

AAPSNews

News, features, profiles and activities in The Ann Arbor Public Schools

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Online:

Detailed stories and additional coverage can be found at:
<http://news.a2schools.org>

Advocacy continues

The Ann Arbor Public Schools PTO Council Advocacy Committee continues its work, planning activities to raise awareness about decreasing school funding. The next meeting is Thursday, April 15 from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at the Balas Administration building, 2555 S. State St. Anyone interested in advocating for better school funding is invited to attend. Contact Donna Lasinski at lasinski@mac.com or call her at 734-997-7265.

Issue No. 12, April 12, 2010

Staff in the Spotlight

Kass highlights the power of both written, spoken word

■ *Winners of Ann Arbor Poetry Slam head for Los Angeles this summer, A2*

By **Carlina Duan**
AAPSNews Service

Growing up in White Plains, New York, Jeff Kass visualized becoming a professional baseball player. An avid Yankees fan, Kass devoted his summers to playing baseball, watching baseball, dreaming baseball – and reading volumes upon volumes of novels.

Although his plans never made it to the big leagues, his childhood love for the literary arts blossomed into a larger passion.

Kass is Pioneer High School's Creative Writing teacher and has taught at the school since 1998. He has not only managed to raise the profile of spoken



Pioneer High School creative writing teacher Jeff Kass, who encourages student creativity and individual thinking in the classroom and at local poetry slams.

'I've always loved reading and writing, and in the back of my mind I always thought I'd try to be a writer. I never thought I'd be a teacher.'

– Jeff Kass

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A school open to learning

Ann Arbor Open @ Mack offers unique experience for grades K-8

Featured story

By **Casey Hans**
AAPSNews Service

The hallways are full of life at Ann Arbor Open @ Mack. Students are researching and collaborating. Some are on laptops; others are huddled together, conversing. Some are meeting with teachers for one-on-one time.

Principal Naomi Zikmund-Fisher said parents visiting for the first time have sometimes asked her “are those students in trouble?”

Not at all, says the long-time principal, who is now in her eighth-year overseeing the K-8 program west of downtown.

It's part of the school's informal setting that encourages students to work cooperatively in a group setting. School literature calls the environment “one of busy trust” where teachers serve as facilitators in the classroom.

“We are one of a very few, a handful of open schools around the country that is



Students work on projects and study in the combined fourth- and fifth-grade classes of Ko Shih and Rick Hall at Ann Arbor Open @ Mack. Below, Shih answers a math question.



public,” Zikmund-Fisher explained.

Lessons are taught in a multi-grade setting, where everyone helps to develop curriculum and students, staff and parents are part of a practicing democracy, with one person, one vote. Students learn to work on their own

and interact with teachers as needed.

“More and more, we're giving them assignments for the day and the time to work on it,” Zikmund-Fisher added. “Boy, do these kids learn to manage their time.”

On this day, Media Specialist Kit Flynn is in the school's hub – a centralized, open media center. Flynn has been with Ann Arbor Open @ Mack, and with its predecessor, Bach Open School, for 21 years.

“It's a place that breeds community,” she says, where most of the staff members

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Kass, from page 1

word projects at Pioneer, but the radar of such projects in the city and nation, as well.

He works with teens as the Creative Arts Director at the Neutral Zone, Ann Arbor's youth center, where he leads the Volume Youth Poetry Project and Red Beard Press printing project. He also helped form high school poetry slams, Ann Arbor's national poetry slam team, Ann Arbor Poetry Night, Ann Arbor Wordworks and the Overtones literary magazine at Pioneer.

Neutral Zone Executive Director John Weiss said he admires Kass's dedication. "He just has this enduring quality and commitment to getting people passionate about writing and poetry," Weiss said. "It's an incredible quality that he has – being so committed to spoken word and providing (so many) opportunities for teens."

Pioneer high school junior Lauren Gaboury said her Creative Writing II class with Kass is open and inviting.

"His strongest quality as a teacher is his acceptance of his students as equals," she said. "He doesn't look down on anyone and he's very open to all ideas. I think that that environment that he provides makes it so much easier for people to write about anything they want to or however they want."

After graduating from college, Kass aspired to be a sports writer. He wrote freelance sports stories; worked as a radio producer in Seattle and hosted a sports radio talk show in California where he also taught for three years.

"I've always loved reading and writing, and in the back of my mind I always thought I'd try to be a writer," Kass said. "I never thought I'd be a teacher."

He was led to education by the dissatisfaction he experienced taking literature classes at his own school. "We were never able to do any creative lessons in my classes. We never had the chance to write a story, or write a poem. I always liked my English teachers. I thought they were good, but they were never really quite going towards what I wanted."

And for Kass, the definition of "want" is embodied in how he teaches Creative Writing. "To me, teaching is trying to give students the tools they need to go the places they want to go," he explained.

Creative Writing is a class for every student to explore, he said. "I think it's important to have a class where young people can really dig into what's important in their lives, what's happening to them, and that they're not bound by restrictions or censorship or

Jeff Kass

Occupation: Creative Writing teacher at Pioneer High School.

Education: Bachelor's degree in English from Yale University; Journalism degree from Columbia University; Master's of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine.

Residence: Ann Arbor.

Age: 43

Family: Married to Karen; they have a daughter, Sam, 8, and son, Julius, 4.

Hobbies: Read, write, watch the Yankees.

Community service: Ann Arbor Book Festival board; heads programs at the Neutral Zone; blogs for AnnArbor.com.

Favorite meal: "I love all kinds of foods, but I especially love Indian food and Mexican food... For Indian food, I love the spicy, vegetarian and fish stuff. As for Mexican food, I just like a really great seafood burrito."

Favorite book(s): Works by Junot Diaz and "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" by Michael Chabon.

Life philosophy: "I like to be happy, and to make other people happy."

anything like that. I feel like their words are bringing them together in (this) class."

As a child, Kass developed his voice in a household full of books. With his father a lawyer and his mother a foreign language teacher, both Kass and his younger brother developed a respect for the written word. "I used to love reading comic books, fantasy novels, like 'Lord of the Rings'," says Kass, "I've always loved Charles Dickens, too."

Kass experienced an epiphany about literature on summer trip. "The summer before eighth grade, I went canoeing with my dad and I pulled a muscle," he says. "I was really afraid that if I went to sleep I'd have a heart attack; so that whole summer, I stayed up all night reading. I feel like those books saved me."

Although he never imagined being a teacher, Kass finds his occupation rewarding. "The most rewarding thing is watching people begin to develop a voice, and an interest in writing and reading in ways that tells you it's becoming more of a passion," he said. "It's watching students realize how important their words are, and how much people want to hear them, to realize that their writing will have an impact on people."

In addition to teaching he has written and published several books; including "The Invisible Staircase" and a soon-to-be released short story collection.

6 young poets head for national slam

By Carlina Duan
AAPSNews Service

The Neutral Zone stage is lit with the glow of 32 youth poets' voices, all in the midst of preparations for the annual Ann Arbor Youth Poetry Slam Finals.

The top six teen poets in Ann Arbor are about to be chosen for the Ann Arbor Poetry Slam team, which competes in the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival (www.bravenewvoices.org/) each year.

The Finals have taken place in Ann Arbor each spring since 1999; this year's event was hosted on March 25 at The Neutral Zone.

"I was in euphoria after the slam," said Allison Kennedy, who represented Pioneer High School in the Finals and was one of those selected for the Ann Arbor Poetry Slam team. "Poetry slams are really all I want from anyone. Everyone just opens up so easily in a poem, and they're able to communicate in such interesting and exciting ways that just makes every other form of language – the way we speak – seem so horrible."

Top student poets from Pioneer, Huron, Skyline and Community high schools represented their spoken word communities after winning in each school's semi-final rounds.

Ranging from somber to comical, poems in the Finals featured contemporary issues such as modern feminists, to more solemn matters such as those of family bonds. Poets could choose to write about any topic they wished, with no censorship or time limit. Regardless of the topic, audience members were impressed.

"I think (the high school) spoken word talent in Ann Arbor is exceptional," said Pioneer junior Adam DesJardins, who attended the slam to support friends. "I loved the slam, it was great to just see all the young writers of the city."

The top six poets were selected for the city slam team, which will compete in July at the 13th annual Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival.

The Ann Arbor Youth Poetry Slam champion this year was Community High School's Alia Persico-Shammas. Second place went to Community's Glenna Benitez; third place to Huron's Isaiah Peet-Blakeney; fourth place a tie to Pioneer's Kennedy and Huron's Haley Patail; and sixth place to Pioneer's Riesterer. All six will travel to Los Angeles this summer for Brave New Voices, scheduled to take place July 19-25. In addition to competing in the national slam this summer, the team also will perform at the Neutral Zone's generational poetry slam on May 14.

Kennedy said she is thrilled to compete this summer. "I'm so excited about getting constant critique and being around (the other team members)," she said. "They have beautiful language and ideas. I'm looking forward to just being with the people, and improving my writing."

Carlina Duan is the News Editor for The Optimist, the Pioneer High School student newspaper. She also reports and writes for the AAPSNews Service.

Grants fund myriad classroom projects

iPods bring high-tech lessons to all age levels

From AAPSNews Service

Ann Arbor teachers are discovering that “there’s an app for that” thanks to a 700 Apple iPod Touches distributed for classroom use.

At Pattengill Elementary School, third-grade teacher Dawn Blair is busy finding ways to use 31 of the devices for lessons. Students have accessed Blair’s class “Moodle” Web page, done math projects and digital story-telling.

“They’re excited about learning things in different ways,” she said. “It gives them some independence and a sense of responsibility.”

The iPods are part of the district’s technology refresh initiative, which made them available through a grant program, said Monique Uzelac, the district’s director of instructional technology. Staff submitted proposals and the iPods were awarded earlier this year.

Fifteen projects were approved across grade levels. Plans include using the iPod Touches for data



Deb Schreck, media specialist at Pattengill Elementary School, works with third-graders teaching them how to use the school’s iPods for lessons.

collection, hand-held media viewers for students, supplements for special education services and enhancing language art and math instruction. Schools and programs include: The Preschool & Family Center; Burns Park, Bryant, Carpenter, Dicken, King, Logan and Pattengill elementaries; Forsythe and Scarlett middle schools; Community, Skyline and Stone high schools; and two programs in self-contained multiple Student Intervention and Support Services rooms in the district’s special education program.

The proposals required staff to

specify use, evaluation and how the project would benefit students.

At Pattengill, Blair and Media Specialist Deb Schreck received the iPod Touches in February and immediately researched free applications to download. Schreck said using them for a math application, for example, is different than putting paper and pencil in front of a student. “You give them an iPod and say ‘do this math application’ and they’re all about it,” she said.

Because at Pattengill they number the iPods and assign the same one to individual students, staff can track where students are and how far they’ve progressed.

Schreck said the iPods will eventually expand to fourth- and fifth-graders and be used across grades as the program is developed.

At Skyline High School, at least a dozen uses are planned for the 100 iPod Touches that were awarded via the technology grant.

The uses will undoubtedly lead to hundreds of future projects, said Pete Pasque, instructional technologist at the school. “It’s so exciting to have students as creators. That’s what we’re trying to do at Skyline,”

he said.

Pasque said he hopes to see them used for everything from recording band practices to review music to accelerometers in science class. There’s even talk of putting an iPod in a football helmet, running a play and charting and graphing the impact in Microsoft Excel. “It’s going to make it more real world for the kids,” he added.

Uzelac said she had so many requests for iPod Touch grants from Skyline, that she asked for a combined proposal. Skyline had a dozen teachers ask for 500; the school was given 100 in the grant process.

The use of the devices in high school becomes more important with trends at colleges and universities, Pasque said. “A lot of them are requiring students to have an iPhone or iPod Touch. They can access maps of campus, how to use the library, walking tours and other important things.”

He said he sees such devices, especially with the introduction of Apple’s iPad and Amazon’s Kindle electronic readers as the wave of the future. Will these replace textbooks someday? Maybe, he said.

Educational Foundation gives \$15,000 to teachers in 2nd round of funding

The Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation has awarded more than \$15,000 in grants for 20 teacher projects during the 2010-11 second semester.

The list includes many longtime programs as well as some new ones, said the group’s Executive Director Wendy Correll. “Many of them prove inspirational,” she said of the recent grant projects, adding that 3,000 students are impacted in a positive way.

The AAPSEF received 82 grant applications for the fall and spring grant seasons this year. Of those, 41 grants were funded. “They have been more competitive than when we started,” she said. “Staff has responded accordingly.”

Some ongoing projects funded

include the Scarlett Sixth-Grade Transition Boot Camp program, to acclimate sixth-graders entering middle school, and the Pioneer Achievement Committee PAC Scholars at Pioneer High School, a program that trains academically excellent young African-American men to mentor those who are underachieving. The longstanding Trailblazers program that partners 200 Pioneer High School student mentors/tutors with elementary students at six schools each day also received funding for a third year.

A 35-year-old mural at Community High School will be revitalized and four new ones created; a first-time project at Lawton Elementary will offer enrichment workbooks and projects; Mitchell Elementary

‘One Million Reasons’

The Ann Arbor Public Schools Educational Foundation has launched its boldest fundraising effort yet: Aiming for \$1 million in gifts or pledges by July 31 to support Ann Arbor school programs. Donors can earmark dollars for specific areas or designate general funds for new, innovative programs. Visit www.AAPSEF.org to donate or for more information.

will add a listening library with books on CD and a broader media center collection for grades K-2; and two school gardens at Northside and Burns Park elementary schools were

awarded grants.

Each year, the foundation earmarks \$30,000 for teacher grants of up to \$1,000 each. Since 1996, the AAPSEF has awarded \$330,000 in teacher grants. Correll said that staff members winning grants are expected to share their ideas with others in the district who may want to do a similar project or program.

Applications will be available in May for consideration of fall grants. Visit www.aapsef.org for information. A scoring matrix of how grants are evaluated as well as a list of frequently asked questions is also available for teachers and staff to consider as they apply for grants. *A full story and list of teacher grants awarded this semester can be found online at <http://news.a2schools.org>.*

Exceptional Education

Open program, from page 1

share their lunch hour together daily and collaboration happens.

“It’s a program that attracts people who want to teach in a certain style and students who want to learn in a more unstructured environment,” she said. “What I see in our building is a kind of excitement about being in school. We’re interested in meeting kids where they are . . . and meeting kids where their high interests are.”

The ‘open school’ movement

The program was developed over a number of years by a group of parents and teachers interested in the “open school” concept. In the early days, families camped out to ensure students got a spot; today, enrollment is handled through a random selection process and there is a waiting list of about 208 students and 483 students enrolled.

Siblings of students entering kindergarten or first grade are given first priority for openings; families remain on the waiting list in the order in which they applied.

In the coming year, Ann Arbor Open will expand for the first time, adding 20 seats, Zikmund-Fisher said. Also under discussion is the



idea of having a second open-philosophy school, perhaps on the east side, in the future, she added.

Flynn said the school has maintained its culture and approach, even as curriculum and requirements have tightened. “I think the basic philosophies are still solid,” she said.

Rick Hall and Ko Shih team-teach classes of fifth- and sixth-graders. Hall has been with Ann Arbor’s open school movement since it started. Shih attended The Open School at Bach and student taught at Ann Arbor Open @ Mack with Hall before landing here permanently.

Their two classrooms flow together constantly, with one or the other teacher offering a lesson, then both handling the one-on-one consults for students.

“It’s pretty much all I’ve every

known,” Shih said of her teaching experience, “but I feel there’s less of an emphasis (here) on all the things you have to know, but a value of how to be a good person . . . a good student and a good community member.”

Hall has been a classroom teacher for 36 years in Ann Arbor. He said his leaning toward the open school concept stemmed from his own experience.

“As a student, I was kind of in the middle – I was one of those kids who sat in the room afraid to raise his hand,” he said. In the open school movement, he saw an opportunity to change that. “It made a whole lot of sense to me to have a relationship with students. They can and should be involved in their learning.”

He said although Ann Arbor Open @ Mack does not compete with the broad curriculum offered at traditional, middle school settings, “what we can offer is the depth. Students can get into things a little more. We have to take that as our strength.”

Ann Arbor Open draws students from throughout Ann Arbor. Bus transportation is provided, though some families do not prefer the lengthier bus ride and stay closer to home at their neighborhood school, Zikmund-Fisher said.

Students say they like the environment as well. Stavi, a sixth-grader, learns a lot in the less restrictive environment. “Things are more casual,” she said. “We call our teachers by their first names. It’s really a great school.”

Parents expected to contribute

Parents enrolling their children at Ann Arbor Open must attend an orientation to determine if the open school concept is right for them. But that’s just the beginning for parents. Not only are they invited to be part of the school, it is expected and most parents welcome the opportunity.

Julie Roth co-chairs of the school’s Coordinating Council, the school’s version of a PTO. She has a 7-year-old daughter who attends and a pre-schooler who is preparing for kindergarten. They chose the school after visiting there, as well as their neighborhood elementary school and several private schools in the area.

“When I walked into the building I thought ‘OK, this is where we want to be.’ I liked the physical space of it,” she said. Visiting a middle school information night, she was most impressed by hearing students speak. “They talked about how they’ve known each other since kindergarten,” she said. “Their school is that constant. That’s not for everybody, but it was for me.”

Roth said she also liked that the program there was less structured and more student led she also liked the K-8 environment.

Her daughter, Eva, enjoys school as well. “She loves school . . . and that’s more important than anything,” Roth said. “She loves it; she feels empowered.”

Zikmund-Fisher said graduates of the program stay connected, even though they split up for high school. “It’s the time (together), it’s the program,” she said. “They do form really close friendships.” She said having many of the students for a full nine years also gives the staff a chance to really know the students and follow their progress over many years.

A more detailed version of this story can be found online at: <http://news.a2schools.org>.

A timeline of Ann Arbor’s ‘open school’ philosophy

1971: Ann Arbor begins with six informal classrooms which were precursors to an open school program.

1972: Community High School was formed, following the open school philosophy.

1975: Thirty-six informal classrooms in 13 different schools accommodate 95 percent of students whose parents requested informal classrooms.



1976: Middle Years Alternative program is established and housed in the Forsythe.

1982: First- through sixth-grade open school program replaces the informal classrooms; 252 students and 10 teachers are divided into two groups with one group sharing facilities at Wines, the other at Pattengill school.

1986: The kindergarten through sixth-grade program is given a principal and facility. Bach Open School is established.

1989: The sixth grade joins the Middle Years Alternative School. Bach is modified to kindergarten through fifth grade.

1998: Bach Open School moves to the Mack School building and is renamed Ann Arbor Open @ Mack. The school is modified to include sixth graders in anticipation of becoming a kindergarten through eighth-grade school.

1999: Seventh grade is added.

2000: Eighth grade is added.

2010: Ann Arbor Open @ Mack continues to operate nine grades with 483 students. There is a waiting list for families wanting to place their children here. It is currently the only K-8 program in The Ann Arbor Public Schools.

Source: Ann Arbor Open @ Mack