

Experience with STAAR workgroup provides insight

By Carol Revelle, Past President

Editor's Note: The following article is a posting from Carol Revelle's blog Revelle ReWrite.

A teachers' workgroup was assembled with representatives from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the College Readiness Board, and high school teachers from across the state to provide a description of the performance levels on the new STAAR test since there will be new performance levels to describe the academic performance of the students. Instead of *commended*, *meets expectations*, and *does not meet expectations*, the performance levels will be *advanced*, *satisfactory*, and *unsatisfactory*.

The current freshmen class will come to understand college readiness in a more specific way than their older peers since 2011 legislation requires that high schools provide a certificate of college readiness to state universities. Until 2015, this will be determined by the diploma of the students (Distinguished Achievement, Recommended, Minimum). However, after 2015, the students must score at the *advanced* level on their Algebra II and both parts of the English III STAAR to receive a college readiness certificate from their high school.

As the group worked through the English reading and writing performance descriptors, there were several patterns. First, students need to be able to independently read moderately complex texts and understand the subtle nuances of the vocabulary and the text and evaluate the success of the authors in achieving their message to score at the advanced level. At the satisfactory level, the students will be able to recognize how the author created the text through analysis. Understanding the literal level of the text will be expected at the unsatisfactory level. It will no longer be enough for our students to comprehend only the surface meaning of the text they read.

Ten New Things We Have Learned About STAAR

1. The new performance levels are called *advanced*, *satisfactory*, and *unsatisfactory*.
2. Students entering the state universities must now have a college readiness certificate from their high schools.
3. Current freshmen will have to score at the *advanced* level on Algebra II and English III to receive a college readiness certificate when they graduate.
4. The reading assessment includes passages from various genres including poetry and drama.
5. In reading, advanced students will be able to evaluate the author's writing choices and how they impact the reader's understanding.
6. In writing, 4s will probably be advanced and 3s will probably be satisfactory. 1s and 2s will likely be unsatisfactory.
7. Comprehension of texts alone is not enough to score at the satisfactory level.
8. Students need to read from a wide range of texts and genres.
9. Students need to see quality models of the essay modes and have opportunities to practice following the writing process.
10. The Texas Education Agency is posting information as soon as it is ready at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/staar/>.

Texas nominee receives National Intellectual Freedom Award; TCTELA recognized at affiliate breakfast, theme announced

By Carol Revelle, Past President



Sandy Hayes (left), NCTE Vice President-Elect, with Carol Revelle (right), TCTELA Past President.

For the third time since 2007, the TCTELA nominee has received the NCTE/SLATE National Intellectual Freedom Award. TCTELA nominated The Texas Civil Rights Project for its report *Banned Books in the Texas Prison System: How the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Censors Books Sent to Prisoners*. The award is presented at the NCTE Affiliate breakfast.

Speaking at the breakfast, eighth-grade classroom teacher, and newly elected vice president of NCTE, Sandy Hayes announced the 2012 NCTE theme: Dream. Connect. Ignite. Hayes chose this theme after reviewing school mission statements across the country. Her favorite, "To educate students to make a living, make a life, and make a difference," is now her personal motto.

Stop the bullying

By Martha Medlock, President

In an NCTE session co-chaired by Kylene Beers and Joseph Dial, experts gathered to share the cold, hard facts of the national problem of bullying, as well as a personal perspective from a mother who lost her child to bullies and intolerance. In addition, educators hosted roundtables and discussed ways for teachers to take an active role in order to stop bullying.

The *News Gazette* in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, reported that Ashlynn Conner, 11, was found dead last month. According to her family, Ashlynn had been “teased and taunted” by kids at school and in the neighborhood for several years. Vermilion County authorities said the Ridge Farm Elementary School student’s death was an apparent suicide. They’re still trying to determine whether bullying was involved.

All too often, the media report stories of children taking their own lives because the life they face at school or online is too intolerable. Daily taunting. Daily teasing. Daily ostracizing. These are the viruses present in schools that are taking the lives of children.

Kevin Jennings, the 2011 CEO of Be the Change and former assistant deputy secretary to the U.S. Department of Education from 2009 to 2011, spoke about bullying as a “health and academic crisis.” Jennings shared studies that show kids who bully need intervention so that they will become successful adults. Currently, studies show that a child who bullies does not have the skills to have a healthy relationship with others. In addition, bullies have greater difficulty holding a job or having a career. The pervasiveness, roles, and influencing factors are some of issues educators, parents, and communities must address. According to Jennings, “Kids must have at least three friends” to not be vulnerable to bullies. Statistics on bullying and suggestions for addressing bullying at the local level are available at www.stopbullying.com.

“Every student deserves a safe space,” said Lindsey Friedman from the GLSEN Safe Place Campaign. Friedman went on to share that “85% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students report being verbally harassed, and 40% report being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation.” Friedman spoke about the issues that LGBT students face on a daily

basis because they are different and because of intolerance. This intolerance comes not only from their peers but also from teachers and their community. Friedman emphasized the need to build a culture of respect in schools. Teachers can offer a safe place for kids when they have nowhere else to go.

One in four students in U.S. schools is bullied on a regular basis.

Learning about other cultures, accepting differences, and showing tolerance is the way to end hate. Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew Shepard, shared that bullying and intolerance is a community issue that needs to be worked on as a community. She recommended a non-fiction book entitled *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School—How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle* by Barbara Coloroso.

Shepard authored a book sharing the story of her son’s murder. Shepard explained that one of the boys who attacked her son was a devout Mormon and an Eagle Scout. “How can a boy like this slip through the cracks?” Shepard asked. According to Shepard, somebody missed the signs; somebody dropped the ball. In *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed*, Shepard shares her heartbreaking story.

The roundtable sessions covered multiple topics. Janet Allen talked about acknowledging the impact of words; Linda Rief shared how her school took a proactive stance against bullying; and Sara Kajder led a discussion on cyber-bullying.

“Students can’t learn if they don’t feel safe. If they don’t feel safe, they skip schools and stop having dreams. They may give up,” said Friedman.

Teri Lesesne, the 2011 recipient of the Richard W. Halle award, shared young adult literature that brings the topic of bullying and intolerance into the limelight. Lesesne included fiction and non-fiction books that tweens and teens can read to learn that they are not alone in this world. These books feature teens as heroes and demonstrate tolerance, and can serve as an important springboard to discussions on bullying and intolerance. marthamedlock@austin.rr.com

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Session explores writing lives of urban teens

By Leigh Van Horn, *English in Texas* Co-editor

District literacy coach Brenda Matthews of Duval County, Jacksonville, Florida, introduced her NCTE session with a call to “connect our students to reading and writing.” She and Andrew Jackson High School teachers Stephanie Brown and Brandie Stallings have been working with Becky Bone, Scholastic Literacy Consultant, and Alfred Tatum, University of Illinois professor, to make that happen in Florida schools designated as failing.

The session began with Tatum, author of *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* (2005) and *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males* (2009). Tatum spoke eloquently about his work in summer literacy institutes where he writes with up to 15 young men from different schools. These young men, some of whom are there because they have nowhere else to go, some of whom are there because someone has decided this is where they need to be, are creating writing lineages, defined by Tatum as “pieces they have written that have impacted their lives.”

Historically, African-American males have written to define self, nurture resilience, engage others, and build capacity (writing for the next generation). Tatum asks his students to consider whether they can carry their lives through their pens and calls on them to answer this question: “How are we becoming better men as we tell our stories?” As he emphatically stated, “We need to respond to the real issues they express in their writing” and “our response must be time-sensitive.” He shared moving and beautifully written pieces by many of these writers. Of particular interest are what Tatum calls “kinship” poems, poems that begin with and expand upon a single word. Tatum shared a poem that begins with the word “Silence” and continues, “Without a voice.” Later in the poem the student asks, “What’s behind the vacant stare? What do you care about?” This student shared his work with another, who responded with a poem of his own that speaks to the first poem: “Tired,” “The mother who had a child too young” and then “What’s behind her vacant stare? Her son.”

Becky Bone spoke next. She showed images and brief statements about true events that represent the forces of love, hate, indifference, and compassion. She then asked participants to engage in a “raw write” by pondering this question: “Which is the greatest force—love, hate, indifference, or compassion?” As volunteers shared what they had written, it became clear that Bone had asked participants a difficult question; their writing proved that a compelling case can be made for each of these as being the greatest force.

“I think compassion might be the greatest force because if we have compassion we are willing to see and to work to understand the life situation of another. When we understand we may absolve indifference and hate and embrace love. When we understand we may take actions that result in positive change. If we cannot be compassionate, we cannot begin...”

—Leigh Van Horn
Writing excerpt from session

Newbery author reveals all

By Kay Shurtleff, Vice President of Membership and Affiliates

Try persuading an average woman to go out in public without makeup or coercing Apple to allow customers to play with its next gadget before introducing it with a press release. No one wants to reveal anything before it’s polished, primped, and practically perfect. Dr. Randy Bomer and Dr. Nancy Roser, both of the University of Texas at Austin, managed to accomplish the literary version of that feat, though. During their NCTE session entitled “Stories of Revisions of Stories,” they described the results of taking a close look at writing before it’s meant to be read.

Bomer and Roser, along with graduate student Michelle Fowler-Amata, studied thousands of early drafts of published authors’ work. They visited the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota, took some 4,000 photographs of drafts and materials housed there, and used their discoveries in elementary and middle school classrooms in Central Texas. Their objective, as Bomer stated, was to help students “look closely at authors’ visible changes to their texts to learn the lessons of writers’ craft.”

Newbery Medal winner Karen Cushman became part of the project when she agreed to let the three researchers use early drafts of her work. Seventh-grade students read two versions of Cushman’s popular book *The Midwife’s Apprentice*. By comparing her first draft with the final product, students learned valuable lessons about revision and about receiving feedback. The end result? As Roser put it, “The talk flowed” among the students, and “their own writing reflected the same kinds of revisions they observed in Cushman’s drafts.”

“I’m amazed at the value that Randy and the students found in these drafts,” Cushman told the audience. She has donated boxes of early drafts to the Kerlan in hopes that she can share in “helping kids become better thinkers” as well as better writers.

According to the Kerlan’s web page (<http://special.lib.umn.edu/clrc/kerlan/index.php>), this immense collection “presently contains more than 100,000 children’s books as well as original manuscripts, artwork, galleys, and color proofs for more than 12,000 children’s books.” Its founder, medical researcher Dr. Irvin Kerlan, turned his book collecting hobby into a significant source of information and research in 1949 when he arranged for his collection to be stored and maintained at the University of Minnesota. Bomer, Roser, and Fowler-Amata culled valuable “in process” examples from the collection to use in opening young writers’ eyes to the entire writing process—not just the polished, finished product.

In addition to Cushman’s early drafts, Bomer also shared photographs of the early drafts of several other authors. Upon projecting an image of an early draft of *Goodnight Moon* and hearing the audience’s collective gasp, Bomer said, “This thing that is so fixed and so monumental in our minds had to come into being some way.”

Fortunately, there are authors like Cushman who are willing to disclose the imperfect as well as the perfect.

Reflections on teaching, learning inspired by NCTE sessions

By Valerie Taylor, SLATE Representative

Linda Darling-Hammond shared in her keynote speech at NCTE that the most important skill we teach in schools is learning to learn. And how do we do that? One way is through books. Books, as Tim O'Brien shared in his session, can open minds, for they often allow contradictory truths to stand side-by-side.

As English teachers, we understand this idea, and so we encourage our students to read widely and to read critically, learning how to learn from what they read. As Anthony Horowitz said during the Secondary Luncheon at NCTE, "Without reading, we won't understand narrative; without that, we won't understand life." Books make us think about who we are as human beings. And whether our students are reading *Through My Eyes: Ruby Bridges* or *Looking for Alaska* or *The Things They Carried* or any other book, we as English teachers encourage them to consider the questions that authors raise in their books, questions like How do we turn pain into wisdom, suffering into strength?, How do we live with integrity in a difficult environment?, and What is worth fighting for?

These kinds of questions are the ones we want our students to think about as they read and as they write, because, as Sharon O'Neal shared in a joint session about social justice, "Our lives begin to end the day we

become silent about things that matter" (words memorably spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.). So we as English teachers work to give our students opportunities to speak and to write and to question. We work to consider questions like the ones ReLeah Cossett Lent and Jimmy Santiago Baca suggest in their book *Adolescents on the Edge: What do you yearn for? What is worth risking your life for? What do you do to prove you're courageous? What makes you a real man or woman? What is the importance of human contact? What has made you feel lucky?*

Addressing such questions, our students become the authors of their own literature. They learn to do what a Colorado school in the 1980s set out as a vision for their students: To educate children to make a living, to make a life, to make a difference (a vision Steve Jobs shared in his 2008 Commencement Address at Stanford). To strive toward this vision, we might keep in mind an idea that Ernest Morrell of Teachers College shared in a session honoring Paolo Friere: We need to consider more *how* we teach, *why* we teach, and *who* we teach, and less *what* we teach. We cannot, Morrell said, allow people we love to fail.

We can, and we must, teach, and that means we must help all of our students learn to succeed. vfstaylor@sbcglobal.net

Texas nominee awarded; TCTELA recognized, theme announced

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Keynote speaker, Bruce Penniman, spoke on the topic of "Going Deep in the Discipline: NCTE Affiliate and Teachers' Professional Growth." Essentially, his comments were specifically targeted to the affiliate leaders in the room. Using his own affiliate, The New England Teachers of English (NETE), as a model, he recommended leveraging teacher leadership to improve the teaching profession, providing opportunities for teachers to connect with each other, using affiliate journals to help teachers

write about their classroom practices, and creating an open and acceptable path for deep professional growth. A real advocate of the professionalism of teacher, Penniman said, "Teacher discourse is the key to improving education, not standardized tests."

During the affiliate breakfast, TCTELA received honorable mention awards for its affiliate newsletter and its affiliate journals. TCTELA also received the Affiliate Multi-cultural Award and the Teacher of the Dream Award. carol@revellweb.com

Experience with STAAR

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Generally, this is also the pattern for the writing expectations. Advanced students will be able to write a focused (remember, the essays are now one-pagers) essay that includes a response with deeper insights. Probably, students who score 4s will be in the advanced level with 3s in the satisfactory level, but that will be clarified when this work is finished. Students will want to spend more time prewriting, so they can get to the point quicker and plan for depth, and they will want to spend more time in revision to improve their draft and increase the complexity of their writing.

Please read these as my understandings from a two-day interaction with the new assessment standards and this committee. We were told that we were allowed to share what we learned, but the performance levels themselves will not be available until they have been completed and edited. TEA will post them on the website as soon as they are ready in order to help guide teachers in their preparation for the new assessments.

It seems that the best way to prepare students for the new STAAR will be to assure that students are spending a great deal of time reading a variety of texts independently. Self-selected reading across genres should work toward accomplishing the goal of helping students learn to recognize author's style and intent. In addition, students should spend more time in class writing to various, preferably personal, purposes. Students will need explicit instruction that includes professional models and teacher modeling of the various essay formats.

Also, it's quite clear that the packaged programs and lessons that are popular across the state are inadequate for fostering the critical thinking necessary to perform at the advanced level. This should save our districts money that they could reinvest in classroom libraries to get books into our students' hands. And though the transition will be challenging, teachers will now be able to bring their best teaching strategies back to the classroom as well as attend professional development that will enhance their ability to develop the skills of academically diverse students in their classroom through differentiated instruction.

Connecting sports with English language arts education

By Katrina Gonzales, President Elect

All across Texas, in months where frying eggs on sidewalks feels like the approach of autumn, students strap on layers of bulky football equipment to spend hours sweating in the Texas heat by choice.

And on mornings when even the roosters aren't awake, students lace up running shoes and affix blinking lights and reflective tape to themselves in order to run mile after mile by choice.

Yet in schools all across the state, there are students who find carrying books to and from class too much of an effort while others struggle to get out of bed for class.

Effective educators focus on the whole child. In doing so, teachers cannot deny that athletics motivates a huge number of our students. According to author and educator Lisa Scherff, "Sports brought some of my students to school. Sports kept some of my students at school." Most teachers can attest to the love of sports within their students. But what if teachers extended the love of sports into their ELA classrooms? What would that look like? How can teachers bring what is often done outdoors into the confines of a classroom?

Fortunately, young adult authors know their audiences. Writers such as Matt de la Peña, Chris Crutcher, and Carl Deuker provide teens with stories mirroring their own lives on courts, the fields, and tracks across America. Sports go hand in hand with school, and, in many cases, with success.

During a Saturday afternoon workshop at NCTE, young adult authors Chris Crutcher, Matt de la Peña, and Doug Merlino were joined by Thomas Newkirk, University of Alabama professor Lisa Scherff, and University of Alabama doctoral student Alan Brown. In addition, roundtable hosts welcomed the audience with various topics pertaining to how sports intersect with literacy. For example, Donna Cox, from Sam Houston State University at Huntsville, Texas, explained how she created a program for severely at-risk fourth-graders.

Ten fourth-grade girls, selected by their principal, teachers, and counselor, were paired with female athletes, and, more specifically, basketball players from Sam Houston State University. Then, 15 books, selected for their content about female basketball players, were given to the fourth-grade girls and their Sam Houston counterparts. The university mentors took the box containing the books with them on

their away games so that they could read them first. The fourth-grade girls will be required to read 10 of the 15 books, but they will be able to choose which one they will read first.

Another step in the process will occur through a Moodle platform, set up by the elementary school's computer lab specialist. Each title in the box is listed on the Moodle site. The girls and their mentors will enter into virtual discussions about the selected books through the online platform. The overall purpose of the project is "to examine student perceptions of benefits and reading motivations related to the reading of sports books while participating in online book chats with university athletes."

As Thomas Newkirk stated in the words of his teen self, "I love sports because it's the one pure thing in my life." He went on to explain the natural consequences of sports that students do not find elsewhere. For athletes in track, for example, the clock serves as a natural consequence. The purity of either beating the clock or not beating the clock is unmatched. Newkirk said there are three distinct benefits of sports: giving clarity that leads to self-improvement, giving a sense of vivid presence, and providing a narrative of friendship and relationships within sports.

De la Peña continued the discussion by saying that he feels "bummed out when people call his first two books (*Ball Don't Lie* and *Mexican White Boy*) sports books." He expressed the hope that when students get into his books, "they'll look deeply at relationships, class, and race." De la Peña went on to tell about an incident in which a student who had read *Ball Don't Lie* asked him about the manner in which a woman looked at a teen character in the book. This question led to a discussion about class and race, which De la Peña explained is much more worthy of discussion than a basketball game. However, the basketball game is the crowbar to get young minds to think deeply about important issues.

Certainly, educators want students to succeed. Often, sports are the means to getting students to school and keeping them there. Coaches have always known this.

Digging further into these connections provides educators with possibilities for using sports as a means for engaging students in literacy and the English/language arts curriculum. katrina.gonzales@scisd.net

Writing lives of urban teens

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Brown and Stallings shared how they have used a structure identified by Tatum to engage their students in reading and writing. This includes identifying an essential question that will capture the attention of the students, identifying texts that are "fast moving, deeply penetrating, and relevant to the essential question(s)," including texts that focus on "self-reliance, resilience, and self-determination," and structuring platforms of action by encouraging students to apply what they are learning.

Brown and Stallings enable teachers to envision the planning as they talk about a study of marginalization. The study began with the reading of an article about a community in the time of segregation. The high school students were interested, but adamant that they "did not want to read" the district mandated text *To Kill*

A Mockingbird. Brown and Stallings found an alternate text, a nonfiction work titled *Students on Strike: Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Brown, and Me* (Stokes, 2007), which is "the true story of a young man who stopped going to school because his school was not equal to the white school." They note that this text is comparable to the district-mandated text as the topic/content are both focused on equality and marginalization. The differences are that *Students on Strike* is a work of nonfiction and the narrator is African-American and is observing and experiencing the marginalization firsthand. The examples shared of student statements and student writing indicate that there are real possibilities rather than false promises with this focus on respect and relevance for the reading and writing lives of urban teens.

Examining, exploring the imaginative with international books make hours fly

By Leigh Van Horn, *English in Texas* Co-editor

I “discovered” young adult literature in a class taught by Barbara G. Samuels. Every Thursday night from 7 to 10, we gathered to listen to her read aloud and talk about wondrous books. The hours flew by and I left hungry for more. So, when I saw that she, along with Elizabeth Poe, the former editor of the SIGNAL (Special Interest Group Adolescent Literature) journal would be speaking with Lian Tanner, Australian author of *The Keepers* series (*The Keepers*, *City of Lies*, and *Museum of Thieves*), I knew I had to be there! Samuels and Poe are both members of the United States Board on Books for Young People. Each year, the members of the board read outstanding international books and award 40 of them with the Outstanding International Book award. Readers use the following criteria to help them select an outstanding international book: represents the best children’s literature from other countries; engages readers through outstanding writing; demonstrates other points of view; addresses topics missing from the literature; demonstrates a cultural flavor; is accessible to American readers; exhibits originality; has qualities that would appeal to children; and has artistic and literary merit.

Elizabeth Poe discussed imaginative literature on the awards list, literature that is “in some way fantastical.” For grades K to 2, she shared *April and Esme, Tooth Fairies* (Graham, 2010), a book that chronicles the first mission of two young tooth fairies and features many aspects of modern life, cell phones and texting included. For grades 3 to 5, Poe shared *The Boy Who Climbed Into the Moon* (Almond, 2010), about a boy who believes that the moon is a hole in the sky. He climbs a ladder from his apartment to the moon where he meets other living beings. David Almond has won the Hans Christian Anderson Award and is also the author of *Raven Summer*, a beautifully written book, she says, that is comparable to *A Separate Peace* and an excellent book to share with students in grades 9 to 12. Other books noted were works by Emily Gravett, who writes picture books with fine

details and humor. *The Rabbit Problem* is a “multi-layered look at rabbits and math that includes birth announcements, a carrot ration book, and a fabulous paper-engineered pop-up conclusion! Look for *Fever Crumb* (Reeve, 2010) for middle school readers. The book takes place in 3000 AD London, and Fever, an apprentice engineer, leaves her foster father and goes on an archeological expedition. High school readers might enjoy *Monsters of Men* (Ness, 2010), the stand-alone conclusion to the *Chaos Walking* series.

Barbara Samuels directed our attention to books about history and current issues. She created five groupings: books about growing up/education in different lands; books with African settings and conflicts; books about the Holocaust and World War II; books about war and conflict in Rwanda, the Sudan, Afghanistan, and Poland; and a historical picture book based upon a Gordon Lightfoot song *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*. In the first category, *Fatty Legs: A True Story*, written by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton, is a memoir about an Inuit girl who leaves her home to attend school on the mainland where she experiences two years of severe bullying. Readers who are interested in learning more about the lost boys of Sudan will want to read *A Hare in the Elephant’s Trunk* by Jan L. Coates. Samuels notes that this is a “heart-wrenching account of a struggle to survive” by a boy who remembers that his mother has told him that “education is important and can change your life.” Samuels told participants that Houston is home to communities of the young boys from Sudan.

Our session ended with Lian Tanner, an Australian author and storyteller who captivated us all with her tales of Tasmania. Tanner spoke on the subject of creativity and relayed to us that she was a good student who “the more [she] got approval, the more averse [she] became to taking risks.” She said that no one taught her about the tools of creativity or the creative process. It took many years for her to learn that

the creative process is “not sitting down and thinking hard, but mucking around (doing it).” An important breakthrough for Tanner was when she realized that she could “write a really bad first draft and then go back and make it better.” Something we might want to share with our students (and remember ourselves) is her vision that “there is a river of ideas all around us that is full of fish and all we have to do is dip our hands in and catch a fish.” She shared that the most powerful question for a writer is *What if?* Be sure to go to Lian Tanner’s website (liantanner.com.au/) where you can really get a feel for her unique and wondrous writing and speaking voice.

January 20-22, 2012
San Antonio, TX



Speakers include:
Naomi Shihab Nye
Harvey "Smokey" Daniels
Judith Youngers
Gretchen Bernabei
T.A. Barron
Katie Wood Ray
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Patterson, Horowitz speak at NCTE secondary luncheon; two Texas teachers receive Excellence Award

By Carol Revelle, Past President

This year's NCTE Secondary Section Luncheon honored two Texas secondary teachers. For the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (TCTELA) affiliate, Jennifer Isgitt of Fossil Ridge High School in Keller, Texas, was recognized. According to Dr. Carol Wickstrom, Isgitt's classroom is "one that is a community in which everyone is accepted for who they are and for what they bring to the learning environment."

Additionally, the North Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (NTCTELA) affiliate's Nannette McMurtry of Coppell High School in Coppell, Texas, was recognized. Tracy Henson remarked, "Nannette's heart and soul go into each and every educational practice and decision, but more importantly, they are given to each and every student who walks through her classroom door."

"Young people today are busy... A pair of hands should come out of the book and hold them there."

—Anthony Horowitz, author of the *Alex Rider* and the *Foyle's War* series

Keynote speakers at the luncheon were James Patterson and Anthony Horowitz. Both spoke about the importance of reading for secondary students and the way they write to engage their adolescent audience.

When writing for teens, James Patterson remarked that he likes "to pretend there's one person in front of [him] and [he doesn't] want them to leave until [he finishes his] story." Though he dismissed his own writing as "colloquial" and "horrifying," he shared his writer's insights for improving student writing skills. His recommendation for students was "read, read, read and write, write, write... and you keep getting better." His advice to teachers was to choose fun and exciting books for students for summer reading from the wide choices of "terrific" books that are available today. His favorite young adolescent books include *The Book Thief*, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, and *Unbroken*, while mentioning "*To Kill a Mockingbird* [as] a very worthwhile book." However, on the reluctance of adolescents to read, he spoke directly about parents: "It's their job to go out and get books for their kids."

Anthony Horowitz recognized the power of reading to prepare students for the world beyond school, stating, "Without narrative, you don't understand life." And like Patterson, he felt that schools should build more time into their schedule for students to read independently, and students should choose what they want to read because "we're in the golden age of children's books." He also mirrored Patterson's belief that literacy starts in the home.

Speaking of his own family, Horowitz said, "There is never a day I don't read. . . . We talk books, we eat books, we live books." He added, "When kids are older, they won't share their video games, but they will share their books."

Other than his own novels, Horowitz recommends *The Chocolate War* and *The King's Mutiny* to adolescents. carol@revelleweb.com

Student affiliates bring energy to NCTE convention

By Kay Shurtleff, Vice President for Membership and Affiliates

As teachers of record, NCTE members value the learning, the rejuvenating, and the networking that occur as a result of belonging to NCTE and/or one of its affiliates. Perhaps an overlooked aspect of professional organizations, though, is the energy, insight, and perspective that university students can bring.

Members of various state affiliates gathered on Saturday afternoon at the NCTE convention to hear preservice teachers and faculty sponsors from two Colorado universities talk about their experiences leading a student affiliate.

Carly Willis, Marketing Coordinator for the Colorado State University Student Affiliate, said that she joined the organization after asking herself the question, "How am I not going to be blindsided during my first year of teaching?" Her predecessor, Allie Solem, stated her reason for involvement in this way: "Here is an organization that is going to tell me all the ins and outs of teaching English that I might not get in my classes."

Maintaining a student affiliate is not without its challenges. Dr. Gloria Eastman and Dr. Jill Adams, faculty sponsors of the Metropolitan State College of Denver affiliate, discussed the difficulties of establishing continuity and of recruiting members. Dr. Eastman cited "getting the constitution to align with both NCTE and university" as a further challenge she faced when her university began its affiliate.

According to NCTE, there are currently 37 student affiliates in 20 different states. A survey done by NCTE's Commission on Creating and Sustaining Student Affiliates revealed a variety of activities that student affiliates sponsor. Many affiliates offer help with resume writing and sessions with area principals in an effort to support students in securing employment. Others offer tutoring services for local public schools. Some use their alumni as presenters for member events featuring panel discussions. Several use funds from various sources to send members to the national conference each year. Common to almost every student affiliate is the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook to keep members connected. "Not everybody reads email, but everybody reads Facebook," said Willis.

Although Texas currently does not have a student affiliate, faculty members at the University of Texas at El Paso are working diligently to start one.

Anyone interested in tapping into the energy of youth by starting a student affiliate should contact Kay Shurtleff, TCTELA Vice President of Membership and Affiliates, or Tim Martindell, TCTELA Vice President-Elect of Membership and Affiliates. kay.shurtelff@gmail.com

Expository writing doesn't come in a can!

By Julie Schweers, Recording Secretary

Thousands of teachers take the information they glean from sessions at NCTE back to their classrooms, trusting that it is accurate. But sometimes teachers are exposed to incorrect information and bad teaching practices. This was the case in a session presented by two high school teachers from Georgia.

The session description promised to inform participants about ways to help students respond to a piece of literature in a variety of modes—expository, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive. Instead, the session's presenters gave erroneous information about expository writing and touted writing pedagogy that takes teachers, and subsequently students, back to the proverbial Stone Age—using the five-paragraph essay and fill-in-the-blank outlines.

The presenters began the session with expository writing. Some 100-plus teachers, anxious to learn strategies to teach this type of writing, listened as the presenters shared their definition of this mode. Here's what they said:

- Expository writing doesn't connect and/or engage with the audience.
- The author of an expository piece of writing should never establish a relationship with the reader.
- Expository writing is meant only to inform and should only be about something important.
- Expository writing should never, never entertain and should never make the reader laugh.

After this portion of the presentation, many teachers walked out shaking their heads in disgust. However, too many stayed.

The presenters attempted to explain how to use this type of writing with literature and then took turns sharing their philosophies on writing an expository essay. They provided a five-paragraph fill-in-the-blank outline that looked like this:

Introductory paragraph (first paragraph)

- General sentences
- Excitement builder
- Answer-the-question sentence

- Thesis statement
 - The three reasons that will be covered in the three body paragraphs

Main Idea paragraphs (second-fourth paragraphs)

- Topic sentence
 - Transition
 - Restate topic
 - Restate a main idea from the thesis statement
- Supporting detail
 - Evidence/example
- Supporting detail
 - Evidence/example
- Closing sentence

Conclusion paragraph (fifth paragraph)

- General sentences
- Similar to introduction, except for using I, me, and my to make these sentences personal
- Thesis statement as two sentences by using “not only, but also”
 - First sentence uses two of the main ideas and includes “not only, but also” structure
 - Second sentence uses third main idea (for example, The last reason is _____ because _____.)

The presenters never explained the “excitement builder” or the “answer-the-question sentence” that should be used in the introductory paragraph, but they went into specific detail about the formulaic thesis statement that includes three reasons to be fleshed out in three body paragraphs and should be the last sentence of that paragraph. This antiquated way to teaching writing didn't bode well with the audience.

More teachers left. But alas, too many stayed.

A review of three popular expository essays, “The Ways We Lie” by Stephanie Ericsson, “This is the Life” by Annie Dillard, and “A Ticket to the Fair” by David Foster Wallace, quickly refutes the presenters' definition and structure of expository writing! Each essay is engaging and entertaining. And not one of them is five paragraphs or contains

a paragraph that emulates the formula the presenters shared.

In Ericsson's light and funny essay, the thesis doesn't come until paragraph six, and it doesn't contain three reasons fleshed out in three body paragraphs.

Dillard's more serious essay is a series of provocative questions about life begging to make a connection with the reader. And Foster's essay takes an extremely detailed, humorous look at attending the Illinois State Fair.

All of these writers have the uncanny ability not just to engage their audience but to pull them in by the shirt, demanding full participation. Isn't this what teachers want their students doing? Teachers must share mentor texts and expose students to the variety of ways they can write an expository essay.

Teachers who use mentor texts in their classrooms regularly, who provide a variety of texts for their students, easily recognize when they are presented with erroneous information and bad practice.

And teachers who use mentor texts in their classrooms regularly will be hard-pressed to find mentor texts that illustrate the features the presenters shared. Teaching expository writing shouldn't be “a drag” as the presenters said over and over again; it should be just as exciting as writing a narrative.

In the remainder of the session, the presenters gave a cursory explanation of descriptive, narrative, and persuasive writing, so the information the pair shared about expository writing will likely make it back to classrooms and students across the country.

The teachers who remained in the room will take this information back to their students, in good faith of course, and students will have pseudo-concepts about expository writing and will probably continue to hate it because of this canned approach.

Research and professional writers demonstrate that expository writing should be just as organic as any other mode of writing. NCTE supports this stance, but sometimes what comes out of the can isn't what's on the label. Julie.Schweers@nisd.net

Authors inspire, offer advice at NCTE middle school mosaic

By Martha Medlock, President

Young adult author Gordon Korman started his address to a ballroom of middle school teachers by saying, “A sense of humor is a muscle that needs to be developed.”

This year, the Middle Level Mosaic turned thirteen years old, an age that attendees know well. Thirteen is a year of angst, discontent, and self-discovery. Thirteen is the transition year between being the top dog to being the freshman fish. But thirteen is also a great year, especially if you are a teacher of thirteen-year-olds.

As Korman confirmed, thirteen is great. It’s important to laugh and embrace humor in the classroom. He encouraged the room to move away from the dead dog series like *Old Yeller* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* and joked that if there is a picture of a dog on the cover of the book, then “that dog is dead by the end of the book.” Korman spoke about the “canon of novels” in various grade levels and noted that not one of those novels was funny.

He offered a solution: Read his books. The *Swindle* series is based on old movies, one of his favorite things. He compared it to the original *Ocean’s Eleven* with the Rat Pack. In addition to this series, he spoke about another of his series books, which he admitted did not have a happy ending. In the *Titanic* series, Korman said, “someone always dies.”

Teri Lesesne, noted expert in young adult literature, spoke about the importance of the past, present, and future, and of exploring the limitless possibilities with books. A complete copy of her presentation is online at www.slideshare.net by using the search term *professornana*.

Regarding the past, Lesesne explained that some of the best ways to engage teens in history is through the use of historical fiction novels. It’s important for students to be able to identify with characters who face events set in history and see them rise above those events. Lesesne offered numerous titles such as *Just As Good* (Candlewick); *Hurricane Dancers* (MacMillan); *The Blood Lie* (Cinco Puntos); *Between Shades of Gray* (Philomel); *Moon Over Manifest* (Delacorte); *Out of Shadows* (Holiday House); *Stickman Odyssey* (Philomel);

Sweethearts of Rhythm (Dial); and *America is Under Attack* (Roaring Brook).

Lesesne also shared realistic fiction that confronts many of the issues teens face today. How does a teenage boy deal with his sexual preference? How does a teenage girl deal with abuse at home? How does a teenager deal with the death of a parent? Teens are reluctant to talk to adults, but a book may open that door of communication. Some suggestions offered by Lesesne included *Bunheads* (Little Brown); *Charlie Joe Jackson’s Guide to Not Reading* (Roaring Brook); *F in Exams* (Chronicle); *You Don’t Know About Me* (Delacorte); *Five Flavors of Dumb* (Dial); *Why We Broke Up* (Little Brown); *Under the Mesquite* (Lee and Low); and *Paintings From the Cave* (Random House).

Lesesne ended her presentation by discussing the future.

“What students learn today will impact not only their futures but also our own,” said Lesesne.

With that, she offered the following science fiction and dystopian titles: *Eye of The Storm* (Walker); *Blood Red Road* (McElderry); *Monsters of Men* (Candlewick); *The Eleventh Plague* (Scholastic); *The Future of Us* (Razorbills); *Divergent* (Katherine Tegen Books); and for those teens who fell in love with Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Game* series, Lesesne suggested *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (Candlewick).

Also addressing the middle school mosaic was Kate Messner, the young adult author of the *Marty McGuire* series. Messner spoke about how writing is fun, fun, fun.

Messner, who offers a free 20-minute Skype session with classes, often entertains a series of questions from young writers.

Students often ask Messner where she gets her ideas to write, to which Messner responds with the power of *What if?* What if there were a girl who is a tomboy but who is made to wear a princess dress in the school play? What if there were a dinosaur who is afraid of going to school? Or what if a kid sells his Babe Ruth baseball card to a collector, is cheated out of its real worth,

and comes to realize that the card he sold for \$200 is worth two million dollars? And what if this same kid and a group of his pals make a plan to steal it back? “That is how I get ideas for books,” she says.

Another popular question students ask Messner is if she is like the characters in her books. “This,” Messner explained, “is where I have the most fun—research.” For one of her *Marty McGuire* books, the main character has to kiss a frog.

“Kissing the frog was not slimy like I expected,” said Messner. “It was more of a cold and dry kiss.” The power of research adds the juicy details all writers need, she advises.

Finally, Messner poses a question to the students: How many drafts do you think I have for a novel? Students often guess one or two. “Fourteen,” she answers, and then she explained that it is important for teachers to show how much fun revision can be.

In addition to the *McGuire* series, Messner has authored several other books: *Capture the Flag* and *Sea Monster’s First Day* as well as a professional book titled *Real Revision*. Teachers can contact Messner at www.katemessner.com.

Janet Allen concluded the middle school mosaic by sharing “Instructional Strategies I Wish I Had Known.”

Allen spoke about the difference between assigning something and teaching something. One by one, Allen shared strategies both novice and veteran teachers could use.

With the national focus on the importance of informational text, Allen offered an analogy that both teachers and students can understand: The table of contents is the main idea, and the index is the details. Also, since vocabulary is a hurdle preventing students from understanding text, Allen suggested looking first at the captions under pictures for clarification.

And the most important lesson teachers can do is to teach students how to learn. A student who knows how to find the answer when no one is around to help is off to a future of life-long learning. marthamedlock@austin.rr.com