



# The Michigan English Teacher

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## President's Message: Come One, Come All to MCTE's Fall Conference



Fred Barton

Well, another year comes around the clubhouse turn and heads down the straightaway. I'm sure, as you look out on that group of budding scholars that has brightened your

days and gave meaning to your life, you're counting the days until the sound of school bells again echo through the crisp autumn air and once more, your step lightened by joy, you tread the hallowed halls of academe.

Or, maybe not. What do I know? Maybe your thoughts turn to relaxing summer evenings, sitting on the veranda of your condo just off the eighteenth green, watching the sun set over the pines and sipping a Mai Tai.

Whatever your summer plans, I want you to know that we here at MCTE Central are constantly at work making teaching in Michigan better for you, and your students (Without the benefit of Mai Tais, I might add). Which brings me to the point of this little missive, the 2007 MCTE Annual Conference. Now I know it's a little early to be thinking about fall, but you really need to get your date book out and mark down Friday, October 5, because, sparing no expense and

brooking no resistance we have brought you, as our keynote speaker...The President.

Yes ladies and gentlemen, I give you the president...of NCTE. Kathleen Blake Yancey, author of many books and articles including most recently, *Delivering College Composition: The Fifth Canon*. President Yancey has agreed to spend the day with us talking, teaching, and shar-

ing. And while she's doing that there are going to be some sesssiiionnnss going on! I mean sessions with a capital S boys and girls! And hey, it's not too late for you to get in on the whole presenting thing either. Check out the request for proposals form at the web site ([mienglishteacher.org](http://mienglishteacher.org)). Download the forms and say hello to fame and fortune.

OK, maybe not fortune, but presenters sit at the cool kids table at lunch. And speaking of lunch, besides the free seafood buffet compli-

mentary mimosas and strolling Mariachi Bands, you'll be treated to a luncheon address from Elizabeth Bauer, a member of the state Board of Education. Mrs. Bauer was elected in 2002. She is a self-employed international consultant in human rights and civil society, and a former executive director of the Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service.

Oh, and about the seafood and mimosas and stuff?

Umm...not so much, but you were thinking 'Fred, where the heck did you get a Mariachi Band' weren't you? I get that a lot. And speaking of thinking, it's time to put on your thinking caps and make a nomination for the MCTE Fries and

Lawson awards. Just click "Awards" on the home page for the particulars. Here's a chance to recognize a colleague, or colleagues (we have two awards after all) unless, like, maybe you think that all the accolades and

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MCTE Fall 2006 Conference attendees Sarah Beasley, left, and Emily Johnston, discuss ideas during a pair-and-share moment in a presentation. Plan to attend this fall's conference, Oct. 5.

## Getting Parents Involved in Student Writing

By Melissa Brooks-Yip

During my third year of teaching, I noticed something missing from my students' writing—connections to their lives at home. I wondered to myself, *what might happen to student's language arts grades if their parents were more directly involved in the assignments?* Unfortunately, it seemed as if the majority of the parents of my eighth grade students

were not involved in their child's school lives. This affected my students on many levels: they didn't get their homework done as often, didn't study for tests, and, in turn, would earn lower grades than students whose parents did seem to be involved.

Thus, as I thought about my work for that year, I felt the area I could

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See the insert for a ready to use lesson plan and information about MCTE's fall conference.

## President's Message:

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respect given to high prestige profession of teaching today is enough and we don't need to reward our fellows for a job well done. Is that what you think, Binky?

So go on, go on and have your summer vacation. Don't think

about us, toiling away here in the un-air conditioned halls of MCTE world headquarters trying to make your life a little brighter. It's OK. Don't worry about us. No, really, it's OK. The seafood buffet is great; I always did like Mariachi music and the mimosas are To. Die. For.

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**Fred Barton**, MCTE's President, teaches at Michigan State University.

Drop a line and make your request for the seafood buffet by emailing him at <bartonf@msu.edu>.

## Region XI Report

By Kia Jane Richmond, with Tom Hyslop

Region XI Counties Include: Alger, Baraga, Chippewa, Delta, Dickinson, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron, Keweenaw, Luce, Mackinaw, Marquette, Menominee, Ontonagon, and Schoolcraft

### Rollout (the barrel?)

Teachers of English Language Arts in the Upper Peninsula, like those in the Lower Peninsula, are busy this term preparing to meet the challenges of the newly approved Michigan High School Grade Level Expectations. Many secondary ELA teachers in this region attended meetings with the Michigan Department of Education such as the one held on October 12, 2006, at the MARESA in Marquette, Michigan. Teachers and administrators there were introduced to the ELA Course Credit Requirements and were given an opportunity to review the structure and contents of the ELA HSCE, to understand how the grade-level instructional units meet the 91 ELA Content Expectations, and to experiment with unit design. For many attendees, what was best about this meeting was visiting with other English Language Arts teachers and learning about the great work that many are already doing in their classrooms!

Attendees at the MARESA Rollout were thrilled to learn that ELA teachers will develop *their own* thematic units of instruction and that literature selections included in model units represent recommendations, *not requirements*. The new high school content ex-

pectations support current practice and focus students on writing, speaking and expressing for multiple purposes; reading fluency, reading comprehension, and critical reading; listening and viewing; media; and the power of language (MDE: HSCE English Language Arts Powerpoint from <<http://www.michigan.gov/hsce>>.

### MCTE Conference News

Several Region XI members attended the MCTE annual conference in Lansing on October 6, 2006. Hancock Public Schools teacher Stephen Alan Smith offered an interactive session entitled "Poetic License: Prompts for Writing across the Curriculum." Northern Michigan University professor Kia Jane Richmond attended the conference with Shannon Marr (Gaylord Public Schools teacher) and student teacher Shawn O'Neil (Marquette Area Public Schools). Richmond assisted with registration for the conference and participated in a session sponsored by the Michigan Conference on English Education. Teachers Marr and O'Neil listened to Alfie Kohn's keynote address, attended concurrent sessions, and learned more about how MCTE conferences, workshops, and journals can help both experienced and newer teachers to enter their classrooms refreshed and enthused about English Language Arts.

### Region XI Selected Highlights

English Language Arts teachers in the Upper Peninsula are doing great work, in and out of the classroom!

Carole Turner, an English Language Arts teacher at C.L. Phelps Middle School in Ishpeming, is well

known for organizing an annual student-created program on the Holocaust as well as for her work with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Turner was honored as one of five finalists for the Michigan Teacher of the Year Award in 2003-2004.

Amy Laitinen and Heather Hollands, both high school English teachers in Gwinn, Michigan, sponsored the Rural Poetry Initiative, part of a national competition for secondary students in rural areas. A celebration was held for poets, parents, and teachers at the Landmark Inn in Marquette on May 20, 2006. Additionally, Hollands was honored in the spring of 2006 as the Marquette-Alger Secondary Reading Teacher of the Year.

Kia Jane Richmond, an English Ed professor at Northern Michigan University, has been selected to receive the 2006-2007 Excellence in Professional Development Award from Northern Michigan University. A plaque and a check for \$1000 will be presented to her on December 7, 2006. Tom Hyslop, English Ed professor, received a similar award from Northern for Excellence in Teaching in 2004.

English Language Arts teachers in the U.P. are excited about the possibility of a regional conference in the U.P. in the near future. Region XI coordinators Kia Richmond and Tom Hyslop are working on the logistics of such an opportunity and will announce details as soon as they become available.

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**Kia Jane Richmond** is MCTE's Region XI Representative. She teaches at Northern Michigan University. Contact her at <[krichmon@nmu.edu](mailto:krichmon@nmu.edu)>.

## SLATE Update — Football, NCLB, and Classroom Advocacy



Ellen Brinkley

I've learned over the years that even when the political party that I want to win actually does win, there's no certainty that education issues will get resolved in reasonable ways. In fact, leaders of both parties too often disappoint me in terms of their grasp of education issues and in terms of the decisions they make about public education. Too often I'm puzzled when politicians propose legislation that seems only marginally important, or even downright threatening to good teaching and learning and to students' well being.

### NCLB as Parody

The No Child Left Behind Act has recently become a favorite target for educators, the press, and even for comedians. A friend from another state recently sent along an anonymous parody that applies NCLB specifications to football, as excerpted below. So, what if football had to be played by the same rules as current No Child Left Behind policies?

All teams must make the state playoffs and all must win the championship. If a team does not win the championship, they will be on probation until they are the champions, and coaches will be held accountable. If after two years they have not won the championship, their footballs and equipment will be taken away until they do win the championship.

All players will be expected to have the same football skills at the same time even if they do not have the same conditions or opportunities to practice on their own. No exceptions will be made for lack of interest in football, a desire to perform athletically, or genetic abilities or disabilities of themselves or their parents. All players will play football at a proficient level!

In light of recent elections, we will all be watching closely to see what new decisions about education are made and what their impact might be. A recent *Denver Post* editorial (Friday, November 17, 2006), titled "Leave 'No Child' Behind," offered several strong recommendations, such as, "Legislators should free the nation's public schools from the unfounded mandates, unnecessary entanglements and impossible edicts of the law." As if directly responding to the football analogy, the editorial explains:

Congress also should address the wildly optimistic goal of having all students proficient in math and reading by 2014, and drop the penalties for districts that don't achieve what the law calls 'adequate yearly progress.' A bizarre provision actually penalizes schools that are making great strides but still aren't meeting adequate yearly progress in reading and math. Each school not only has to hit a certain target of students who are proficient in the subjects, but each of the school's subgroups, such as minority groups or low-income students, also must meet that standard. If even one subgroup falls short, the whole school fails and could face penalties.

So, what if all teams had to make the state playoffs? And what if all teams had to win the championship? And if a team didn't win the championship, they would be put on probation until they did become champions. Their coaches would be held accountable, and if after two years they had not won the championship, there would be penalties. In fact, their equipment would be taken away until they did win the championship.

Too often I wonder at the uninformed decisions that politicians are making about education. Who are they listening to? Who are they consulting with? And why, too often, do I hear what seem to be equally ill-

informed positions being articulated by legislators on both sides of the aisle?

### NCTE's No Child Left Behind Recommendations

I encourage MCTE members and friends to read a new document produced and approved by the NCTE Executive Committee November 15, 2006. NCLB Recommendations <<http://www.ncte.org/print.asp?id=126092&node=255>> provide a wealth of information that can be used in conversations with lawmakers, who clearly need to hear directly from knowledgeable and articulate classroom teachers. Also, each of the NCLB Recommendations is practical and reasonable, even somewhat conservative some would say. I encourage you to read the entire document and then pick one or two of the points that you find especially important and focus your letter on them. Here are a few:

1. Multiple assessments are needed for an accurate portrait of the academic achievement of all students.
2. Teacher quality is an important factor in enhancing learning....
3. High-need students should have the best prepared and most experienced teachers.
4. *Reading First*, as the report of the Office of Inspector General in the U.S. Department of Education shows, has been riddled with ethical and legal violations, which excluded many researchers from the grants evaluation process.
5. NCTE supports the adoption of growth models to track increased achievement and provide longitudinal data based on the performance of individual students and subgroups.

### The Voice and Power of One English Teacher

When Katherine Ha (Portage Community High School) found herself in conversation with State Representative Tom George a few

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## Getting Parents Involved in Student Writing, Continued

(Continued from page 1)

stand to gain the most growth in was parental communication. Teachers play a vital role as a family professional, yet have little training or guidance on how to work with families (Balli, Demo, Wedman 1998). All teachers can benefit from knowing how to design and use homework that effectively engages family members, something not stressed in colleges of education. When teachers are being prepared for student teaching, there's a great deal of emphasis on planning a good lesson, but very little emphasis, if any, on designing related homework (Jones 2001). As a teacher, I am only with my students for about 45 minutes a day, for approximately nine months out of one year of their lives. Parents have access to their child for life and I hoped to find some ways to get parents and family members actively involved in their child's schoolwork, particularly in writing for their language arts assignments.

Wanting to get parents involved in my student's schoolwork is not a new approach to teaching, but increasing parental participation in education has become a priority lately as it promotes educational achievement. There have been variations in how teachers utilize parent involvement, but all believe there is a strong relationship between parental involvement and academic performance (Lareau, 1987). Policymakers, school administrators, parents, and students themselves generally agree that parental involvement is critical for students' academic success (Xitao 2001). However, with all of these findings on the benefits of parental involvement, research is scarce on parent involvement with middle-grades homework. Studies show that parent involvement declines dramatically when children make the transition from elementary to the middle grades. The few studies I

did find suggested that parent involvement had a substantial effect on eighth graders' achievement test scores, and this seemed to be accomplished primarily through parent involvement with homework, which led to higher homework completion. It is important for parents and other adult family member to see that the responsibility for formally educating children cannot be left solely to teachers (Balli, Demo, and Wedman, 1998).

Yet, teachers have a responsibility in this process, too. Giving writing a purpose for the real world is key to getting students to "buy in" to the writing process. If students see that writing is important not only for a grade from the teacher, then they will be more likely enjoy writing now and in the future, creating lifelong writers. My hope as an English language arts teacher is that students see writing as a way to communicate and connect with peers, family members, and significant adults in their lives. To instill this belief, students must see the adults in their life take writing seriously with them. Parental involvement in student writing and achievement is one of my specific goals as an English language arts teacher.

Getting parents involved in their child's written school work can be attempted in a few different ways. Teachers may solicit family involvement indirectly through prompting children, or they may directly prompt family members to become more involved. Children in turn, can request family involvement with (or without) the influence of teacher prompting. Some families may become involved with homework on their own or because their child or their child's teacher has influenced them to become involved. Many parents suggested that student prompting influenced their involvement, if the child said it was

"something we were supposed to do with him." (Balli, Demo, and Wedman, 1997). Barillas (2000) found that teachers can enlist parental involvement by designing activities to be carried out at home. It has been found that parents of successful students actively involved themselves in their children's completion of schoolwork (Falbo, Lein, and Amador, 2001). Interactive homework assignments can build stronger parent adolescent relationships, and can be designed to either involve the student as teacher of the parent, or the student interacting with the parent about the subject matter. No prior content knowledge is required on the part of the parent in order for students to successfully complete the assignment (Phelps, 1999). This last finding is extremely important, as we have to understand that some parents will not be comfortable enough with their own literacy skills when asked to become involved in their child's schoolwork.

### How To Involve Parents

Here is how I tried to increase parental involvement. Starting out by just having parent read and sign homework assignments, or being interviewed by their child for an assignment, I hoped to eventually use language arts assignments that would bring families and children together as writing partners at home. I wanted to use assignments to at least spark an interest in adult family members so they would *want* to know what their children are doing in my language arts class.

Past studies have shown that when parents are invited to share in an assignment, they get closer to their children's learning process. Such an invitation is beneficial to students in language arts because it nurtures their understanding of the writing process *and* their relationships with their parents (Hanson, 1994). I anticipated that these collaborative assignments would also improve student's attitude toward writing. Albee and Drew (2001) note that if parents, grandparents, and adult friends demonstrate their excite-

As a teacher, I am only with my students for about 45 minutes a day, for approximately nine months out of one year of their lives. Parents have access to their child for life and can be actively involved in their child's schoolwork, particularly in writing assignments.

## Getting Parents Involved in Student Writing, Continued

ment and involvement in the writing process, the attainment of this critical skill will become important to their children.

Two assignments I felt were particularly effective to begin involving parents and students in writing together are "Introducing a Family Member" and the "Phase Autobiography" (see insert). I designed these assignments in a way that would get family members increasingly involved in the writing assignment with their child. Starting out with the child interviewing the adult and then journaling together, the project ended with parent and student writing together. They used a Venn Diagram for organizing ideas to write a final paper that compared and contrasted the child and the parent or family member. In order to foster parental involvement over time, these three assignments were inserted amongst writing workshops we did in the classroom throughout the year, with the Venn diagram assignment being the final parent/child assignment for the year.

After the concluding assignment, I distributed a survey to measure parent/family member opinions on these various assignments designed to bring them together as writers with their children. The final assignment described above was ranked as the most favorite, according to parents this was because:

*"He picked me and it was interesting to see what a mother and son had in common."*

*"She was surprised by my childhood and the differences between us. I believe she enjoyed teaching me to do a Venn diagram, I know I did."*

*"It promoted discussion between us and a chance to laugh about some of our choices and comments."*

*"We did it together. He was very honored to hear what I had written, and I was excited to hear what*

*he thought of me."*

Also according to parents, the total of six assignments designed to involve them in their child's writing process proved to be a way to do just that. Parents commented positively about such assignments:

*"Parent participation is essential in the success of their student."*

*"It is important for a parent to understand what a student is learning, what stage*

*they're at and to stay knowledgeable about their life."*

*"It's nice to work together, especially at this age when they're trying so hard to be independent! Thank you!"*

Out of 29 parents responding, 23 stated that they would enjoy doing assignments designed for parents and children to work together, in any subject, not just English. Of these 23, one parent noted that these assignments "make us take a moment together, it's nice to have one-on-one time." As past research has shown, lack of time may be a factor in why parents are not involved, but many parents felt that assignments such as these were positive because it made them take the time to work with their child.

Overall, parental involvement in a child's education is just as important to many parents and family members as it is to me as a teacher. The research in the field and my own experiences have shown me that this is a critical part of my teaching. Having created such assignments has helped me to create working relationships with parents each year, leading to more important family/child/teacher writing projects.

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**Melissa Brooks-Yip** is an English Language Arts teacher at Eaton Rapids Middle School. Contact her at <meldan03@yahoo.com>.

## MCTE Celebrates Award Winners

*Editor's Note: Each year, MCTE selects two worthy teachers to receive the equivalent of our "lifetime achievement" honors, the Lawson and Fries awards. The following descriptions come from press releases that Past-President Jill VanAntwerp wrote to describe this year's award winners.*

### **Lawson Award Winner: Mary Cox**

Mary Cox, a high school teacher at Renaissance High School in the Detroit Public Schools, has been awarded MCTE's Ray Lawson award. The Lawson award, named after MCTE Secretary-Treasurer Ray Lawson, made its debut at the 2002 Annual Conference Luncheon and was awarded to Lawson himself that year. Lawson exemplified in a career of over 50 years the kind of teacher who should win the Lawson award, and the kind of person Mary Cox is as well, a teacher dedicated to the classroom and the profession who teaches not for the honor it affords but for the gifts it gives the students.

Mary Cox was chosen based on her 36 years of teaching, including 18 years at Martin Luther King High School before her transfer last year to Renaissance, as well as service to the profession in innumerable ways. Mary is described as one who "exudes the value of best practice in a diversified student body."

In 1997 Mary was President of

the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE). Lawson recalls Mary's presidency as having been marked by congeniality and calm under stress. As Ray recalls it, "She began her tenure as President with an overnight retreat in a Detroit hotel on the riverfront. It was a rousing one. The English teachers shocked

English held their annual convention in Detroit in November of 1997. Lawson noted that "she had a way of making others feel that they were important—especially evident when she was working with the chairs of the conference." All of us in attendance remember the Detroit Conference as one of NCTE's most successful.

Mary is the assistant director of the Meadow Brook Writing Project and the coordinator of the New Teacher Initiative. In these ways she passes on her expertise and knowledge to a new generation of teachers who are taking on the daunting task of joining our profession. Mary herself has said, "Students deserve highly qualified, caring teachers." Mary is a role model for that kind of teacher.

The Michigan Council of Teachers of English is proud to award her the 2006 Ray Lawson Award for Excellence in Teaching.

### **Fries Award Winner: Susan Steffel**

On October 6, 2006, Dr. Susan Steffel was awarded the Charles Carpenter Fries Award by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE). The Fries

award, first given in 1967, memorializes Fries, a U of M Professor and an early president of MCTE. Recipients of this award are teachers of English Language Arts who are not only excellent teachers but also serve their profession in the local communities in which they live and work and on the state and national levels.

Dr. Steffel is a worthy recipient



Mary Cox listens to Jill VanAntwerp read the award description for the Ray Lawson Award. The award is given each year to a teacher who has contributed significantly to English teaching in Michigan.

the hotel staff because of such a loud dinner group. As a result of the dinner, Mary established a congenial feeling among the members of the Executive Committee that proved fruitful throughout the year."

Perhaps Mary's most stressful task was serving as Local Arrangements Chair when the National Council of Teachers of

## MCTE Award Winners

of this award. She began her teaching career at Maple Valley High School in Vermontville, Michigan as a high school and middle school English teacher. There she had all of the experiences high school teachers remember fondly, including chaperoning senior class trips and serving as faculty representative to various clubs. After 18 years at Maple Valley, Sue joined the faculty at Central Michigan University. Her department chair, Marcy Taylor, describes Sue as a “mentor and an excellent image of the profession for students to emulate.” Taylor adds, “Not only does Sue shine in the classroom, but she serves as a model of what a teacher should be for her students—most of whom are pursuing degrees in secondary language arts education. She is active in the profession, an engaged colleague, and a proponent of public education.”

Sue was on the MCTE Executive Committee from 1996 through 2005, serving as President in 2003-2004. Her presidency was characterized by high energy. A highlight for all members was the annual conference to which Sue invited keynote speaker Christopher Paul Curtis. Those who served on the Executive Committee remember an enjoyable and productive year led by a congenial president.

Sue has served MCTE in many other capacities, notably as co-editor of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* from 1999-2003. One issue during that time was on the topic of Diversity and was instrumental in MCTE being awarded the 2002 NCTE Affiliate Multicultural Program Award. Sue served on the Board of Directors of the Michigan Writing Project from 1986-88, and currently serves as



Sue Steffel receives the Fries award and a smile from MCTE President, Fred Barton.. The award is given each year to a teacher or teacher educator who has contributed to English teaching in Michigan and serves in local, state, and national contexts.

a longstanding member of the Steering Committee of the MSU Spring Conference on English Language Arts.

Nationally, Sue has served as an affiliate liaison to NCTE (National Council of Teaching of English), on the NCTE/CEE Affiliate Task Force (Conference on English Education), on the CEE Nominating Committee, on the Editorial Review Board of CEE’s journal, *English Education*, on the Board of Directors of the American Society for the Teaching and Research of Young Adult Literature, and as an active member of ALAN (the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE). She was recently nominated for a seat on the ALAN Board of Directors.

Sue has been honored numerous times at CMU, receiving the annual teaching award twice, the Sigma Tau Delta “Chip Off the Old Block” award twice, and the inaugural College of Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sci-

ences Teaching Excellence Award last spring.

Sue judges writing awards, presents at conferences both in the state and nationally, mentors students during their college year and beyond, often presenting at conferences with her current or past students, and exemplifies what our profession would call excellence in teaching. She is a loyal friend and a dedicated teacher and blurs the line between those two categories as a matter of practice. For this dedication and professional service, for teaching quality and the accomplishments of her long career, MCTE is proud to award Dr. Susan Steffel the 2006 Charles Carpenter Fries Award.

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If you are interested in nominating a colleague for next year’s Fries or Lawson Award, please visit our award website at <[www.mienglishteacher.org/awards.htm](http://www.mienglishteacher.org/awards.htm)>.

## MET Editorial Policy

### Winner of the NCTE Affiliate Excellence Newsletter Award for 2004-2005.

*The Michigan English Teacher*, a member of the National Council of Teachers of English Affiliate Information Exchange Agreement, is published quarterly by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

The editors welcome manuscripts (on average, between 200–2000 words) responding to issues in English teaching, or offering news, announcements, and reviews. We will consider articles, accounts of teaching strategies, and book reviews of current interest or concern to English language arts teachers in Michigan and reserve the right to edit any submission. All unsolicited manuscripts will be subject to review by the editors. *The Michigan English Teacher* is published four times a year (September, December, April and June).

The deadlines for 2007-08 submission are:

- August 15, 2007
- November 15, 2007
- March 15, 2008
- May 15, 2008

All submissions should be sent via email in Microsoft Word or compatible format to either:

**Rita Maddox or Troy Hicks at [met@mienglishteacher.org](mailto:met@mienglishteacher.org)**

### Membership Information

Correspondence about change of address, subscriptions, or membership should be sent to:

**Ray Lawson  
MCTE  
P.O. Box 81152  
Rochester MI 48308-1152**

Questions? Email:  
[treasurer@mienglishteacher.org](mailto:treasurer@mienglishteacher.org)

Membership, which is \$40.00, includes four issues of *The MET* and two issues of *The Language Arts Journal of Michigan*.

## SLATE Update, Continued

(Continued from page 3)

years ago, she mentioned that she was a teacher and told him a little about her teaching. She realized as they chatted that he had little idea about alternative high schools, so she invited him to come and speak to her students. As she told me the story of his school visit, I realized the amazing wisdom of her invitation and the careful preparations she made for it.

It was an election year, just before Tom George moved from the Michigan House to the Michigan Senate. Kathy told him that she taught in an alternative school and described her students as “those who had not found success in traditional programs.” She explained that 82 percent of her students received free lunches and told him about what would go on in a normal day. She explained that one of the main things she tries to do is to prepare students to integrate back into a traditional school, at least to get the skills they will need.

Kathy and her students had decided who might ask Senator George questions. He talked to them for about 40 minutes or so, long enough that her administrators asked him to give a talk to all their students. He talked and answered questions for about 40 students and told them what representatives and senators do. He also made a point to ask them questions about their school and the hometowns they had originally come from. And he strongly encouraged them to focus on their education.

In retrospect, Kathy points to one specific exchange that helped bring

the visiting politician and the students together: “When he invited questions, one student dropped the bravado and asked, ‘If you mess up in high school and come to the alternative school, does it mean that the whole rest of your life will be messed up?’”

Senator George must have appreciated the honesty of this important question. “Five years after you graduate,” he said, “no one will even know where you graduated from.” Kathy reports that “this single comment seemed to win over the heart of every kid in the school.”

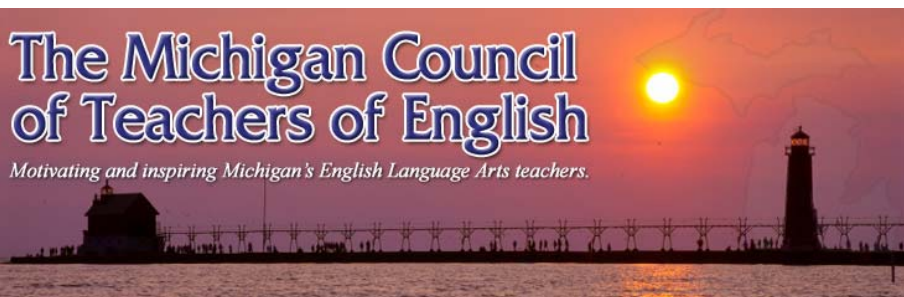
### Classroom Advocacy

This is just one story about one teacher whose advocacy was effective because it was entirely focused on support for her students. But what if lots of us invited a legislator into genuine conversation with our students?

Kathy says that she continues to watch Senator George’s voting record. I haven’t checked, but I believe that he learned a lot that day from Kathy about good teaching for all students. And I’d like to think that he and his legislative colleagues would think twice about setting statistically impossible goals, and that they would refuse to consider imposing dramatically punitive consequences on all students.

I encourage you to tell your story, and be an advocate, too.

**Ellen Brinkley** is a member of NCTE’s SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Steering Committee. She teaches at Western Michigan University. Contact her at: [ellen.brinkley@wmich.edu](mailto:ellen.brinkley@wmich.edu).





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bartonf@msu.edu

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kruchm@gvsu.edu

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Language Arts Consultant  
tobyteach@aol.com

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Yeggela@clarkston.k12.mi.us

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KVogel@nvps.net

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taryn1014@yahoo.com

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j.mix@wayne.edu

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Kia Richmond  
Northern Michigan University  
krichmon@nmu.edu

W. Douglas Baker  
Eastern Michigan University  
douglas.baker@emich.edu

## MET Co-Editors

Rita Maddox  
Language Arts Consultant  
wjmaddox1@comcast.net

Troy Hicks  
Michigan State University  
hickstro@msu.edu

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### Region I

Vacant

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Vacant

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Vacant

### Region IV

Kimme Knuckles  
Baker College  
kimme.knuckles@baker.edu

### Region V

Reade Dornan  
Michigan State University  
dornan@msu.edu

### Region VI

Vacant

## Region VII

Toby Kahn-Loftus  
Central Michigan University  
tobyteach@aol.com

## Region VIII

Vacant

## Region IX

### Webmaster

Rob Patin  
Tri-County High School  
rpatin@tricityschools.com

## Region X

Toby Kahn-Loftus  
Central Michigan University  
tobyteach@aol.com

## Region XI

Kia Richmond  
Northern Michigan University  
krichmon@nmu.edu

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Atherton High School  
sgarza@athertonschools.com

## Student Affiliate

Frank Accavitti  
Michigan State University  
accavitt1@msu.edu

## Michigan Department of Education Liaison

Lynnette VanDyke  
English Language Arts Consultant  
VanDykeL@michigan.gov

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## Michigan Council of Teachers of English Fall Conference

Friday, October 5, 2007  
8:30 AM – 4:00 PM  
Sheraton Inn, Lansing, MI

Composing Communities: Creating and Connecting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Keynote Speaker: Kathleen Blake Yancey  
*Author of Teaching Literature As Reflective Practice*

Blogs, wikis, e-books, hypertext, e-mail. The opportunities to bring the world into our classrooms have grown exponentially in the blink of an eye. And even as the educational world shifts under our feet, the classic traditions of reading, writing speaking and listening stay with us. Join Dr. Yancey and your colleagues for a day of exploring the impact of the future on the present, and share strategies and stories for creating connections to the 21st century, for you, and your students.

Presentations will be 50 minutes long and are invited in varying modes: lecture/discussion, demonstration, and workshop. If you would like to propose a conference session, please fill out and return the proposal form (e-mail preferred). Questions can be directed to Conference Chair Fred Barton (517) 449.1169 or bartonf@msu.edu.

## 1. Introducing a Family Member/ Speaking about a Person

**Consider this scenario:** In social studies class, you have worked on family histories and may have written about your parents, grandparents, or other family members. Now you will choose a family member in your life to discuss with the class. Use these questions to gain some information about your family member's life.

Name and how you know this person:

Date and place of birth:

Occupation:

What special talents or experiences in the person's life should be highlighted?

What would this person want to tell your class if he or she could be there?

*\* Using this information, write a **brief** rough draft of a speech you can share with the class.*

## 2. Phase Biography

You will now dig deeper into your family member's life stories for a phase biography—a story about one important thing from their life. You need to interview this person by either writing in your journal using these prompts for conversation, or inviting them to write in your journal, answering these prompts for you, and then sharing.

**Tip:** \* If you are doing the writing while listening to your family member talk, be prepared to take quick notes, since the person is likely to talk constantly. You can fill in details later.

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Begin with the two interview questions below. If time allows, you may find other, related questions to ask for more detail.

1. Name two or three important and interesting things that have happened in your life.

2. Which of these things would you like to tell me about in detail? (This will become the focus of your phase biography).

3. Additional Questions (be sure to write your question and the response):