



# The GEA Observer



March 2017

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## President's Reflections

Dear GEA Members,

I can't believe the year is almost over. The end of third term already! I know at the beginning of the year I felt there were so many things to do and, while I have finished some of them, it seems that the list has only grown longer.

Today is the first day of Spring! It has been a strange winter with warmer than normal temperatures and more snow than we have seen in a long time. Like the weather, teaching is constantly changing and causing us to adjust; and I have to say that I love teaching, in part, because of the unpredictability.

On the horizon for Granite School District (GSD) is Proficiency-Based Grading (PBG) (aka: standards-based grading). This change in grading philosophy is an outgrowth of Utah's Core Teaching Standards. Since each subject we teach is defined by a set of specific "standards" and, as GSD employees we are teaching these standards with "fidelity," and testing our students on those standards, we are now being called to grade our students on how well they have mastered or are proficient in these standards.

For the past six years, there have been committees formed to discuss pros/cons, and plan/suggest how to implement PBG. It's critical that you know that GEA teachers and leaders have been representatives on each of these committees. While we were able to give input, and gain concessions on the plan, ultimately the District decided what technological program to use, and how PBG would be presented and tested.

Currently, there are six schools and 18 educators who have agreed to "beta" test the program that the District has developed for PBG. GEA is monitoring to learn what these teachers like about the program, how it is being implemented, and suggestions they have for moving forward. GEA held a focus group of these "PBG Beta Testers" on February 9. The goal of the meeting was to gain 1:1 feedback from the teachers, hear their suggestions, and prepare to report the findings to the District with the request that their input be used in modifying the program.

Is there a chance to completely stop PBG? Probably not, especially since there is a bill at the legislature ([SB 220 sponsored by Sen. Millner](#)) addressing implementing PBG statewide. It is the coming "wave" and we need to plan for and try to put breakwaters in place to moderate the impact. We want to have the best methods for teaching our students in place, while protecting teachers from a labor intensive program with little return on investment.

Please hang on while we navigate these waters together, and call if you would like to discuss this further.

— Susen Zobel



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### Dates to Remember:

**GEA Executive Board Mtg—April 5**

**GEA AR Mtg—April 12**

**GSD Insurance Committee—April 10**

**GSD Board of Directors Mtg—April 18**

**GEA Talk: Working with BD Students—April 20**

# GEA TALKS—Why Political Action



## EVERY SCHOOL DECISION IS A POLITICAL DECISION

For more information, check out this link:

[http://www.myuea.org/Articles/uea\\_joins\\_utah\\_business\\_leaders\\_as\\_they\\_launch\\_our\\_schools\\_now\\_campaign\\_to\\_raise\\_taxes\\_and\\_improve\\_student\\_performance.aspx](http://www.myuea.org/Articles/uea_joins_utah_business_leaders_as_they_launch_our_schools_now_campaign_to_raise_taxes_and_improve_student_performance.aspx)

Thank you to GEA's excellent PAC advocates for their insight: Beth Neiderman (Chairperson), Barbara Antonetti, Eddie Berrest, Tyler Jensen, Michele Jones, Mary Lamb, and Mike McDonough.

In February, the GEA Political Action Committee (PAC) hosted the monthly GEA Talk around “**Educator Voices During the Legislative Session.**”

The presentation focused on “Power to the People” to emphasize the fact that as educators, we know more than legislators do around the needs of public education. Because of this, it is critical that we let our legislators know what resources are needed to enhance public education in Utah.

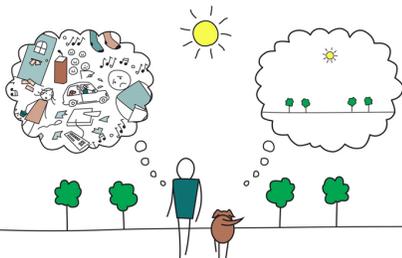
Our influence has been revealed after the last state school board election, where we were able to displace board members who did not have educator or student interests in mind, and elect well-rounded lead-

ers who are education professionals.

In addition to the change in the state school board, several education-friendly candidates were elected to the Utah State House of Representatives and Senate.

The Legislature was challenged this year by the Utah business community to increase funding for public education. The public pressure was healthy as the normally tight-fisted Legislature funded our schools with a 4% increase on the Weighted Pupil Unit (WPU). There is still discussion around a public referendum to raise taxes for our schools, so stay tuned.

## Mindfulness in the Classroom



Mind Full, or Mindful?

Instead of “March Madness”, GEA practiced March Mindfulness during its March 16 GEA Talk. We began with a short description of mindfulness as “being in the present moment with non-judgmental awareness.”

Participants experienced a short mindfulness exercise to quiet the multitude of thoughts that continually filter through

our brains. We then shared the stressors in our lives and the activities or crutches we use to cover-up the emotional upheaval stress produces.

Exercises for educators’ to share with elementary and secondary students to assist them in adapting mindfulness or self-awareness in the present moment were also explored, from “first aid for worries” for elementary students, to stress-reduction activities for secondary students. Research on how mindfulness exercises improve testing scores, class-

room discipline, and relationship building between students and educators was discussed.

Participants expressed the wish to establish ongoing dialogue around mindfulness for the educators’ personal benefit. The challenges we have in the classroom today and the excessive energy we are asked to hold and deliver can be overwhelming. Anyone interested in meeting to explore mindfulness techniques and support one another in maintaining more life balance, please contact Cindy Formeller at the GEA Office:

[cindy.formeller@myuea.org](mailto:cindy.formeller@myuea.org) or (801) 266-4411.

# GEA Retirement Seminar 2017

Once a year, GEA sponsors a retirement seminar and invites Granite District retirement expert, David Rettie, and representatives from the Utah Retirement Systems to share specifics about the District retirement benefits and State retirement benefits.

Over 165 people attended this year's seminar. Some were gathering information for future years, but many were planning on retiring at the end of this contract year. It takes us by surprise to learn how many educators, and GEA members are unsure of the outstanding retirement benefits the Association has negotiated for them. We are proud of the fact that Granite is one of only a handful of school districts that has maintained a district retirement benefit. Here is a sampling of the robust benefits you receive as a career educator with Granite.

## Eligibility Requirements:

- ◇ Minimum of ten (10) years of contract service in GSD.
- ◇ Must retire immediately with the Utah Retirement Systems
- ◇ Must not have a current (within existing school year) written notice of suspension, termination, or non-renewal of contract.

If you are considering retirement and meet the above three eligibility requirements, then **you would receive from GSD the following:**

1. A one-time stipend equal to one-half of one percent multiplied by the number of years of service in a contract position, multiplied by the amount of the final contract base salary. (whew)
2. Early Retirement Stipend is equal to 12% of the final base contract salary. (for a retiree on Lane D, step 20 =  $0.12 \times 60,931 = \$7,311.72$ ) This benefit is paid once a year, on or around September 15, for *up to five years* or until the retiree is eligible for full Social Security benefits by July 1 of that year, whichever comes first. The last year eligible for payment is
3. Medical Coverage is available for the gap years from retirement to Medicare eligibility or *whichever comes first*. The retiree pays the same costs as current employees (only medical coverage continues). And if the retiree's medical coverage included a spouse and/or dependents, then these benefits will continue until eligibility ends.
4. Life Insurance—if the retiree is enrolled in the GSD's group Basic Life Insurance, that too will continue for five years or until Medicare eligibility.



**Calendar this next GEA Talk—Thursday, April 20, 2017, 4:30—6:00 p.m.**

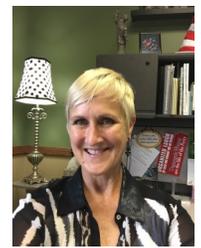
**“Help for Regular Classroom Educators Working with Students with Difficult Emotional & Behavioral Problems.”**

**Presented by Sheri Kennedy (elementary), and Brandy Moon (secondary), Granite School District Special Education Associate Directors. RSVP to [Mary.Jones@myuea.org](mailto:Mary.Jones@myuea.org) or call (801) 266-4411**

## GEA Directors, Star Orullian and Cindy Formeller



Star Orullian



Cindy Formeller



Hey, AdvoCat, what do you do all day? Just lounge?

Signed: Wondering

**Dear Wondering,**

...lounge, read the paper, drink warm cream, and nap in the sun...NOT! GEA AdvoCats are involved in member issues from early morning to late in the evening. We meet with teachers before and after school, schedule meetings with Granite District administrators to “AdvoCat” for individuals and district-wide issues, coordinate with GEA leaders on the calls and concerns received from members, organize events and projects, and basically do everything including clean the litterbox. We don’t yowl out to the world our daily

successes and disappointments. Maybe we should? Mostly we are stealth protectors of the realm!



**Dear AdvoCat,**

I am receiving a lot of email and messages on social media regarding politics in public education. I don’t think teachers should get involved in politics. We just need to teach!

Signed: Tired of Politics

**Dear Tired:**

I’m a tired cat, too. The lay of the public education landscape is founded on politics. Unfortunately, educators cannot afford to be silent. Regardless of the political party you endorse, every cat hair on your head is managed by national, state, or local government. From crayons to assessments, length of a school day to your professional development, there is nothing free of a political vote.

That’s why you are hearing from your national, state, and local

associations about political issues and events. Public Education needs your voice so that our schools do not become a “cat-astrophe.” Take a cat-nap when you’re able, and then come back and claw the couch with the rest of us!

**Dear AdvoCat,**

I am looking forward to a break and my family and I are hoping to go to Disneyland. Can you scratch up a deal? Signed: Vacay Ready

**Dear Vacay,**

You came to the right place. Check out UEA’s Members Only page, [www.myuea.org](http://www.myuea.org) or NEA’s Member Benefits, [neamb.org](http://neamb.org) for ongoing savings at Disney Properties! You will need your member “microchip” number. Call the GEA Office for help: (801) 266-4411.

## Opinion: Teacher for Social Justice

A few weeks before the inauguration of our new president, I had a conversation with my brother about the impending administration and my constant worry for people in American who are marginalized because of their race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and gender.

I made a statement about how I was going to avoid the news until May because the stress and heartache was overwhelming. Of

course, this didn’t happen, and on January 21<sup>st</sup>, I started to get involved and stand up for civil rights in every opportunity. I had a personal wake-up call as I walked down a slushy street, wearing a pink hat in Ogden with the Women’s March. The fact that I felt like it was an option to protect myself and avoid politics speaks to my ingrained white privilege.

Even after educating myself on Social Justices for a year, I felt that I had the option to check out, when most of America, including my students, do not.



(continued on page 5)

I teach a classroom of students who are trauma survivors, refugees, and immigrants. Many of my students live in poverty line and go home to stresses I've never experienced. We had a guest speaker in my class recently, Eddie Berrest, the other half of the GEA Social Justice Committee. He told his story of growing up as a black man in Utah, being raised by a single parent, and the struggles he went through growing up in poverty. At one point in the talk, he asked students if any of them had ever had the electricity shut off, if any of them had every gone home to empty refrigerators, if any of them had to take a cold shower because they had no heat, if many of them had to raise their little brothers and sisters while their parents had to work more than one job to pay the bills. The majority of my students raised their hands. Those hands! That moment! This is why we can't check out, even though it is not the easy option.

Issues in Social Justice start to get resolved when bridges begin to be built. Eddie shared openly about his hard childhood and its challenges, and his reasons for why he is a teacher. He built more bridges with my kids in 90 minutes than I have in six months because he let them truly see him. After he left, my kids told me they loved that he spoke about his challenges, his story, and that he was so genuine with them. We continued to discuss the different cultures and backgrounds in our class family, the food we like, the places we have lived, and the way we feel when we come to school. Students then took time to write Eddie "thank you" letters. I told them to include a little bit about themselves. I expected them to write about their favorite sports team, or their favorite video game, but instead, they started to tell their stories. That bridge of trust was built and they were finally comfortable enough in my classroom to share.

I sat after school and cried as I read about their realities. It was a humbling experience for me to realize I am in a class of survivors and my twelve-year old students are probably stronger humans than I will ever be. That safe space I try to create is important; sometimes it is the only one they have. That love I try to show them needs to be bigger and louder. That education I prepare for them is going to be a lifeline out of poverty and prison.

There is no way to solve every issue of inequality and oppression in one classroom. These issues are complicated and woven into society so deeply that we will not complete the process quickly, but small steps will lead to big actions eventually. Students we teach this year will be the future leaders of tomorrow, and our treatment of them will make an impact.

So please, fellow educators, don't check out or change the station. Take care of yourselves and your students. Tune in and sharpen those listening skills; continue to be that change you want to see in the world. Each of the small drops that lead to tidal waves of change! With much love, respect, and gratitude,

— Caren Burns, teacher of 6th graders



**GEA\_Utah**



**Our page is: GEA**

**We also invite you to  
check out our website:**

**[WWW.GEA-UT.ORG](http://WWW.GEA-UT.ORG)**