

AEL Leadership Forum



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UPCOMING EVENTS

Nov. 22
AEL General
Membership
Meeting/Fall
Football Social—
Blue Dolphin,
Crofton
(More information to
come)

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The Work Behind a “Seamless” Start

By Tracey Ahern, AEL President

We are more than six weeks into the school year, and one of the themes we continue to hear is how **seamless the start of the school year felt across AACPS**.

That is something worth celebrating.

Our Superintendent has recognized the strong opening of schools, and those kudos feel good. But as AEL members, we also know something important: **a seamless opening does not just happen**.

Behind every smooth first day are months of planning, problem solving, adjusting, communicating, anticipating, and sometimes improvising. It is the work of our administrators, coordinators, special assistants, and other Unit II leaders who are constantly thinking several steps ahead.

Before students ever walk through the doors, we are asking: Do we have the right staff in place to move students forward? How will we support

them? Are schedules built to maximize instruction? Are students receiving the services they need? Are our buildings ready? Are transportation, technology, meals, safety procedures, materials, special education services, interventions, and family communication in place?

And then the students arrive.

Recently, I participated in a professional development session where we were asked to write down our “role” in the school.

I wanted to write one word: **Everything**.

I suspect many AEL members know exactly what I mean.

On any given day, our work may include instructional leadership, coaching teachers, analyzing data, managing behavior, supporting students in crisis, addressing attendance, solving staffing issues, covering classrooms, helping with lunch duty, ensuring IEP and 504 compli-

ance, managing budgets, responding to facilities concerns, supporting school safety, meeting with families, partnering with community organizations, handling transportation issues, supervising arrival and dismissal, responding to emails, evaluating staff, implementing district initiatives, planning professional development, celebrating staff, recognizing students, and somehow finding time to think strategically about where our schools, offices, and programs need to go next.

And that is before the unexpected happens.

We are relationship builders, problem solvers, instructional leaders, advocates, managers, coaches, communicators, planners, and mentors. Sometimes we are also the person holding the door, carrying the lunch tray, finding the missing Chromebook, de-escalating a difficult situation, or stepping

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Behind a Seamless Start...

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“Leadership is not simply managing all of the moving parts. It is creating the conditions where people can do their best work.”

*Tracey Ahern,
AEL President*

into a classroom because that is what the moment requires.

We keep an incredible number of balls in the air. The irony is that when we do it well, much of that work becomes invisible.

People see the result. They do not always see what it took to get there.

They see a school that opened smoothly, but not the administrator who spent hours rebuilding a master schedule because of a staffing change.

They see a strong instructional team, but not the countless conversations that built trust, supported a struggling employee, developed a new leader, or helped a teacher believe they could succeed.

They see a safe school, but not the planning, drills, supervision, coordination, decision making, and constant attention to hundreds of small details that make it safe.

They see an initiative successfully implemented, but not the leader figuring out how to make one more priority fit alongside everything our staff and students already need.

And they may not see the **relationships behind the work.**

Leadership is not simply managing all of the moving parts. It is creating the conditions where people can do their best work. It is knowing your staff, supporting them when things are difficult, celebrating them when things go well, having hard conversations when necessary, and building a team that keeps students at the center even when the demands around us compete for our attention.

Making Our Work Visible

As AEL prepares for our next round of negotiations, this matters.

We need the people sitting across the table from us, and the people making decisions throughout our school system, to fully understand what Unit II members actually do.

Our responsibilities have grown. The complexity of our work has grown. Expectations around instruction, student achievement, school safety, special education, student behavior, mental health, family engagement, staffing, accountability, compliance, and implementation continue to grow as well.

Yet much of that work can be difficult to quantify precisely because **our job is often to prevent problems before they become problems.**

When a school opens smoothly, when a program operates effectively, when staff feel supported, when a

difficult situation is resolved before it escalates, when families trust their school, and when teachers can focus on teaching, leadership is at work.

That work has value.

As we enter negotiations, we need to tell that story clearly. This is not simply about compensation. It is about ensuring that the responsibilities, expectations, workload, time, expertise, and leadership of Unit II members are understood and appropriately recognized.

That means each of us has a role in making our work visible.

Share your successes with AEL. Tell us about the challenges you are navigating. Help us identify responsibilities that have expanded or changed. Share the things you are doing today that were not part of the job five or ten years ago. Those stories, combined with data, give us a much clearer picture of what Unit II leadership looks like in 2026.

If the opening of school felt seamless, it was because **Unit II leaders made it look that way.** That deserves to be celebrated. But it also deserves to be understood.

Because “seamless” is not effortless.

It is the result of skilled, committed leadership, and that leadership must be valued.

Another Opening, Another...

By Rick Kovelant, Esq., AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

As the new school year begins, it is somewhat ironic that the September holiday, Labor Day that recognizes workers and unions, corresponds with the beginning of the collective bargaining process between AEL and the BOE.

Collective bargaining is a right established by law and “Negotiations” is the process by which that right is exercised. That exercised right should result in a Negotiate Agreement. Sounds pretty simple, but it never seems to be the case. The right to collectively bargain is not without restrictions. Topics relating to wages, hours and working conditions are the permitted generic areas. Defining what those areas encompass can be the challenge. As always, the devil is in the details.

In a perfect world, negotiations (“the process”) are required to be conducted in “good faith.” What exactly constitutes good faith is open to interpretation and when challenged, is often decided by a third party.

The creation of the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) is the first arbiter of any challenge of this sort. Generally, good faith negotiations involve meeting on a consistent and scheduled basis, exchanging positions, providing rationales for those positions and trying to reach an accord. It is important that each side can rely on the accuracy of all representations and information presented at the negotiating table, unless they are specifically changed or properly withdrawn.

Strategies and positions on one side are obviously impacted when representations and information is changed or withheld by the other side. There simply cannot be a fair negotiated resolution if these areas are compromised.

Public school employees are limited in the exercise of the collective bargaining process. Unlike the private sector, strikes are prohibited and walkouts are not an option. In the private sector, unions seek increased compensation, while management is motivated by profits, generally at the expense of workers’ compensation enhancements.

By contrast, public school management (BOE), has no profit motive when negotiating employee compensation. It is, rather, an

“It is important that each side can rely on the accuracy of all representations and information presented at the negotiating table....”

*Rick Kovelant, Esq., AEL
Executive Director &
General Counsel*

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Another Opening ...

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“For collective bargaining to continue to exist and the process of negotiation to have meaning, it cannot begin and end with the negotiating team.”

*Rick Kovelant, Esq., AEL
Executive Director and
General Counsel*

issue of budget item priorities that dictate its response to labor’s compensation proposals. Because of this, compensation negotiations become even more complex.

While AEL and the BOE may negotiate a fair compensation package, the BOE’s fulfillment of that agreement is dependent upon funding by the County. These funds are not self-generated or earned by the BOE (there is no separate school tax). In reality, AEL’s negotiations involve convincing the BOE to agree to compensation (paid by County funding) and, if necessary, then convincing the BOE to adjust its budget priorities, to support fair and appropriate compensation for Unit II employees.

This is no small task, because the issue of Unit II

compensation as part of the BOE budget is one that impacts all BOE bargaining units. All bargaining units are fighting for a larger piece of the compensation pie from a source that is without its own funds to satisfy.

Although hours and working conditions seem to be singular non-monetary topics to negotiate, that is not necessarily the case. There is, most probably, a fiscal cost attributable to these areas. As a result, AEL may need to prioritize its negotiated compensation position. The time and attention in developing a negotiating agenda is a formidable undertaking. Compromising distinctly financial improvement (“compensation”) at the expense of modifying certain working conditions has to be carefully considered.

For collective bargaining to continue to exist and the process of negotiation to have meaning, it cannot begin and end with the negotiating team. Arriving at a Negotiated Agreement is a challenge. The results are neither fulfilling a “Great Expectation,” nor are they a result of “expect nothing and you won’t be disappointed.”

As I have said before, your involvement is necessary. Standing in solidarity at a BOE meeting, serving on a number of AEL’s committees, standing for election on the Executive Board and just appearing at a membership meeting in person or, on occasion, virtually will keep the collective bargaining right alive.

Your compensation and your employee benefits are dependent on this right. They cannot be taken for granted.

504 Updates:

Advocating for Support and Sustainable Processes

By Stacey Smith, AEL First Vice President

“This will provide an opportunity for administrators from the field to share what is working, identify barriers, and help shape solutions that are practical for schools.”

*Stacey Smith,
AEL First Vice President*

On August 14, 2026, AEL representatives met with Ms. Monique Jackson and Ms. Keisha Butler to discuss the ongoing challenges and needs surrounding the implementation and management of Section 504 processes across our schools. The conversation centered on identifying ways to better support administrators and school-based teams while ensuring that our processes are legally sound, efficient, and responsive to the needs of students.

One of the immediate requests coming out of the meeting is for AEL to provide estimated numbers for the substitute coverage that may be needed at all building levels to support the work associated with 504s. AEL will be reaching out to Principals for assistance in gathering this information. Your feedback will help us accurately communicate the operational impact that the current process has on our buildings.

Ms. Butler will be establishing a 504 Advisory Board specifically designed to examine the needs of schools and identify potential changes to current processes. This will provide an opportunity for administrators from the field to share what is working, identify barriers, and help shape solutions that are practical for schools.

AACPS Legal is also reviewing the applicable requirements to determine what process changes can be made while remaining compliant with the law and avoiding violations or potential OCR concerns. This is an important part of the work, as we want to ensure that any changes improve efficiency and reduce the administrative burden without compromising students' rights. The need for this work is clear. During the 2025–26 school year, there were 17 impartial hearing cases and 5 OCR cases related to 504 matters. These numbers underscore the importance of having clear, consistent, legally defensible processes and ade-

quate support for those responsible for implementing them.

AEL is looking for APs and Principals at the elementary, middle, and high school levels who are interested in serving on the 504 Advisory Board. Representation from all levels is important so that the group can examine the process through a variety of building-level lenses.

If you are interested in participating, please contact:

Stacey Smith
smssmith1@aacps.org

Your experience matters. This is an opportunity to move beyond simply identifying the challenges and participate in developing solutions that better support students, staff, and administrators.

Another significant outcome from the August 14 meeting was a commitment from Ms. Jackson to request funding for dedicated support staff to assist schools with 504-related work. This request

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504 Updates ...

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has been included in the current budget request.

To be clear, these are not additional resource positions. The intent is to provide school-based support for administrators and buildings that have a demonstrated need for additional assistance with the workload associated with 504 implementation. AEL must continue to support and advocate for this staffing. The workload associated with 504 responsibilities has grown considerably, and administrators need meaningful support to manage these responsibilities while continuing to lead instruction, school operations, staff development, student discipline, attendance, safety, and the many other demands placed on school-based leaders.

A small WIN!

We also identified an immediate process improvement

related to paperwork.

When there are minor errors that need to be corrected or edited, the process should now be easier. Ms. Brown in the 504 Office will assist with correcting these minor errors rather than requiring school-based administrators to navigate an unnecessarily cumbersome process.

While this may seem like a small change, it represents the kind of practical adjustment that can make a difference in the day-to-day workload of our buildings.

It's NOT Over...

The work does not end with one meeting. AEL will continue advocating for clearer processes, appropriate staffing, reasonable expectations, and meaningful support for Unit II members who are responsible for this work.

Our goal is not to diminish the importance of Section

504. Quite the opposite—we want to ensure that students receive the support to which they are entitled while also creating systems that are manageable, sustainable, legally compliant, and appropriately supported at the school level.

We encourage Unit II members to share their experiences, participate in the Advisory Board if interested, and help us identify the areas where additional support is needed. When we bring accurate information and building-level experiences to the table, we strengthen our ability to advocate for meaningful change.

Thank you **Staci Cassarino** and **Tracey Ahern** for joining me on this mission. AEL will continue to keep Unit II members informed as this work moves forward.

“...we want to ensure that students receive the support to which they are entitled while also creating systems that are manageable, sustainable, legally compliant, and appropriately supported at the school level.”

*Stacey Smith,
AEL First Vice President*

Strength in Numbers: AEL Membership Grows

By Kristy Snyder, AEL Second Vice President

Our AEL family has grown to 395 members, and we are grateful for each person who has chosen to stand alongside fellow educational leaders.

Membership is more than a number. It is a commitment to supporting one another, strengthening our collective voice, and advocating for the needs of assistant principals, principals, coordinators, and special assistants.. There is strength in numbers, and every new member helps expand our network, strengthen our advocacy efforts, and amplify our voice on the issues that matter most to school leaders. Together, we are stronger.

If you know a colleague who has not yet joined, invite them to become a member. Let's keep growing together!

And a special note for our members... stay tuned for details about our **Fall AEL Social!**

This year, we're changing things up. Rather than our traditional December gathering, we're planning a **Football Sunday** with your AEL colleagues.

Be sure to save the date: **Sunday, Nov. 22nd, at the Blue Dolphin in Crofton.**

More information will be shared soon, but for now, mark your calendars and get ready for an afternoon of fellowship, fun, and football with fellow AEL members!

"If you know a colleague who has not yet joined, invite them to become a member. Let's keep growing together!"

*Kristy Snyder, AEL
Second Vice President*

Welcome New Members!

We are excited to welcome the following members to our association:



Assistant Principal **Michael Francis** at Annapolis Middle School
 Assistant Principal **Christopher Phillips** at Manor View Elementary
 Assistant Principal **Aleah Queen** at Annapolis Elementary School
 Assistant Principal **Linda Charles** at Meade High School
 Assistant Principal **Theresa Bange** at Annapolis High School
 Assistant Principal **Saira Haas** at Annapolis Middle School



5-Star Recognition

APs at Bates Rock!

A big shoutout to three awesome Assistant Principals at Bates, **Kathleen Adkins, Lauren Milburn, and James Walker**. The work this team did since last year to lift the pilot schedule off the ground has been amazing to see. Countless hours of planning, strategy and support has led to a great start to the school year!

(Principal Lustgarten)

Melissa Bradshaw is the Glue

Melissa Bradshaw - is a 5-star AP; she is the glue that holds our team together. All of her departments appreciate her consistency and feedback. Ms. Bradshaw always comes to work with a smile on her face and supports her students with high expectations and love.

(Principal Carr)

Lucky to have Maura Shaul

As **Maura Shaul** begins her third year as Assistant Principal, we are incredibly lucky to have her helping lead GBPE! Maura is the perfect combination of a leader who is driven, professional, and compassionate. She has an incredible ability to take a vision or idea, turn it into a plan, and work out every detail and logistical piece to make it happen. If you need something accomplished—and done well—Maura is your person! But beyond her exceptional leadership and organizational skills, it is her kindness and genuine belief in children that make her truly special. She leads with both purpose and heart, always keeping students at the center of her work. We are so very lucky to have Maura on our GBPE team!

(Principal McFarland)

Nominate a fellow Unit II member for 5-Star Recognition!

Email:

smssmith1@aacps.org

At the Table: Understanding AEL Negotiations

By Dr. Dawn Lucarelli, Chief Negotiator

One of AEL's most important responsibilities is representing Unit II employees at the bargaining table. We believe you should understand both **how the process works** and **what AEL is advocating for on your behalf**. Beginning this year, we plan to provide periodic negotiation updates while also protecting the integrity of the bargaining process.

Negotiations 101: What Happens at the Table?

Collective bargaining is a formal process between AEL, as the exclusive bargaining representative for Unit II, and the Board of Education. The parties negotiate matters such as salaries, wages, hours, and other working conditions.

The process involves much more than presenting a request and receiving an answer. Proposals may be introduced, discussed, clarified, countered, revised, or withdrawn as negotiations progress. The negotiating team must continually

consider member priorities, available data, fiscal conditions, internal equity, comparisons with other employee groups, and the long-term impact of proposed language.

One important point to remember is:

A proposal is not an agreement.

Until the parties reach a tentative agreement and the appropriate approval and ratification processes occur, proposals remain bargaining positions.

There may also be times when AEL cannot provide every detail of a bargaining session. Protecting certain discussions, strategy, and exchanges can be important to effective negotiations. Our goal, however, is to share meaningful information whenever doing so does not compromise AEL's ability to advocate effectively for Unit II.

2027–2028 Compensation: AEL's Current Proposal

AEL began this bargaining cycle with a clear focus on

ensuring that Unit II compensation appropriately reflects our roles, responsibilities, accountability, and leadership expectations.

AEL has proposed a **7% Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA)** for all Unit II employees, in addition to any applicable step equivalent, pay-band, market, equity, compression, or other structural salary adjustment.

Why 7%?

Our position recognizes both the current compensation landscape and what Unit II previously relinquished when we reached an agreement after going to impasse. During that bargaining cycle, Unit II accepted less in order to help facilitate movement of additional members onto the salary bands. That decision was made in good faith and in recognition of the fiscal circumstances at the time.

AEL's position this year is that the prior concession should not become a permanent reduction in Unit

“Our goal, however, is to share meaningful information whenever doing so does not compromise AEL's ability to advocate effectively for Unit II.”

*Dawn Lucarelli,
Chief Negotiator*

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Unit II's relative compensation position.

The proposal also recognizes an issue that is particularly important for administrators: **salary compression.**

Unit II members supervise, evaluate, coach, support, and lead employees represented by other bargaining units. When compensation for those employees grows at a faster rate than compensation for their supervisors, the differential between leadership and non-leadership positions can continue to narrow.

Our compensation proposal therefore seeks to recog-

nize not only cost-of-living pressures, but also the scope of responsibility carried by principals, assistant principals, coordinators, special assistants, supervisors, and other Unit II leaders.

Protecting Unit II if Other Bargaining Units Receive More

AEL has also proposed language intended to protect Unit II if another AACPS bargaining unit ultimately receives a greater across-the-board compensation increase during the same fiscal year.

In practical terms, AEL's proposal would ensure that Unit II receives no less than the highest across-the-board percentage increase resulting from a COLA and/or step equivalent provided to another AACPS bargaining unit for the same year.

Looking Beyond the COLA: Salary Placement and Experience

Compensation is about more than a single percentage increase.

AEL is also examining where experienced Unit II

members are positioned within the current salary bands. As part of that work, we have requested information from AACPS Finance regarding the relationship among administrative experience, the minimum, midpoint, and maximum of the Unit II salary scale.

What Happens Next?

Negotiations are a process, and there is significant work ahead. AEL will continue to advocate from a position grounded in data, equity, responsibility, and the interests of Unit II employees.

As bargaining progresses, we will provide you with updates when there is substantive information to share. We will be careful to distinguish among an AEL proposal, a Board proposal, a tentative agreement, and a final agreement so you have accurate information throughout the process.

Staying informed makes our organization stronger.

We look forward to keeping you updated throughout the 2027-2028 negotiation cycle.

"AEL has also proposed language intended to protect Unit II if another AACPS bargaining unit ultimately receives a greater across-the-board compensation increase during the same fiscal year."

*Dawn Lucarelli,
Chief Negotiator*

AEL Listening and Support Conversations Underway

AEL's individual Listening and Support Conversations are underway. Members are using these private 15-minute appointments to share what is working, what is making their jobs harder, and where AEL support can be stronger.

There is no meeting to attend and nothing to prepare. Dawn is setting aside individual times because AEL wants to hear directly from members. You can choose a time here <https://calendly.com/dawn-dawnlucarelli/ael-listening-support-conversation>

*Please join from your browser.

Maryland's Budget Pressures: What Educators Need to Know

By Edie Picken, Director/President Emeritus

The economic roller coaster grows stranger by the day, affecting people at every income level. The political climate has contributed to the current situation, particularly its impact on state and local economies.

Maryland has become increasingly unaffordable as the legislature creates new taxes to address budget shortfalls. Because the state constitution requires a balanced budget, lawmakers must rely on both spending cuts and tax increases.

One of the greatest pressures on Maryland's finances is the Blueprint. Although it appears ideal in theory, the legislature enacted it while openly acknowledging that it did not know how the program would be funded. No financial plan supported the decision.

Now that AEL has concluded the previous negotiations, it is entering the next round. The

Superintendent faces the difficult task of developing a budget that meets the needs of the entire system. Although our negotiating team will press for adequate pay increases for Unit II, success is not guaranteed. Do not blame AEL. Unless you have participated in negotiations, you may not realize how difficult it is to persuade the Board to compromise and recognize Unit II's value and worth.

As a member of the Maryland Retired School Personnel Association's (MRSPA) Legislative Committee, I work with representatives from every LEA on issues affecting Maryland and public education. With the legislature now in session, we will review proposed bills and identify those that support our priorities.

The state budget is especially important. Although reviewing it is time-consuming, when we identify concerns, we contact the finance committee, which plays a

central role in the budget process. I encourage you to visit the Maryland State Legislature website, [Legislation - House](#), and review the proposals. Your voice matters at every level.

Contact your legislators, committee chairs, and committee members, and tell them how difficult it has become to be an educator and resident of Maryland. Above all, vote for your federal representatives on November 3.

One final note: Last year, and again this year, AEL has offered virtual sessions where you can share concerns, learn how AEL is advocating for you, and better understand ongoing issues. Please participate. We have designed these presentations to be brief, relevant, informative, and easy to access. We look forward to seeing you there.





2026-27 AEL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE/BOARD/STAFF

Tracey Ahern (2022-26)	President	P, Richard Henry Lee ES	(o)410-553-2200	tahern@aacps.org
Stacey Smith (2022-26)	1st VP	P, South River	(o)410-956-5600	smsmith1@aacps.org
Kristy Snyder (2025-27)	2nd VP	P, Solley ES	(o)667-492-3670	klsnyder1@aacps.org
Ted Nilsson (2025-27)	Secretary	AP, Southern MS	(o)410-867-0050	tnilsson@aacps.org
Lindsay Abruzzo (2025-27)	Treasurer	P, Magothy River MS	(o)410-544-0926	labruzzo@aacps.org
Shira Dowling (2025-27)	Director at Large	P, Rippling Woods ES	(o)410-760-7900	sdowling@aacps.org
April Umile (2025-27)	Director at Large	P, Jacobsville ES	(o)410-222-6460	aaumile@aacps.org

STAFF

Rick Kovelant, Executive Director and Legal Counsel	(c) 443-848-8022	rick@kovelantlaw.com
Dawn Lucarelli, AEL Chief Negotiator & Executive Team Member	(c)443-974-4748	dawn@dawnlucarelli.com
Will Myers, AEL Liaison	(c)410-570-9031	wtm1588@gmail.com
Edie Picken, President Emeritus	(c) 410-371-9527	rag_qb@hotmail.com
Denise Hofstedt, Publicity & Website	(c) 443-223-0273	AELnewseditor@gmail.com

Mailing Address: AEL, 1521 Ritchie Hwy, PO Box 203, Arnold, MD 21012

Visit our website at: www.aelaacps.org

AEL Mission Statement

The Association of Educational Leaders exists to ensure all Unit II employees are fairly and equitably treated in the course of their employment.

We commit to accomplishing this mission on behalf of Unit II employees by ensuring:

1. Adherence to our Negotiated Agreement.
2. All Unit II employees are adequately and equitably compensated for their responsibilities and work load.
3. Personal and professional needs shall be respected.
4. Fair, consistent and equitable practices shall be adhered to when dealing with hiring promotions, assignments and evaluations.
5. Fair, consistent, equitable practices in dealing with matters relating to discipline and conflict resolution.
6. Fair, consistent, equitable practices in resolving school and community conflicts.