ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY

AEL Leadership Forum

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 3 MARCH 2026

UPCOMING EVENTS

April 16, 6 pm
AEL Information & Q&A Meetings (virtual)

June 18, 4-7 pm
AEL General Membership Meeting/Social—Blue Dolphin, Crofton

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Staying Focused in the Home Stretch

By Tracey Ahern, AEL President

This is the stretch of the year that tests every part of our leadership.

Right now, you are carrying two full realities at once. You are pushing to keep momentum strong in your building while everything around you is pulling toward the finish line.

Testing schedules are tight. Student focus starts to drift. Staff energy dips. Behaviors get a little... creative. At the same time, you are expected to keep morale steady and make sure end of year events feel meaningful and joyful for your school community.

And while all of that is happening, the next school year is already knocking at the door. You are deep in hiring. Making difficult staffing decisions. Navigating excessing. Shifting roles. Building schedules. Updating school improvement plans. All while continuing to run a safe, responsive school every single day.

It is a lot. There is no way around that.

I say it every year because it is true every year. This is one of the hardest parts of our job. Our feet are firmly planted in the present, but our attention is constantly being pulled into the future. That tension is real, and it is exhausting. And yet, this is also where your leadership matters most.

You set the tone. You are the temperature of your building. Whether you feel it or not, people are watching how you respond, how you prioritize, how you show up. As the leader goes, so goes the building.

So take care of yourself. Not as a luxury, but as a responsibility.

Administrators, coordinators, special assistants, every role feels the pressure right now. You cannot pour stability, clarity, and calm into your building if you are running on empty.

At the same time, I want to acknowledge what many of you are still holding related to the recent agreement and the ongoing conversations about pay bands. While much of the feedback has been positive, there are still valid concerns about how compensation was distributed. If something does not feel right, do not ignore that. Consider filing a grievance. You do not have to navigate that process alone. Rick and the Executive Board are

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Staying Focused...

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"We know the fiscal outlook for the coming year is challenging, but that does not change what our schools need."

Tracey Ahern, AEL President

here to partner with you, answer questions, and support you through it.

We are continuing to raise questions, seek clarification, and push for transparency in the process. That work is ongoing.

As we look ahead, our collective voice will also need to be heard at the County Council budget meetings. We know the fiscal outlook for the coming year is challenging, but that does not change what our schools need. When those meeting dates are released, I encourage you to consider attending. When AEL shows up in force, it makes a difference. Our presence matters. Our voice matters. We still have to advocate clearly and consistently for the resources our students and staff deserve.

I also want to be clear about something else. Your AEL Executive Board is made up of practicing administrators. We are doing this work alongside you. We are leading schools and divisions while also leading this organization. We are learning as we go. I know I have learned more over the past four years than I ever expected, and I also know there is still so much more to learn. That is why your voice matters.

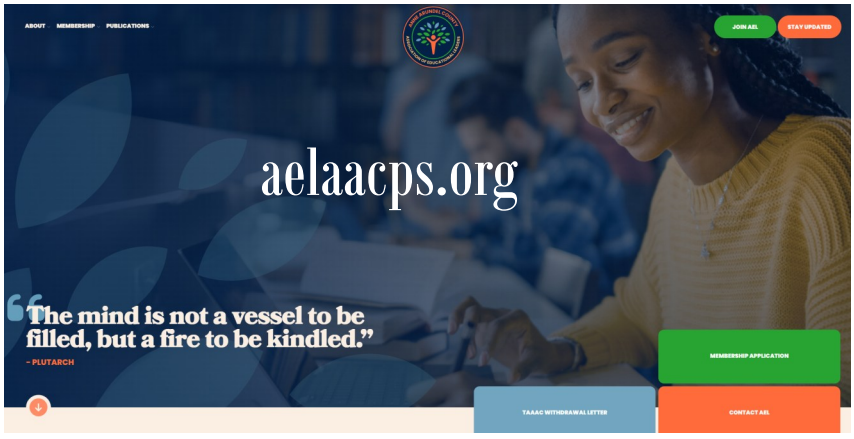
We have members across this organization who are thoughtful, informed, and full of ideas about where AEL should go next. If you have ever thought about getting more involved, now is the time.

Consider running for a position on the Executive Board. Help shape the direction of our work and the future of our organization. You are doing incredibly important work in one of the most demanding seasons of the year.

Stay focused on what matters most. Take care of yourself and your people. Finish strong.

We are in this together.

Revamped AEL Website Is Live!



Climate Surveys Do Not Predict the Climate

By Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

In determining weather patterns and changes in conditions in our environment, scientists have developed and thereafter utilized climate surveys. These surveys involve the use of empirical data and information gathered in a scientific manner. They are not based on subjective interpretation or anecdotal statements. They are designed to collect objective information upon which decisions impacting our environment can be made.

By contrast, the increasing use of climate surveys in AACPS, which are unprofessionally created by TAAAC for the benefit of Unit I employees are designed to gather non empirical subjective feedback from the teaching staff to be shared with all Unit I employees and executive management. While feedback is valuable and transparency is important, the growing push for teacher-driven school climate surveys raises significant concerns for Unit II employees. The design and use of these surveys by TAAAC, to be shared with its members, executive staff and the potential dissemination to the public can damage trust, misrepresent complex school dynamics, hinder effective leadership, and misrepresent the school and the school-based administrators .

As school administrators you support open communication with teachers and value constructive input. However, the use of climate surveys initiated or controlled by TAAAC risks transforming a tool for improvement into a mechanism for pressure and public criticism, rumors and misinformation. Administrators' tasks are far more complex than recognized in a survey questionnaire.

The job requirements and program responsibilities come from above and are only changed as AACPS sees fit. The challenge to these required administrative responsibilities in a survey reduces leadership performance or school culture to a set of survey questions and can oversimplify the challenges that administrators navigate every day.

One major concern is the lack of context that

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"However, the use of climate surveys initiated or controlled by TAAAC risks transforming a tool for improvement into a mechanism for pressure and public criticism, rumors and misinformation."

Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director & General Counsel

Climate Surveys ...

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"AACPS has not supported the use of climate surveys, but instead has embraced the faculty council and grievance procedures as the methods for obtaining feedback and resolving school employment issues."

Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

surveys often provide. School climate is influenced by many factors: student needs, AACPS policies, State mandates, staffing shortages, community pressures, and budget constraints. Administrators operate at the intersection of these forces. A survey that asks teachers to rate leadership without acknowledging these realities can only produce results that are misleading or unfair. Principals implementing AACPS policies, for example, may receive negative ratings even when they are acting in accordance with requirements beyond their control. To publish survey results without a contextual backdrop produces unexplainable results.

Other issues involve methodology and accountability. These survey results are based on anonymous participation and therefore, the accurate interpretation of results cannot be measured. Small response groups can produce skewed outcomes, while leading or poorly designed questions can bias responses. When these surveys are publicized without professional analysis, they risk creating narratives that do not reflect the true and accurate school community or provide a legitimate rationale for improvement.

Moreover, teacher-led climate surveys can erode the collaborative relationships that schools depend on. If surveys are used as instruments to evaluate or publicly criticize administrators, they may encourage adversarial dynamics rather than problem-solving. School improvement requires partnership between teachers and administrators, not a system where one group formally judges the other through unofficial processes.

The best practice for developing an improved climate and resolving issues is through the faculty council or if need be, through the grievance procedures. These methods have served AACPS administrators and staff well as they are a structured and collaborative existing process.

AACPS has not supported the use of climate surveys, but instead has embraced the faculty council and

Free Help When You Need It

If you need help, advice or just need to ask a question, please remember to contact AEL's legal counsel **Rick Kovelant**. He has a wealth of experience in assisting our members. He is a valuable resource and **available to you as part of your AEL membership**. He can be reached at **443-848-8022**.

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Climate Surveys ...

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"A fair exchange of concerns should be welcome provided the appropriate delivery of these concerns is utilized."

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grievance procedures as the methods for obtaining feedback and resolving school employment issues.

The abandonment of these methods would allow climate surveys to become instruments of unsupported advocacy rather than collaboration This could only damage the climate of the school. A fair exchange of concerns should be welcome provided the appropriate delivery of these concerns is utilized. Anonymous, unweighted and/or ambiguous responses to a biased climate survey questionnaire will not improve a climate, but it will only cause a bad climate to occur or continue to exist. No other AACPS employee group is a subject of climate surveys. In the end analysis, while it may be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent a climate survey from occurring, AEL must remain committed in its efforts to prevent its use and distribution.

Tracey Stakem, Severna Park HS

Tracey Stakem exemplifies what it means to be a 5-Star Unit 2 employee in AACPS. In only her second year at Severna Park High School, she quickly earned the trust and respect of the staff through her collaborative leadership and unwavering commitment to supporting both students and teachers. As an assistant principal, Ms. Stakem has had a meaningful impact on strengthening a positive school culture, consistently demonstrating professionalism, responsiveness, and care for the entire Falcon community. Her dedication to supporting staff, advocating for students, and contributing to a welcoming and inclusive environment makes her a valued leader and a true asset to Severna Park High School and AACPS. *(Nate Johnson)*

Sara Mitchell-Sherman, Severn Run HS

I'd like to nominate Sara Mitchell-Sherman for this month's 5-star shout out. This is her first year as an AP, and she oversees the science department at Severn Run High School as part of her duties. Throughout the year, she has juggled the many tasks assigned to her while keeping student engagement and achievement in science at the forefront of her mind. I have truly enjoyed collaborating with her on instructional rounds and conversations about students who need extra support in finding success. Thank you, Ms. Mitchell-Sherman, for leaning in to make every day better for the students and teachers with whom you work! *(Vikki Romanoski)*

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

Link: https://forms.gle/mNz1cx2QTQEc4jkH7

Healthy Tips for Working Parents…That are Good for Everyone, Too

By Edie Picken, President/Director Emeritus

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Many Unit II members are parents and consequently face significant challenges balancing family responsibilities. This can result in considerable stress that may affect workplace performance. There are times when workdays feel routine as one strives to complete all tasks. Nevertheless, practical strategies exist to help manage these demands effectively while also ensuring personal well-being.

After reviewing several articles on this topic, the main takeaways are straightforward and practical. The key is to prioritize physical activity: take active breaks, such as walking inside or outside your workplace for 15 minutes. Maintain a healthy diet by preparing meals ahead of time and choosing nutritious snacks like nuts, yogurt, and fruit, while avoiding processed foods. Stay hydrated by drinking six to eight glasses of water daily to maintain energy levels. Lastly, consider using a fitness tracker to monitor activity and remind you to move regularly.

Many articles stress the importance of mental and emotional health. Taking time for activities you enjoy, setting clear boundaries between work and family, and practicing gratitude—such as noting three things you're thankful for each day—are helpful habits for well-being.

Working from home means finding a dedicated workspace apart from your living area. If possible, choose a spot that separates work from home life. Establish routines for waking up, eating, ending your workday, and bedtime to create boundaries—this is especially helpful if you have children. Keeping your workspace organized helps both work and family time feel less cluttered. While it can be challenging with kids and their activities, clear routines and boundaries make it manageable.

If you need assistance, don't hesitate to ask for it. Delegate tasks whenever possible, as your support staff can handle them efficiently. You're not expected to do everything yourself or be flawless; letting go of perfectionism is important. Many people struggle with this mindset, but releasing it can help you avoid burnout, which is common in your field.

Even though your work environment is constantly shifting and feels never-ending, it's important to look after yourself and your family. Hopefully, these tips will help ease some of your stress.

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING/SOCIAL #2

June 18, 2026
4-7pm, Blue Dolphin (Crofton, MD)

AEL INFORMATION AND Q&A EVENINGS

APRIL 16, 2025

Mark your calendars. These will be hosted virtually from 6-7pm. Information will come out prior to each Information/Q&A session.

2025-26 AEL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE/BOARD/STAFF

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