ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS, ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY

SPECIAL EDITION

AEL Leadership Forum

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 4 SPECIAL EDITION

MAY 2026

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

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The Work Behind the Work

By Tracey Ahern, AEL President

Last week, many of us had the opportunity to take part in events like the Glen Burnie Connect event, and it was one of those moments that reminds us exactly why we do this work. Marley Middle School was full of energy, pride, and connection. Students performing, families engaged, schools showcasing the incredible opportunities happening every day. It was powerful.

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We could see the pride on each other's faces as our students performed. Those moments where we step back and watch them shine, knowing the time, effort, and care that got them there. That is what stays with you.

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And this is not unique to one network. Across all of our networks, events like this are happening every week. Community nights, showcases, job fairs, transition events, sporting events, talent shows. Too many to list! Each one thoughtfully planned. Each one centered on students and families. And each one grounded in the culture, climate, and support built through the leadership of a Unit 2 administrator, coordinator, and special assistant.

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For many of us, this was not just one event. It was one of several in the same week. For me, it was the third event beyond the typical workday.

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Let's be honest about what it takes.

These events do not happen during the school day. They happen at night. On weekends. After long days that already stretch us. They mean missing our own children's games, saying

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no to family dinners or invitations, and skipping the downtime that helps us reset so we can show up strong the next day. They take from the very time we need to recharge and sustain this work.

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And yet, we show up. Every time.

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Because that is who we are. Coordinators. Special Assistants.

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The Work Behind the Work...

Continued from page 1

"Because that is who we are. Coordinators. Special Assistants. Administrators. We step in, we lead, and we make it happen for our communities."

Tracey Ahern,
AEL President

Administrators. We step in, we lead, and we make it happen for our communities.

But the work does not stop when the event ends.

As I sit here on a Sunday , finally finding the time to write my weekly bulletin and parent communication, my mind is already shifting to the next big push. Ratings.

Writing thoughtful, feedback driven ratings that truly reflect each staff member's work is not quick or easy. It takes time to review data , reflect on observations, and capture the day-to-day moments that do not always show up on paper but matter the most.

Let's be honest again. This is not work that can be done during the school day. Even with support tools, writing meaningful ratings requires focus, care, and uninterrupted time. Time that simply does not exist between conducting walkthroughs, supporting students, staff, families, and the constant pace of the school day. Close your door and work, does not happen in a school!!!

So it happens here. Nights . Weekends. Quiet moments when everything else finally slows down.

This is the work behind the work.

Best Practices: Data-Driven Goal Setting That Worked

Note: As leaders within our system, we are always looking for best practices being used by our colleagues. This month we highlight the work occurring at Old Mill Middle North.

At **Old Mill Middle North**, we used students' prior i-Ready performance data as the foundation for intentional, individualized goal setting. Each student was provided with a goal-setting sheet that clearly outlined their MCAP score from last year and their most recent i-Ready score, along with benchmarks for both typical growth and stretch growth. This allowed students to understand where they currently stood and what both expected and ambitious progress looked like.

Teachers then met with students to review their data. During these conversations, teachers explained what the scores indicated about each student's current performance level and emphasized the importance of striving for both typical and stretch growth. These conversations helped make the data meaningful, increased student ownership, and built motivation around achieving measurable academic gains.

As a result of this focused and transparent approach to goal setting, Old Mill Middle North experienced a significant increase in student performance. This process contributed to some of our strongest i-Ready results in the past three years, demonstrating the impact of aligning data-driven goal setting with purposeful teacher-student engagement.

Jason Campion
Principal
Old Mill Middle North

Negotiations? An Update of Concerns

By Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

Following the recent ratification of the Negotiated Agreement for the 2025-2026 school year, AEL received numerous inquiries regarding not only the result, but the path that was followed in reaching the results. While the topic of negotiations has been the subject of past articles, given the current negotiations for the 2026-2027school year, it would be appropriate to review the negotiation process and the associated frustrations.

Collective bargaining is not a privilege. It is a statutorily required process requiring the Board of Education and AEL, as a recognized bargaining unit, to negotiate in good faith wages, hours and working conditions.

This is the first in a series of an articles showing an up close look at collective bargaining between AEL and the Board of Education.

What specific items fall within in the definition of wages, hours, and working conditions can become a subject of disagreement between the parties and require a determination of whether or not the topics offered at the bargaining table are mandatory, permissive or not permitted at all.

AEL and the BOE, through their respective negotiating teams, meet to negotiate in these areas. Once an agreement is reached, the terms are tentatively approved and presented to the BOE and AEL membership for ratification. If agreement isn't reached, either party can seek resolution of a declared impasse through the Public Employee Labor Relation Board (PERB). A Mediator is selected by the parties, position statements are submitted and a mediation occurs at a meeting with the mediator attempting to facilitate a resolution. This stage is nonbinding. If the mediator's suggested resolution is not adopted by either party, the next phase of the process is arbitration, a far more involved, time consuming and expensive process which includes a selected arbitrator to undertake factfinding at a hearing and render a decision for, against or modified as to the positions presented by the parties.

In the last 40 years, AEL and the BOE have utilized the impasse procedure only two times. In both instances the issues involved the allocation of the compensation to which the the parties had previously agreed. Ultimately, the BOE and AEL returned to the

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Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director & General Counsel

An Update of Concerns ...

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Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

bargaining table and elected to resolve the matters between themselves.

The entire negotiation process must rely on good faith bargaining and most importantly the implementation of the agreement that was reached. Unfortunately, the negotiation process for the 2025-2026 school year fell far short of that requirement. It is generally accepted that "good faith bargaining at its core, means showing a genuine intent to find common ground, rather than merely going through the motions. In practice certain key behaviors and characteristics have been traditionally identified as bad faith bargaining.

In looking back over the course of the negotiations and the conduct and of the BOE's negotiating team, good faith bargaining was far from a reality. In particular consider the following indicia of what most authorities consider bargaining in bad faith:

First, the failure to send representatives with bargaining power to make tentative decisions can be considered bad faith. The past negotiation sessions resulted in few or no exchanges of counter positions at the table during a session. The Board's team repeatedly had to go back to the BOE before it could respond or alter its position. As a result, the BOE team was without authority to discuss any change in the position they put forward until a subsequent session.

Second, the parties should consider and respond to proposals without a rational explanation for their position. The BOE's negotiating team's simple rejection without any reason given is not bargaining in good faith. Simply stating, "no" to a proposal without further dialogue cuts off further discussion and delays the process.

Third, the failure to provide requested relevant information, in particular financial data necessary to determine the validity of the BOE's position and employee placement is indicative of bad faith. AEL requested financial information, but none was forthcoming during the negotiating sessions.

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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**.

An Update of Concerns ...

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"Testing our rights through PERB and ultimately, the Courts may provide relief, but the results are not time friendly."

Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel

Fourth, it has been recognized that changing wages or the manner in which they are calculated and paid (a mandatory subject of negotiations) without negotiating those changes with, a bargaining unit, herein AEL is considered bargaining in bad faith. The decision reached by the BOE, without AEL's approval or even mention of the proposed change by the BOE negotiating team resulting in applying the COLA to existing Unit II members then current wages prior to placement of the individual on the new salary band was in bad faith as that was not what was agreed to by the parties. The BOE claims that this application was communicated to the AEL team and thereafter agreed to by AEL is simply incorrect.

Fifth, there was never a good faith reason for the BOE negotiating members to call members of the AEL negotiating team, "ungrateful and selfish" in their pursuit of fair compensation for Unit II employees. The tone and tenor set by the BOE team with these remarks does nothing to encourage good faith bargaining.

As AEL members, it is important that you understand the negotiating process, and the frustrations that are evident in attempting to reach a fair result.

AEL is aware that many of you were frustrated with the impasse procedure. Unfortunately, Maryland provides very little other opportunity to challenge labor unfair/bad faith labor practices. Unlike the private sector, school employees have no right to strike or walk out. Testing our rights through PERB and ultimately, the Courts may provide relief, but the results are not time friendly.

AEL will continue, however, to seek redress through those means that are available with the hope that the BOE will consider working with us to achieve a good faith bargaining experience as we continue the negotiation process in the future.

Spring Social

AEL General Membership Meeting & Spring Social

June 18, 2026

4-7 pm

Free to AEL Members

Join your colleagues for buffet dinner and an update.

Blue Dolphin, Crofton

Grievances Are POWERFUL and AEL Has a Few Brewing

By Stacey Smith, AEL Vice President

Filing a grievance is often misunderstood as a last resort or a combative act, but in reality, it is one of the most powerful tools individuals and organizations have to uphold fairness, accountability, and integrity. Whether the outcome results in a clear "win" or not, the act of filing itself carries meaningful impact.

At its core, a grievance is a formal acknowledgment that something is not right. It documents concerns, creates a record, and ensures that issues cannot be quietly dismissed or overlooked. In environments where silence can allow inequities or inconsistencies to persist, a grievance brings visibility. It says: this matters, and it deserves attention.

Even when a grievance does not result in a favorable ruling, it can still drive change. Patterns begin to emerge when concerns are consistently documented. Leadership is forced to examine policies, practices, and decisions more closely. Over time, what may have started as a single voice can influence broader conversations, leading to adjustments that benefit others in the future.

There is also personal power in the process. Filing a grievance requires reflection, courage, and a willingness to advocate—not just for oneself, but often for colleagues or a larger community. It reinforces a culture where individuals feel empowered to speak up, rather than accept circumstances that may be unjust or misaligned with agreed-upon standards.

Importantly, grievances contribute to organizational health. Systems improve when they are tested. Policies become stronger when they are clarified through real situations. Even unsuccessful grievances can reveal gaps in communication or understanding, prompting training, dialogue, or revision.

In the end, the power of a grievance is not solely in the outcome, but in the act. It is a mechanism for voice, a tool for accountability, and a catalyst for growth. Winning may resolve a specific issue, but the process itself—when used thoughtfully—helps build more transparent, responsive, and equitable environments for everyone.

"It is a mechanism for voice, a tool for accountability, and a catalyst for growth."

Stacey Smith,
AEL Vice President

Editor's Note:

Sheila Coffman and Stacey Smith have active grievances filed regarding compensation.

AEL Awards First Mini-Grants

By Edie Picken, President/Director Emeritus

After a review of our finances, AEL's Executive Board decided it was important to make available four mini-grants in the amount of up to $2,500 each to support school improvement initiatives directly affecting students. For those applying, projects/programs needed funding to support their efforts. For this inaugural year, two applications were submitted. Both programs were extremely valuable programs that were deserving of AEL's support.

The first mini-grant was awarded to **Erin Simmons**, Coordinator of Birth to 5 (Infants and Toddlers). Erin's program focused on "creating meaningful opportunities for children and families enrolled in the Infants and Toddlers Program and Community-Based Services to connect with other families of children with delays and disabilities. The program offers families access to a safe, supervised community environment where they can practice the strategies introduced during their coaching sessions in the Infants and Toddlers Program…" Erin connected with Urban Air Trampoline Park which has worked with Infants and Toddlers in the past, but not for this specific program. Through activities provided at Urban Air, students engage in social- emotional, language, and gross motor skill support and development, while providing families the opportunity to connect and support each other.

The second mini-grant was awarded to **Shiela Coffman**, Assistant Principal at the Center of Applied Technology-North (CAT-N). Annually, students enrolled in CAT-N programs have the opportunity to participate in the SkillsUSA National Leadership & Skills Conference. "Over 15,000 students, educators, and industry leaders gather to celebrate excellence in skilled trades, leadership, and workforce readiness. The conference provides high school students with the opportunity to compete in more than 100 hands-on technical and leadership contests that mirror real-world industry standards." Students who participate must fund their way to the conference which is held outside of Maryland and is extremely costly. This mini-grant aided with purchasing the necessary supplies.

AEL was glad to help support important initiatives as these and look forward to next year making mini-grants available again.

When is Enough, Enough?

By Will Meyers, AEL Liaison

Building level administrators have had the expectation to do whatever it takes to cover their schools regardless of the time involved. The concept of a regular 40-hour work week is foreign to Unit II members at all levels. The list of events is exhausting, Yes, these events also include Saturdays. Whether it's a concert, play, game or special event we are expected to be a willing chaperon.

The upside of our commitment is our strong relationship with our students, parents and communities. I'm sure our presence is observed and appreciated. AEL has worked tirelessly to reduce our workload. The issue is always, what would we cut? Can you imagine the outcry if we tried to cut the spring concert or attempted to touch the holiest of holies, Friday night football? Finding ways to mitigate the hours spent on the job is challenging. Rest assured the workload issue is at the top of our list.

Recently AEL has been appraised of Unit II members working at the Central office have been required to attend school-based activities beyond their regular work week. I'm sure we all appreciate the extra help. However, Coordinators and Special Assistants have not established relationships with many of the schools they have been requested to cover. It does not make sense to have them serve as simple people monitors. AEL will continue to question the use of its members. I think we can all agree when there is a real crisis it's "All Hands on Deck". However, using Unit II members for mundane jobs is not productive and simply bad practice.

AEL is committed to assessing working conditions for all its membership. Conversations will continue at the negotiation table and with direct dialogue with the Superintendent.

"Finding ways to mitigate the hours spent on the job is challenging. Rest assured the workload issue is at the top of our list."

Will Meyers,
AEL Liaison

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.

504 Plans Matter—but the Clock is Ticking!

By Stacey Smith, AEL Vice President

Section 504 plans are a critical component of ensuring equitable access to education for students with disabilities. Rooted in federal law, these plans are designed to remove barriers and provide accommodations so that every student has the opportunity to learn and succeed alongside their peers.

At their best, 504 plans are not just compliance documents — they are living frameworks that support student growth, independence, and dignity.
The benefits for students are significant. A well-developed 504 plan can provide tailored supports such as extended time, preferential seating, modified assignments, or health-related accommodations. These adjustments allow students to fully access instruction without being limited by a disability.

More importantly, 504 plans affirm that students are seen, understood, and supported. They create a foundation where students can build confidence, advocate for themselves, and engage more fully in their educational experience.

However, the implementation of 504 plans with fidelity requires a substantial and ongoing commitment from school staff—particularly administrators, counselors, and teachers. Annual reviews are necessary to ensure that accommodations remain appropriate and effective, while reevaluations every three years require a deeper analysis of student needs, data, and documentation.

These processes demand coordination, careful review, compliance with legal requirements, and meaningful collaboration with families and staff. For administrators, this responsibility comes alongside an already full plate of instructional leadership, student discipline, staff supervision, community engagement, and daily operational demands. The time required to manage 504 processes thoroughly and correctly can be significant, often pulling administrators away from other critical responsibilities within their schools. This is not a reflection of unwillingness, but rather the reality of competing priorities in complex school environments.

It is important to state clearly: 504 plans are not optional. They are mandated by law and must be implemented with consistency and integrity. At the same time, the strain on school-based leaders and staff is real. Balancing compliance with capacity is an ongoing challenge that deserves attention and action.

The Association of Educational Leaders (AEL) recognizes this challenge and

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504 Plans Matter ...

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Tracey Ahern, **Stacey Smith** and **Staci Cassarino** have a meeting scheduled with Ms. Jackson to discuss 504 implementation.

hears the concerns being raised by its members. The call for support, clarity, and more sustainable systems is valid. In response, upcoming meetings will be scheduled to engage in meaningful dialogue around 504 processes. These conversations will focus on how to better support AEL members, streamline expectations where possible, and explore ways to lessen the operational burden while maintaining full compliance with legal requirements.

The goal moving forward is not to diminish the importance of 504 plans, but to strengthen the systems that support them — ensuring that students receive the services they need while also supporting the educators and administrators responsible for delivering them. Through collaboration, reflection, and shared problem-solving, there is an opportunity to create a more balanced and effective approach that serves everyone involved.

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