

# Summer Learning Reinvigorates LEF Fellows

By Laurie Atwater

The students aren't the only learners in a school. This summer thanks to Summer Fellowships from the Lexington Education Foundation, several Lexington teachers were able to learn and become renewed with wonderful experiences that they will bring back to their professional lives at our schools.

In so many ways, learning is about risk. The LEF fellowships offer the educator a chance to re-experience the risk and joy of learning—of letting go of old beliefs and habits and opening up to new ideas. This is what we want for our kids when they approach life and learning and LEF recognizes that it is essential to rekindle the experience within the soul of the educator who struggles day-to-day to deliver excitement and passion in the classroom.

## *Amy Martin and Karen Tripoli Explore the Value of Professional Learning Communities*

One of the pitfalls of teaching can be isolation. Although teachers teach to a classroom of students, they do so behind a closed door with minimal collaboration. A teacher's practice is influenced by standards, frameworks and a host of testing standards, but the actual day-to-day work can be very solitary.

The National School Reform Faculty, a program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (NSRF) at Brown University has developed a program that seeks to promote the concept of "professional learning communities" in schools. The idea is to by train educators as facilitators for what they call "Critical Friends Groups" (CFGs).

Amy Martin, Math Specialist and Karen Tripoli, Elementary Schools Mathematics Head, used their LEF Fellowship to attend a workshop sponsored by the NSRF designed to train them as facilitators.

The concept of professional learning communities has been slowly breaking through the traditional educational culture. We're talking about changing the ways schools do business," Martin says. Martin and Tripoli feel that it's a change whose time has come in Lexington. The business world has emphasized team building and collaboration for years. In education it can empower a shared sense of community in a time when the multiple roles of the educator can be extremely demanding.

A Critical Friends Group is designed to promote collegiality and communication among the professional educators and administrators. Groups consist of 8 to 10 educators and participants typically come from all specialties in the schools. "It benefits a math teacher to hear from an English educator and a high school teacher to hear from an elementary teacher," stresses Martin. "We always have outside people coming in to do professional development," she says "What we really want to know is—what's going on right down the hall?" Both women feel that peers can be valuable assets as teachers struggle to reach and teach a more varied population than ever.

"We want to look at the work of students and cooperatively think about it and how to improve it. The overall goal is to improve student learning," Amy explains. Karen stresses that the goal is support. "It's more of a conversation about teaching and learning," she says. "It's focused around supporting each other—no one is telling; they're not going to solve it for you."

People bring inquiry questions about their practice, about their students and student work to the group. "These conversations need to take place in the schools and there just isn't enough time in our hectic, busy day," says Karen Tripoli. "This type of peer support is what should be expected in schools." Coaches of CFGs learn to facilitate groups as well as how to balance the contribution of participants. Still, undertaking this type of peer review requires an enormous amount of trust and risk taking on the part of a teacher used to working alone.

The two women feel that their experience was invaluable. It was an intense week long workshop that challenged them to learn over 30 protocols, act both as facilitators and participants and bond with educators from many different schools and specialties. "As a participant looking at someone else's dilemma or some else's student work you have to reflect on your own

practice," Karen says. "It was a challenge."

Changing the focus in Lexington will require leadership from the top down. Amy and Karen will be presenting their experience to several groups of their colleagues in the coming weeks. They hope to ignite the flame of interest among them and encourage the formation of groups as well as the inspiration for more Lexington educators to become trained in the process of facilitation. Amy says, "Our ambition is to start small and hopefully—successfully. The things that we learned at the institute will also be incorporated into our ongoing work one-on-one with other teachers."

## *Ann Northrup Explores the Art of Mexico*

Ann Northrup, A visual arts instructor at Lexington High School and Diamond Middle School was awarded an LEF fellowship this summer that took her in to Mexico to recharge creatively, explore a new culture, study painting and absorb the work of indigenous crafts people as they created pottery together

"I did it all and it was fabulous," Ann says.

Ann's enthusiasm for her fellowship project is palpable. Bursting with enthusiasm, communicates the ways in which she was inspired to look at things differently, challenge herself and think about the ways she could use the experience to inspire her students.

"Visiting the museums and churches everywhere inspired me with ideas for teaching," she says. "I loved the aesthetic power of Diego Rivera's drawings in



*Josephine Aquilar and her granddaughter in Mexico.*

Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art. In Oaxaca I marveled at the technical prowess of the sculptures in the Rufino Tamayo Museum and stories they communicated about the lives of pre-Columbian inhabitants...this trip revived my belief in the importance to imbed art history and contexts for art into the art curriculum."

When in Mexico, Ann studied watercolor technique with noted artist Edina Sagert and spent a week studying Spanish and pottery in Oaxaca known for its cultural richness, inspiring beauty and diverse population. "In my watercolor workshop I struggled with trying something new as an artist and student," Ann comments. "I asked myself: 'how do I create form and space while letting the water flow? How do I apply the new and not resort to the familiar?'" The watercolor workshop was challenging and inspiring. "I have added some of the techniques into my lesson plans," she says, "and I will continue applying them in my own work."

Ann was especially inspired by a trip she made to observe the Aquilar sisters in their home and studio in Ocotlan. Ann explains that these sisters make expressive figurative sculptures out of clay that they fire and paint with bright enamels. "I watched Josephine Aquilar's grandson preparing the clay by mixing it with water with his feet," she says. "I saw Josephina herself making a sculpture while an infant granddaughter tried to participate!" (see photo).

"For me, receiving a Lexington Education Foundation Summer Fellowship was a dream come true," Anne says enthusiastically. "There were unforgettable experiences; looking at El Parroquia, San Miguel de

Allende's beautiful cathedral lit up at night after rain... In Atzompa I stood in a potter's courtyard surrounded by debris, a pig, baby chickens, a horse and old ox and watched the men feed two kilns while an older woman dipped bisque pottery into green glaze in preparation for a second firing."

For Ann the trip was a true inspiration. "I plan to introduce a new sculpture unit into my Foundations of Art Class," Ann says. "I want to inspire students by showing them the work of contemporary Mexican sculptors who have been inspired by pre-Columbian sculpture. I also hope to offer a school trip to Mexico and offer a sculpture class this summer!"

## *Norma Gordon Explores the Social and Emotional Needs of Students*

"Well, I must admit that this past August I did one of the better things that I have done to recharge my teaching energy!"

So declares Norma Gordon, mathematics teacher at Clark Middle School attended a week long course entitled *Meeting the Social and Emotional Needs of Children with Learning Disabilities* given at the Cape Cod Institute. Rick Lavoie, well-known specialist in the area of Learning Disabilities, spoke at the workshop. With main streaming such an important part of today's classroom, it is vitally important that teachers possess a toolbox of skills and awareness that far exceeds what was required in the past. In this workshop, the importance of a school's "hidden curriculum" was explored. The so-called "hidden curriculum existing in schools is the complex maze of social learning and experience that leads to peer acceptance—or not. Succeeding at this part of the game can be particularly difficult for learning disabled kids—especially at the middle school level where Norma teaches. "We need to be aware of this and enable ALL students to succeed outside the classroom," she explains. "Social acceptance translates into academic self confidence and vice-versa."

Norma was thrilled that the workshop not only exposed her to new ways to look at common behaviors among some of students and also provided some practical tools for reaching these kids. "Since middle school is a 24/7 challenge not to be embarrassed for every child," she explains, "Learning Disabled (LD) kids often 'act out' since they would rather look 'bad' than dumb." This behavior conundrum often leads to disaster for LD kids—disguising their true intelligence and potential. "One goal that I am bringing into the classroom is to better see situations from the student's perspective and be more aware of not only the questions that students are asking, but why they are asking them," says Gordon.

Many LD students exhibit a kind of "social dyslexia" as Lavoie calls it that is an inability to read non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and gestures. This inability to comprehend many of the cues most take for granted can wreck havoc on a kids understanding of situations and events. "I thought about how I'd feel just listening to a foreign film without being able to watch, hear and read the subtitles," Norma said. Gordon explains that these types of communication issues can be addressed by using "multiple cues" for students.

Gordon currently uses a SMART Board, which helps her to deliver these "cues" more effectively. It's a white board that works with a computer and projector to transform teaching space into an interactive working, training, and learning environment.

Gordon sums it up by saying, "LD issues are pervasive and interconnected; LIFE, LANGUAGE and LEARNING go hand in hand." For LD kids the "locus of control" for their failure is very internal—they will feel at fault. When they succeed they will attribute success to external forces. This is the exact opposite from the non-LD kid's perceptions.

The real challenge is enhance the in-class experience of the LD child to provide more success and reinforce their identification with that success. As a result, their master of the "hidden curriculum" of school life will be more successful as well.