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# NEATE NEWS

New England Association of Teachers of English

## What It Means to Be a Union Member

Whether you are a union member or not, it is important to understand what being a union member means. We give up x amount of money each paycheck to do two main things: protect the membership from things outside of its control and advocate for the membership.

Unions have gotten a bad rap as the latest scapegoat for the failure of the American education system. Unions, according to *Teachers Unions Exposed* website, block education reforms. However, the truth is that legislation is passed regardless of what the unions say. Unions have the reputation for protecting low-caliber teachers. However, it is *also* the responsibility of the administrator to monitor, evaluate and document performance of teachers to determine their level of instruction.

The main function of a union is to negotiate fair and equitable contracts for employees through collective bargaining. That is, the union membership functions as a unit to negotiate items in the contract. This gives the negotiations strength because of the singular voice representing the membership, rather than addressing each individual need or concern of individual teachers. Also, the union understands the labor laws that are attached to employment, as well as has political pull in the community. Employees of charter schools need to negotiate their own contracts each year. Collective bargaining is on the chopping block in several states across the nation.

## NCTE Current Past President Carol Jago to Present Keynote at Annual Conference in October

NEATE is pleased to announce that Carol Jago, a 32-year veteran teacher and current past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) will present the keynote address at this year's NEATE conference on October 28, 2011 in Mansfield, Massachusetts.

Jago is the author of six books published by Heinemann, including *With Rigor for All* and *Papers, Papers, Papers*. She is also an educational columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*.

See her website [www.caroljago.com](http://www.caroljago.com) for more information.

Please register for the conference at [www.neate.org](http://www.neate.org).

## The 3Ts: What Four Young Black Men Can Teach Us About What Is Required to Help Them Become Readers

Kimberly M. Parker, Ph.D.

After spending some time with middle school young Black men who proudly proclaimed themselves non-readers, I know that three critical factors were instrumental in changing their beliefs about themselves. I've distilled them into three factors, here called the "3 Ts" in hopes that these youth can help us in our own teaching of the young men in our classrooms.

**Time:** Young men need time to become proficient readers. For the young men in my study, when their teacher provided in-class time for them to read in book clubs, as well as time to set reading goals and to discuss their books, the young men readily complied. In my own classroom, I give students a weekly in-class reading period where they are permitted to read texts of their choice. I also use that time to provide individual reading instruction for students who struggle with reading comprehension and fluency. During this time, I can conference with students to engage them in conversations that readers have: what they like about their books, what troubles them about characters, what they want to read next. Carving out classroom time for students helps them practice what real readers do, and helps preserve the continuity between reading experiences.

**Texts:** That young Black men read is a regular point of contention. I have never met a young man that didn't want to read; rather, young men, as research has shown, **do** read. Their texts of choice often don't mesh with what we teach in classrooms, however. The young men in my research preferred to read urban fiction and nonfiction about topics of interest to them (in this case, basketball and street fighting). However, in their eighth grade classroom, they did not have ready access to those texts. Once their teacher decided to incorporate book clubs into his regular classroom practice, however, the young men began to read, citing *Forged by Fire* (Sharon Draper) and *The First Part Last* (Angela Johnson)

as two of the first books they'd ever read. It makes sense that if we want to keep our young men engaged as readers in our classrooms, that we make a conscious, regular effort to balance the texts we have students read along the fiction/nonfiction spectrum and to remember that "texts" can be defined quite broadly.

**Teacher:** Young Black men need teachers who are skilled at helping them find books as well as teachers who are skilled at facilitating their entry into becoming readers. For example, the young men in my study were frustrated with their teacher, new to book clubs and young adult fiction himself, because he regularly changed how he wanted the book clubs to run. For instance, one time he wanted students to use role sheets, while another time he wanted students to run their book clubs based on questions they generated about their reading. Students were never allowed to gain proficiency with any one way of discussing their book. As a result, their book clubs often devolved into other matters of business (usually setting a reading goal) rather than discussing the books. As teachers, trying something new particularly, it can be difficult to commit to a practice that doesn't seem to immediately "work." However, in the case of implementing book clubs with reluctant readers, students wanted to try, and keep trying. They needed a teacher who was willing to stick it out with them, to have patience, and to let them keep meeting in their book clubs until they gained proficiency. I try to remember the time required to become good at something, particularly this year in a new school where oftentimes I am one step ahead of my students. However, I am committed to making my classroom a space that helps students—but, in this case, particularly my students who are young men—develop a love of reading. It is my hope that I remember the 3Ts and incorporate them into my practice to help students on their own reading journeys.

## Why I Joined NEATE

I became a member of the New England Association of Teachers of English over twenty years ago, when I was a fairly new English department head. I began by attending NEATE conferences and began to feel the power of joining a regional professional organization when I was invited to attend an Affiliate Forum. Connecting with other language arts educators throughout New England and beyond was exciting and energizing. Our department had recently gone through a difficult time with challenges to some of the books we were teaching at our school. Colleagues at the Affiliate Forum gave me wonderful support and very practical suggestions. I began to encourage teachers in our district to take advantage of opportunities to be published in the Leaflet, to present their lessons and approaches in workshops at the annual conference, to network with colleagues in our region and beyond and even to join the NEATE Executive Board. Our entire district benefited from our involvement in NEATE through our professional collaboration and growth opportunities. NEATE offers many ways for new and veteran language arts educators to share their thoughts, their writings, their hopes, their successes, and their concerns. Honestly, NEATE has been my most beneficial professional growth experience as well as the source of several of my very best friendships.

*Debbie Woelflein is a member of the board of directors of NEATE.*

## What to DO with ALL THOSE ELLs

English Language Learners (ELLs) are one of the most rapidly growing populations in our schools across the nation. Even in smaller districts, the ELL population is on the rise, as immigrants move out into the suburbs and rural areas. The issue is that many districts are unsure of how to handle this population of students.

There are many misconceptions about ELLs that are prevalent in society including that ELLs can't learn as well. As well all know, every child who walks into our classroom has his or her own set of challenges to overcome. The truth of the matter is that it takes 5-9 years to acquire a language and English immersion is not always the key to success. We can't expect success in numbers after a year.

Widely accepted theorists, including Stephen Krashen, suggest that comprehensible input of a new language is needed to acquire a skill provided the student's affective filter is down; that is, provided he or she is not overly anxious or under motivated. This theory gave rise to the Sheltered Instruction method for English learners, where the teacher considers the language goals and not just content goals. While a new ELL may not fully comprehend the nuances of Chaucer, she may be able to learn to construct a thoughtful response, with enough support.

For more information, post a question or join a discussion on [www.neate.org](http://www.neate.org).



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## Are Your Students Hungry for *The Hunger Games*?

I don't know about you, but I am getting tired of vampires and werewolves. I was all on board for Meyer's thrilling *Twilight* series, don't get me wrong, but the onslaught on vampire-mania that followed is somewhat tiresome after a while.

I am an avid reader of young adult fiction. It fits my needs during the school year that is filled with technical reading on the profession and email after email reminding me of something else I have to fit into my 30-minute prep period. YA lit is a fast and easy, and it allows me to recommend captivating books to my burgeoning middle school readers. Not all YA lit is for the middle school age. Even Laurie Halse Anderson puts a warning on her latest book *Twisted* that it isn't for young readers. When *The Hunger Games* came across my desk, given to me by a voracious reader in my class, I was afraid it was another vampire thriller. I was pleasantly surprised.

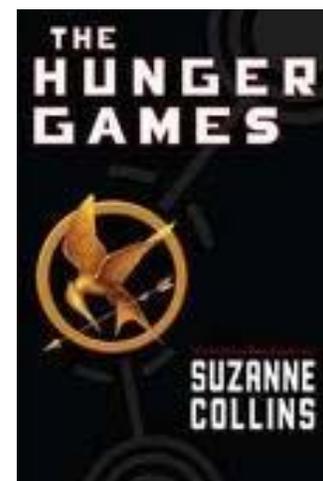
Suzanne Collins creates a feasible future dystopia that is plagued by hardship in *The Hunger Games*. In an unnamed time in the future, America has been divided into 12 districts, each responsible for an industry. Each year, to commemorate the rebellion of the elusive district 13 against the domineering Capitol, two young people from each district are selected by lottery to compete against each other in the Hunger Games, a televised fight to the death. The victor guarantees extra food rations for her district and a life of luxury for her family.

Katniss Everdeen, from district 12, is a 16-year old who worries about far more than falling in love. She is the sole provider for her family after the tragic death of her father in the mines and the subsequent breakdown of her mother. When her younger sister's name is called in the lottery, she automatically volunteers to go in her place. Katniss is all about sacrifice for her family.

While some may be concerned about the violence for younger readers, the fighting and deaths of the tributes are more emotionally draining than grotesque. Collins has said again and again in interviews that she wanted a way for young people to be able to witness fighting in a safe environment to be able to make judgments for themselves.

Reading this book would be a great opportunity to prepare some students for reading other dystopian literature like *1984*, *Animal Farm* or *The Giver* because of its readability and its realistic characters. Like most YA lit, *The Hunger Games* leaves the reader with a sense of hope.

*The Hunger Games* is followed by *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*.



## National Writing Project Loses Federal Funding

It is a matter of communication. In a world that has become so small, good writing makes it necessary to be competitive in the global market. However, it is clear that lawmakers did not take that into account when they took away earmarks for The National Writing Project.

Countless times, teachers blame the teachers who came before for lack of writing proficiency in their students. We have to remember, we can only get so far each year. We may be good teachers, but we aren't miracle workers (most of the time). It has been with tireless effort over years and many hours of reading and re-reading and commenting on essays that real change can happen. The National Writing Project has helped the change to come.

An entire generation of students will miss out on the opportunity for a NWP coach to guide them or their teachers to become better readers. The project, which began in 1974 creates, "agents of reform" to improve writing from kindergarten through college level by promoting best practices in writing. The NWP relied on the federal government for at least half of its funding. The rest of the monies were provided through state grants that matched federal dollars. Without that federal funding, the sustainability of the NWP is questionable.

While it is true that not every teacher in every district is exposed to or instructed in the best practices of writing through The National Writing Project, there are more than 200 writing project sites that service all 50 states. In New England, there is a strong contingent of writing projects that have shaped the writers and writing instruction across our region.

In an open letter to President Obama, teacher-consultant for the NWP Bruce Penniman states, "We all know that solving the federal budget crisis will require bold actions. This bill wasn't one. It makes no sense to undermine effective programs that advance our nation's educational goals at a time when they are needed more than ever – especially since the effective on the budget deficit is negligible. Better to strengthen proven programs like NWP and look to reform the real budget-busters."

Research shows that NWP effects positive change in writing environments. "In 16 studies conducted in seven states, 103 of 112 comparisons show positive results in writing achievement favoring students in classrooms of NWP participants," according to the NWP homepage. The numbers speak for themselves, but it is the anecdotal data from across our region that demonstrates the power of the program.

Kristine Anderson, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in New Haven, CT, has been working with the Connecticut Writing Project for the last six years. When she came to New Haven from Baltimore, the writing scores in New Haven were abysmal. The district had spent a significant amount of time focusing on reading comprehension that writing had taken a backseat. With the district-wide revamping of the curriculum, CWP coaches helped shape the writing workshop model of instruction. "I saw my students grow from being hesitant about two sentences to not being able to put down their pencils."

Cuts need to be made, but concessions such as NWP are not moving our nation in the right direction.

# Join us online

NEATE has resources at your fingertips. Please visit us at our website: [www.neate.org](http://www.neate.org) or find us on Facebook: Search for New England Association of Teachers of English (NEATE)

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