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A monthly series dedicated to the people and the organizations whose efforts in literacy make Massachusetts a great place to live and learn.



Standards + organized approach + creativity = student success in school? That's the hypothesis of MassInsight Education and Research Institute, who have the standards and the organized approach well in hand. Good thing they have teachers like Donna Cycz to handle the creativity piece. Massachusetts Reads and Succeeds and the Verizon Foundation are proud to honor Donna Cycz and MassInsight for their work in promoting student achievement, from the classroom to the capital. Maybe we should lock them in a room together for a few days? There'd be dedication and passion, ideas and plans, spilling out the windows and doors. In fact, they just might be able to solve this education thing once and for all...



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Here's To Scientific Inquiry – And a Whole Lot of Laundry

By Lauren Leikin

Andrew Caulkin, Senior Vice President of MassInsight Education and Research Institute, is talking a big game: standards and frameworks, efficiency and global education policy, curricula and...volcanos. "Take the age-old volcano experiment," he says, conjuring up images of paper-mâché mountains and food-colored foam. "In too many schools, it's great hands-on engagement and lively theatre, but doesn't connect at all to the core science concepts that lie behind it. Kids end up viewing it as a really cool experiment – but ask them to explain what it means in terms of scientific method and beginning chemistry, and by and large they won't be able to do it."

For Caulkin and the folks at MassInsight, this is a problem for several reasons. First, and most pragmatically, by 2010, Massachusetts students will be required to pass the MCAS science and technology exam in order to graduate from high school. There's also the well-publicized fact that U.S. students are being surpassed by their peers in places like China and India on standardized tests of math and science. But most importantly, says Caulkin, is "making sure that kids' natural curiosity about scientific things doesn't get extinguished by the end of 5th grade, which seems to be what happens these days."

This is a challenge that MassInsight, a 10-year old non-profit working to improve student achievement, is ready for. With the help of \$50,000 from the Verizon Foundation, and a cohort of teachers from across the state, they are developing standards-based science and technology maps that help teachers make the connection from curriculum to classroom. It can be a long connection – one that begins when the state sets achievement standards, also known as frameworks. Once that happens, districts have to figure out to how align their curriculum with those frameworks. Then the schools have to figure out how to get all their teachers to incorporate the curriculum. Finally, the teachers have to figure out how the larger goals break down in terms of individual skills they need to help their children develop. "It's not efficient," says Caulkin "to have every single school district and every single teacher out there reinventing their own wheel." Educators evidently agree: thousands of them are already using the maps MassInsight created in 1999 for standards in English and math.

Caulkin acknowledges that the maps are not "a silver bullet – there are a bunch of challenges that we're trying to address all at once," he says. "They have to be worked on simultaneously." But just wait until the next academic year, when these maps are available for schools and teachers throughout the state. Ask your fourth grader how her day was, when she comes home from school covered in paper-mache and red food dye. "Well, Dad," she might say, "My hypothesis about decomposition reactions proved to be incorrect, but I learned a lot about the chemical reactions of acids and bases." Here's to scientific inquiry – and a whole lot of laundry.

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Meet Massachusetts Literacy Champion Donna Cycz

Not much fazes Massachusetts Literacy Champion Donna Cycz. After all, she traveled, with a Yale University program to the outer reaches of Mongolia and grew up on a North Hadley farm where, "picking five tons of cucumbers a day was nothing." But moving thirty-one years of teaching materials from The Greenfield Elementary school to her new Newton School classroom in Greenfield, Massachusetts, has got her a little rattled. "I must have two, three, five hundred boxes," she says, along with larger things like her Smart Board.

Cycz first saw the Smart Board at a conference, a white board that doubles as a touch screen computer. And the best part? No erasing at the lesson's end. Cycz can just print it out and hand the copies to her students for review. "It's a chalkboard of the future!" Cycz exclaims. But no way was Cycz going to wait for the future to get it. Instead, she wrote a grant.

It's a common refrain around Cycz: grant writing – the way, since 1999 that she's implemented the ideas that come to her. And as long as she meets the Massachusetts' State Frameworks, and her students continue to make high scores on the MCAS, no administrator has a reason to object. "I know the curriculum you have to teach," says Cycz. "You have to keep that as your bread and butter. You have to have your five food groups. How can you rearrange that, so kids want to eat it?" So, dismissive of the time it surely takes her to find, write and send the grants, Cycz has never felt constrained by state budgets, or curriculum guidelines to do the job she loves the best way that she can. In fact, she says, "I have everything, I feel, at my fingertips."

The Internet, for one thing, where, along with the "weird articles" and "tidbits" at the backs of books, she finds the grants. Like Toshiba's Road Kill Grant. "That was a hoot," Cycz says, laughing. "Road kill!" But she applied for it in relation, again, to a mathematics framework, and that won her the \$2,000 that helped her to teach her students to record the whereabouts and species of every dead animal they drove past. Then they read and graphed the coordinates on a giant classroom map and discussed in Fourth Grade terms, the impact of Land Use and Development on the habitat and population of regional wildlife. All examples of what Cycz calls



"Back Door Learning," when learning is so hand's on and fun, students are not aware that they're learning at all.

So, \$6,000 for a Smart Board, \$1,000 for digital cameras, \$1,000 for a microscope, \$2,500 for a video physical fitness program complete with pedometers– no wonder Cycz's classroom move is overwhelming.

But the purchases Cycz made for the project she speaks of most passionately would not even fill a half a box. She calls it The Boys' Book Club, and The Girls' Book Club – a matter of handing out two copies of a book to a student and a partner: parent and child, grandparent and child etc., for them to keep, and to read in any manner they choose: parent to child, child to parent, as a whole family, or separately. Then they attend a book discussion at the school and are always welcome regardless of whether or not they've read the book, Cycz saying, "If you read the book come, if you don't read the book, come and listen to the discussion and maybe you'll want to read the book."

Cycz began it as a fourth grade club for boys only, the reason being, says Cycz, "At that age, boys are quieter than girls and I wanted to make sure they had a voice." But only one week later, the girls had their club too. "Not only would kids talk to other kids, but they would talk to different parents or parents would talk to parents. They would learn to communicate, converse or sit back and listen," says Cycz.

And after personally fronting the money for the first 2003 Book Club, using all her Scholastic points to order books for free, Cycz received funding that included a \$2,500 Massachusetts Literacy Champion award from Verizon. The increased funding paid, not only for books and pizza, but stipends to teachers who helped Cycz expand the program to include, along with grade 4, grades 3 and 5.

But, despite writing three grants and even sending an email to Oprah, Cycz could not obtain the funding for the book clubs of 2006. Ironically, it was the program's suspension that brought home to her the power of its impact.. "Kids constantly would ask me: when is it going to start? They would talk to other kids about it: 'We read this book in Book Club.' Parents saying, 'We loved this book club.'" And what she realized was that book clubs join child, parent and teacher. "And as soon as you have that, Bingo!" So, says Cycz, with characteristic determination, she will find funding for the book clubs again.

Visit www.massliteracy.com for additional information on the Literacy Champions.