The Baltimore Teachers Union is proud to introduce a new quarterly newsletter aimed at furthering our union's democracy and deepening our fight for educational justice in Baltimore. I look forward to members submitting ideas or articles for future issues of this newsletter.

Since the start of the school year, over a thousand BTU educators have participated in an action at a School Board meeting, attended a BTU event, or lobbied a lawmaker to benefit our students. This work has had a lasting impact on our schools, and our strength will continue to grow as more and more members unite to struggle for change. Victories happen when communities come together to fight for equity for our students, fairness in our contracts, and dignity in the workplace.

Our union is only as strong as our members' participation. Ask your Building Reps for the latest updates, contact your Field Reps when you need support, attend BTU committee meetings to drive our work, and show up to actions when we need to make our voices heard. Together, we are a force for change when confronting the challenges facing our city. When we fight, we win!

In solidarity,

President Diamonté Brown
Kirwan: A Once in a Generation Opportunity for our Public Schools

By Corey Gaber

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: For as long as Baltimore City Public Schools have existed, they have been underfunded by the state of Maryland. The difference between what the state should have been funding BCPSS, and how much they actually sent in 2017 (the last time the Department of Legislative Services studied the “Adequacy Gap”) was 342 million dollars!

This underfunding isn’t just a Baltimore City problem, as 20 of the 24 counties in the state are underfunded, and analysis shows the higher concentration of black children in a district, the larger the funding gap. BTU members can feel the impact of this historical underfunding every day in our inhumane facilities, with blooming class sizes, inadequate materials and technology, and insufficient staff and counselors in order to meet students needs.

In 2016 a commission was formed by the legislature in order to study Maryland’s current funding formula and make recommendations for what would make the state’s schools world class. This commission was headed by Brit Kirwan, Chancellor Emeritus of the University System of Maryland, and thus became known as the “Kirwan Commission.” Baltimore City teacher and BTU Member Morgan Showalter sat on the Commission and was part of the process of creating the set of recommendations.
What Did the Kirwan Commission Recommend?

The Commission issued a 200+ page report in 2019, recommending a series of reforms organized into 5 major policy areas:

1. Invest in Early Childhood Education
2. Teacher Quality and Diversity
3. College & Career Ready Pathways
4. Ensure All Students are Successful
5. Blueprint Accountability

Altogether, these reforms once fully implemented would represent an additional 4 billion dollars of investment, split between the state and local jurisdiction into Maryland’s public schools. It is truly a once in a generation opportunity to finally get the resources our students deserve.

But Can We Afford This?

The bottom line is we can afford this by closing tax loopholes, ending giveaways to large corporations, and having the super rich pay their fair share of state income taxes. The current governor has put out a lot of false and misleading statements about what this new revenue could mean for Maryland taxpayers. He has even raised $2 million dollars in dark money to fund an advertisement campaign aimed at defeating the Kirwan recommendations.

Even if you didn’t believe that we had a moral obligation to provide young people with an excellent public education, we can’t afford NOT to make this investment based on the economic future of the state alone.

Kirwan Growth Areas

The recommendations offer an inspiring opportunity, and they are not perfect! Here are a few priority areas that BTU will be fighting to improve as the recommendations are translated into legislation to be voted on this session in Annapolis:
1. **BTU proposes that National Board Certification (NBC) be one of, but not the ONLY pathway to professional development and career advancement.** The Commission is recommending that over the course of 10 years, each district will create a career ladder which would restrict salary increases and leadership advancements to teachers who have achieved National Board Certification. This could exacerbate equity concerns by making Baltimore City a place where teachers are less likely to advance financially and in the career ladder, due to working in schools with concentrated poverty and trauma, and less support for navigating the NBC process. Additionally, NBC is overseen by Pearson, a private corporation with a dubious history, rather than by public universities with boards and accreditation accountability processes.

2. **BTU proposes the inclusion of a similar pay raise for PSRPs as is included for teachers.** BTU leadership is working in coalition with MSEA, SEIU, AFSCME, and legislators to put forward a bill that would honor the many non-teachers who work in schools and make our children’s education possible. (Delegate Solomon is working on the legislation now; wait to push this issue until there is a bill number.)

3. **BTU proposes eliminating the state funding floors.** As part of a political deal when passing the “Thornton” education funding formula in 2002, legislators compromised their commitment to racial equity in order to ensure elected officials from richer counties would vote in favor of the (at the time) new formula. Currently, state funding floor rules require the state to provide every district with at least 15% of foundation funding and 40% of compensatory education, special education, and limited English proficiency funding (even if a richer jurisdiction should be shouldering a higher share of the burden according to the formula). They are by nature inequitable, letting rich districts off the hook for paying their full equitable share and thereby reducing state funds available to invest in less wealthy districts and needier students.

**What Next?**

Opportunities to seriously revise and improve the state’s education funding formula only come about once every 15-20 years, so we’re not exaggerating when we say that this is a once in a generation opportunity to get our students the resources they deserve. Legislators are translating the Kirwan recommendations into a bill, which will first go through the House of Delegates and then the State Senate.

The legislative session runs from January 8 through April 6 and will be filled with opportunities to ensure that the best version of the recommendations are passed and are funded equitably. Passing Kirwan is far from a done deal and will require educating, advocating, and organizing from our membership in order to turn Commission recommendations into the law of the land.
Students, teachers and community groups went together to Annapolis in March of 2019 to lobby the Maryland state government to provide more funding for public schools. We went around passing out flyers to lawmakers all over the General Assembly. We met the lawmakers and we also talked with them, explaining why we needed the money.

The Kirwan Commission is a study that found out that a lot of school districts in Maryland were not getting enough money. We went to Annapolis because we were trying to convince the General Assembly to pass a law that will give schools the extra money. We learned how to advocate for action in government. This is important because it can make a huge difference for improving Baltimore City Public Schools.

Adam Sokolski is a government teacher at Patterson High School and a member of the Baltimore Teachers Union. He is also the faculty adviser for Patterson’s Student Government Association and a member of Patterson’s “Team of 10”, a group that works on advocacy around Kirwan. Mr. Sokolski said it was a great experience being able to see first-hand how our legislative branch works and getting the opportunity to meet with lawmakers and advocate for an important cause.

“It’s important for people to advocate in their government because otherwise your voice isn’t heard.”, Mr. Sokolski explained. “And I think the fact that there are teachers and students in Annapolis advocating for extra funding helps keep it in the forefront of legislators’ minds”.

The Patterson Team of 10, along with other groups from Baltimore City and all over Maryland plan to go back to Annapolis this March to continue pushing for the funding we need and deserve.

_Meylin Diaz is the Class President for the Class of 2021 at Patterson High School._
Teacher Autonomy

By Kerry Graham

My first year of teaching (2011–2012), I wrote every lesson plan from scratch. The students in my tenth grade English class learned what I thought they should learn in the way(s) I thought they should learn it.

When we read A Lesson Before Dying, we discussed the history and present-day examples of systemic racism, including the controversial execution of Troy Davis. Their summative assessment was to write a letter to then-Governor O’Malley stating their opinions about Maryland’s then-legal death penalty.

Next, I taught a unit on food deserts, which included multiple visits to Real Food Farm, an urban farm on our school’s campus. For a later unit, we analyzed poetry and song lyrics that grapple with civil disobedience. All year, when people asked which subject I taught, I’d say, “High school English, but secretly, it’s a social justice class.”

Certainly, and especially as a first-year teacher, my lesson and unit plans had considerable room for improvement. They lacked cohesion and appropriate scaffolding; if I taught the same material now, I’d revise my pacing for sure. Looking back, I’m flabbergasted at the stamina that propelled me to not only survive as a first-year teacher (which, for me, included completing BCTR coursework), but also single-handedly created every unit, lesson plan, and resource for a year-long course.

But when I lost that autonomy the next year, as North Avenue began to implement required texts and assessments, I realized how fortunate I had been to make those types of decisions about my instruction. For the next several years, the amount of choices I could make regarding content, standards, and assignments have become smaller and smaller. While I appreciate having a structure to follow, and especially the provided materials, I resent my lack of freedom. Why are people who have never, or will never, teach my students mandating how I teach them?

For the most part, I’ve adjusted to this lack of autonomy, though it’s never stopped annoying me. I sneak in as much of my own teaching style as possible--weekly Socratic Seminars, 11:59 p.m. deadlines for electronic assignments, arts integration--to help me (and my students) stay engaged.

A few weeks ago, though, at the start of second semester, I went completely rogue. For a full week, I taught a mini-unit on a set of topics that were not only timely, but of interest and value to my students—and me. For five consecutive days, I was eager to teach. I introduced new content enthusiastically, and remained more patient than normal when students struggled or asked the same questions repeatedly. I looked forward to delivering these lessons, and ended each class feeling upbeat and grateful. Just as importantly, this energy rubbed off on my students; not only did I have high attendance that week, but high participation. Students were willing to complete tasks that were out of their comfort zones because they enjoyed the material.

While I reflect on that week, and am grateful for the breath of fresh air it provided me, it has also reminded me how stifling our current curricula are. I wish that, as a qualified and capable professional, I could be trusted to do what is best for my own classroom. For my students. For myself.

Kerry Graham is an English teacher at Patterson High School and a BTU member. She has written for the Huffington Post and several other publications.
I was extremely mad at Sara and Natasha because as usual, they were off-task. I was yelling at them again and it wasn't working. They both went to the back of the class and started working on their own. I thought they were just playing some writing games or other fun activities. After a while, Sara came to me and tried to give me a note. I was boiling with anger and so I refused to even look at it. I yelled again, “Go back to your assigned seat and work!” At the end of the day, when I was cleaning my desk, I saw that paper and opened it. It said, “Ms. Afreen, you are going too fast.” I was ashamed.

I was teaching Eureka Math to a small number of my kids and the rest of them were not interested or thought that I was teaching too fast. According to my coach, I should have taught the rest of the students in small groups. Eureka took an hour, most of my teaching time, so in my opinion, I should teach Eureka in small groups to the small number of students who actually understand it, and I should be teaching my other students the skills they need to catch up, not material that they can’t understand. But I was bound to teach Eureka. Unsurprisingly, the results of i-Ready and A-net tests were frustrating. Most of my students performed poorly.

In the winter of 2019, I went to a Saturday workshop for new teachers in Title I schools, where Dr. Lawrence Brown, an associate professor at Morgan State University, gave a presentation on “Cognitive Impacts of Baltimore Apartheid: How Toxic Lead & Trauma Impact Our Youth.”

His talk was about the long legacy of trauma in Baltimore City that undermines the health and well-being of Black neighborhoods and students. His work maps the effects of Baltimore Apartheid, as well as the impact of toxic lead and trauma on the brains of Baltimore City students. He showed MRI scans of the affected brains. It was devastating for me to learn that my kids were not only facing violence, if not directly, indirectly in their neighborhood and extended families but also they were affected by toxic lead. It made me wonder, how come they are being tested on the same standardized tests as the rest of Maryland like Howard and Montgomery County's prosperous families?

The way we test is unfair to the students of Baltimore City and to teachers as well, because teachers are also evaluated on the basis of their students' test scores. After I went to the workshop with Dr. Brown, it was even more disturbing to me that our students are being judged against the students of prosperous counties. How can you compare healthy children, who have access to books and computers in their homes and their parents read to them most of their childhood life, with the children, like their parents, are affected by toxic lead and the severe trauma around them? Many of my kids' parents were poor and were using drugs, some kids' parents were in jails, and some living in shelter homes.
Clearly, I was frustrated, I decided to do research on lead paint, effects of trauma, poor living, and the standardized tests. The results were profoundly disturbing.

Despite the fact that over the last two decades, reductions in lead poisoning have been made, low-income black families still carry the burden of this legacy. Beyond the toxicity of lead, the poverty level in Baltimore is twice the national average at 24%. Baltimore City students’ exposure to trauma, mass incarceration, violence, drug addiction, environmental toxins, homelessness, poor health/nutrition can result in anxiety, attention deficit, depression, impulse control, aggression. Apart from the lack of healthy nutrition, a good night’s sleep, reading culture, easy access to computers, in the crime-plagued Baltimore neighborhood, it is significant to recognize that chronic childhood trauma affects brain development, which generates the risk of physical and behavioral health problems.

If we know all of this information about our students and the public health outcomes of poverty, lead and trauma, why do we continue to teach and test as if nothing is wrong? Teachers need support from intervention systems. Professional support should be inside of classrooms with teachers.

Paraeducators and other intervention staff could support in restorative practices like calming exercises. They also could help the teacher in small group teaching.

Baltimore City students need extra care and attention to cover the achievement gap and to build a high expectation culture in the classrooms. How can you expect teachers to have high expectations from their students with multiple issues going on? Comprehension and learning cannot be possible if the mind is not at peace, nurtured, and ready to learn.

As described in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a human being requires to fulfill basic needs before moving on to fulfill psychological needs and Baltimore city students don’t have their basic needs: food and safety fulfilled so how are they expected to learn?

I strongly feel that if I had the freedom of teaching according to the needs of my students, my students would not feel that I am too fast, and there would be fewer behavior issues in the class. And if I could make the tests accordingly, most of my students would pass 5th grade. Relying on teachers high expectations is not going to work. There should be an intervention system to produce a high expectations culture. Therefore, the solution is not only to find support to encourage a student’s positive adjustment to school and the ability to learn. Teachers also need additional support from an intervention team to be in the classroom to address the needs of the students effectively.

Dr. Amna Afreen is currently teaching in Baltimore City Public Schools
Member Spotlight

Alyson Manion, Teacher

What are the challenges of leading the CTE department at Digital Harbor High School?
One challenge has been learning to support the individuals on our team while keeping the students at the heart of all we do. I feel that in learning about and understanding the teachers in our department and empowering them with their strengths better enables me to help develop career pathways. I believe in leading by example, holding high standards and always keeping our students in the center of our work.

What is your involvement with BTU? Why is it important for teachers and PSRPs to be active in the union?
I always make sure I am fully informed and aware of what the BTU is doing, their goals and mission. I never miss an election and attend meetings within my school building... The union is not 5800 Metro drive; the union are the active workers in the buildings each day in front of our students. It is important to get involved at any level. I believe in my voice in the union and even with my baby in tow, show up when I know I must. I always urge others to do the same, stay informed, stay involved and participate as much as you can, because you are the union.

Alyson Manion is the Career and Technology Education Department and Fine Arts Department lead at Digital Harbor High School, where she has worked since 2006. She is also the school’s Yearbook Adviser.

*This article has been excerpted. To read the full version of the article, please visit www.baltimoreteachers.org/blog.

Claudette Lake, PSRP

What are the challenges of being a Building Rep for the PSRPs at DHHS?
How do you rise to those challenges?
I try to let them know that I’m here for them. I’ll be with them when they need me.

Tell us about your work with the DHHS staff and students.
I love working with the new teachers, giving smiles when the day has been hard. The students sometimes need a push to make it through the day.

What is your role at DHHS?
I’m the attendance monitor, working to better the attendance for the entire school.

What would you like to see BTU focus on in the future?
Raising the self-worth of all its members. PRSPs sometimes believe they’re not as important as the teachers, and that isn’t true.

Claudette Lake is the attendance monitor at Digital Harbor High School.
In August, I set a goal to visit every school in Baltimore City to meet you, to get a feel for what your day-to-day life is like in the classroom and in your schools, and to hear directly from you what your concerns are about the job you have assumed as educators. I launched my Back to School Tour on the first day of the 2019-2020 school year, and, in the five months since that launch, I have visited our members in 157 schools!

I have seen your quiet spaces where children can go to regain their composure in a safe space, and book nooks where students earn time to sit and read. I have witnessed our secretaries and office support staff engaging with youth and their parents in the main office, running the buildings with expertise. I have seen you teaching engaging lessons that have the entire class glued to what you are doing. I have seen you in the gym preparing for big athletic events, art classrooms helping to develop the next Picasso, science and medical classes preparing our youth for a career in medicine, and in CTE classes teaching much-needed trade skills.

My Back to School Tour also allowed me to speak with many of you one-on-one about your frustrations concerning unfair practices with formal evaluations, SLOs, standardized testing, and curriculum like Wit & Wisdom. I have had the opportunity to speak with Guidance Counselors, Speech Pathologists, School Psychologists and IEP Chairs about what you need to be more effective. I have spoken with front office staff about the heavy load you are lifting carrying your schools on your shoulders. I have heard your concerns, and am doing everything in my power to bring you to the table to help address and find solutions to these issues.

The time I am spending on my Back to School Tour is invaluable. I have an opportunity to get back into schools, engage with you and your students, talk to parents and, most importantly, to let you know that I am here for each of you. Please continue to be engaged with the BTU. This is YOUR union, and the more you are aware and engaged, the more we can do together to provide our students with what they need to be successful leaders!
Upcoming BTU Meetings & Events

FEBRUARY

2.12  AFT–MD Mayoral Debate (Members Only)
      Hearing & Speech Agency
      3900 Metro Dr., 21215
      6pm–9pm

2.17  President's Day Action in Annapolis
      100 State Circle, 21401
      12pm
      Email: cgaber@baltu.org for more details

2.19  District Committee on Assessments Meeting
      Maryland Vocational Technical High School
      3500 Hillen Rd., 21218
      5:30pm–7:30pm

2.24  BTU/PGCEA Lobby Night in Annapolis
      Bus leaving from the BTU
      5800 Metro Dr., 21215
      4:30pm
      Email: cgaber@baltu.org for more details

MARCH

3.2   March Employee Evaluation Input Session
      *Two sessions in March*
      Mergenthaler Vocational Technical HS
      3500 Hillen Rd., 21218
      5:30pm–7:30pm

3.4   PSRP ParaPro Test
      2500 E. Northern Pkwy., 21214
      4:00pm
      Email: wdew@baltu.org for more details

3.30  March Employee Evaluation Input Session
      *Two sessions in March*
      Hamilton Elementary/Middle School
      3101 Old Harford Rd., 21214
      5:30pm–7:30pm

We Need YOU to contribute to the
The Baltimore Educator!

We are are looking for members to contribute to the Baltimore Educator. If you have expertise you want to share with the membership, have an article (1,000 words max) to submit, want to share a lesson that has been successful in your classroom, please email publicationscommittee@baltu.org!
BTU/PGCEA
LOBBY NIGHT IN ANNAPOLIS

Monday, February 24, 2020

The BTU and Prince Georges County Educators Association (PGCEA) are partnering to co-host a joint Lobby Night in Annapolis. Lobby training sessions will be conducted for those who choose to attend. Transportation to Annapolis and dinner will be provided.

RSVP to join us: http://bit.ly/2S24iJC

Email Corey Gaber at cgaber@baltu.org for more information