

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Oct. 16, 6 pm  
AEL Information  
& Q&A Meetings  
(virtual)

Nov. 19, 7 pm  
Open Forum w/  
Rick Kovelant,  
Executive  
Director/  
Attorney  
(virtual)

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

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Welcome 2  
New Members

Impasse 3  
Explained

Treat Yourself 5  
with Kindness

Best Buddies 6  
Elementary-  
style

5 Star 7  
Recognition

# AEL Leadership Forum

VOLUME 18, ISSUE 1

OCTOBER 2025



## The Power of Participation: Why Your Voice Matters in AEL

*By Tracey Ahern, AEL President*

As we have been in school for a month, the energy and excitement that starts the year has now settled into the familiar rhythm of our day-to-day work. It is easy to see that we have all slipped back into the school routines, juggling the ever-growing responsibilities that are on our plates. In the middle of all that, it can be easy to forget the power of stepping outside our own roles to connect, engage, and advocate together through AEL.

Over the past several months, the Executive Board has been reviewing AEL's bylaws to ensure that the structure of our organization supports our members in the most effective way possible. One truth has become clear: too many of our committees, the very committees outlined in our bylaws, are not active. Instead, the Executive

Board has been carrying out much of the work that should be happening in committee spaces. While this has allowed us to "get the job done" in the moment, it has not increased member engagement or expanded the collective impact of AEL.

If we're honest, this isn't new. Historically, participation in monthly meetings and committees has been limited, and then COVID made it even harder to gather. But now it is time to shift the narrative. The time has come to tap into the collective genius of our membership, to share responsibility, and to build a stronger, more visible, and more effective AEL.

We also know that negotiations remain at the forefront of everyone's mind. Our first mediation date with the Board of

Education is set for this month. We have already convened the Negotiations Planning Team, and we



are hopeful that the mediation process will propel us toward an agreement. At the same time, we are not letting mediation stall our ongoing planning and preparation for this year's negotiations. We remain committed to advocating for the needs of Unit II members.

This fall, you will see opportunities to get more involved. In the next few weeks, we will be asking for volunteers to join

*Continued on page 2*

## Why Your Voice Matters...

*Continued from page 1*

***“This year let’s move from watching to leading.”***

*Tracey Ahern,  
AEL President*

committees and take part in other ways to strengthen AEL. We need your voice, your experience, and your perspective. AEL is only as strong as the members who stand behind it.

We know the challenges: negotiations have been difficult, and as a smaller organization, our presence does not carry the same weight as some larger associations. But that is

exactly why active participation matters. When we come together, we amplify our voice and demonstrate our shared commitment to ensuring that the administrators and coordinators who hold our school system together are supported, valued, and heard.

This year let’s move from watching to leading. Let’s ensure that AEL is not just an

organization working for its members, but an organization powered by its members.

The school year is off to a positive start—now is the perfect time to get involved. Join a committee. Attend meetings. Share your perspective. Together, we can shape the direction of AEL and show up as the strong, united voice that Unit II deserves.



The graphic features a dark blue background with yellow and light blue geometric shapes on the left. In the center, the text "Welcome To AEL" is displayed, with "Welcome To" in a gold script font and "AEL" in large white block letters. To the right is the Anne Arundel County Association of Educational Leaders logo, which is a circular seal with a tree and a person figure. Below the central text, two columns of names are listed. At the bottom right, a light blue box contains the text "We are now 334 members strong!".

**Welcome To**  
**AEL**

**Judy Branco**  
**Coral DeLeon Santiago**  
**John Halmi**  
**Sara Ingersoll**  
**Victoria Lutian**  
**Stephanie Mastall**  
**Sara Mitchell Sherman**

**Jean Raymond**  
**Xzavier Robertson**  
**Taci Shaw**  
**Laura Skeelee**  
**Kimberly Smith**  
**Kaitlyn Stafford**  
**Elizabeth Turner**  
**Jason Wohlfarth**

**We are now 334 members strong!**

# Impasse: A Speed Bump on the Negotiation Highway or Foresake All Hope Ye Who Travel the Path?

*By Rick Kovelant, AEL Executive Director and General Counsel*

At this moment in time, I am quite sure that those of you reading this article are aware that AEL and the BOE are at an impasse in their negotiations and have sought the intervention of the Public Employee Labor Relations Board ("PERB") to assist in resolving their differences. To understand what "impasse" means and what is involved in the process to arrive at a result, I hope this brief article will be helpful. Let's begin!

In the context of labor relations, the term "impasse" refers to a point in the collective bargaining process where an employer and a union are unable to reach an agreement on key terms of a labor contract, despite good-faith negotiations. It is not simply a temporary disagreement or a heated exchange — it is a recognized deadlock where further discussions appear to be futile without outside intervention. In the present case, AEL and the BOE disagree as to the allocation of pay band funding and the inclusion

in the Negotiated Agreement of language regarding communication by Unit II employees with students. Setting aside the particulars of the disagreement, I would prefer to speak to the process as well as the impact this process has on the current contract and probably most importantly, the relationship between AEL and the BOE in the course of future negotiations.

Some years ago, the Maryland legislature created a dispute resolution method to assist public employee labor unions and public agencies to resolve unfair labor contract claims and failures to reach contractual agreements. This mission was placed in the hands of PERB, who utilizes the tools of required mediation and ultimately, binding arbitration to "helpfully" assist the parties achieve an agreement.

The process begins when either the union side, the employer side or both sides

jointly petition PERB to declare that an impasse exists. This can only occur after the parties have exchanged their "best and final offers." In determining if an impasse exists, PERB considers the following:

- **The bargaining history** between the parties.
- **The good faith of the negotiations** (whether both sides engaged sincerely in attempts to reach agreement).
- **The length and frequency of meetings** held during bargaining.
- **The importance of the issues** in dispute.

PERB, after taking in to account those items, has concluded that AEL and the BOE are at an impasse and has now required mediation as the first step in resolving the parties' differences.

Mediation is a process in which a third party is selected by AEL and the BOE. The mediator will meet with AEL and the BOE at a mediation session(s) to try and assist

*"PERB, after taking in to account those items, has concluded that AEL and the BOE are at an impasse and has now required mediation as the first step in resolving the parties' differences."*

*Rick Kovelant, AEL  
Executive Director &  
General Counsel*

*Continued on page 4*

## Impasse explained ...

*Continued from page 3*

**“Understandably, AEL does not favor delays. I don’t believe the same can be said of the BOE who has done little to timely meet and share proposals.”**

*Rick Kovelant, AEL  
Executive Director and  
General Counsel*

the parties in reaching an agreement. The process is conducted in a confidential manner and ultimately results in a report by the mediator as to what he/she believes is an appropriate resolution if, in fact, the parties have not reached their own agreement. This report can either be accepted by AEL and the BOE or rejected. It is non-binding and not subject to disclosure.

If no mediation result is acceptable to both parties, binding arbitration is the next order of business. This process requires a selection of an arbitrator, who will then formally hear the matter in a quasi-judicial manner. Evidence, if required will be presented, arguments in support of each party’s position will be heard, and a written decision will be

made by the arbitrator which the parties will be obligated to follow.

Certain limited appeals to the judicial system may follow, but hopefully, no further action by the BOE or AEL will be required. Impasse is not a quick and easy resolution mechanism. Given that public school employees have limited tools at their disposal to put pressure on their employer to meet their demands, as strikes, walkouts, etc. are not permitted in Maryland, the impasse process is the only available mechanism. An impasse is not necessarily permanent.

Circumstances such as new proposals or economic changes can reopen meaningful negotiations. Mediation and arbitration while

commonly used tools to help break deadlocks and move toward agreement, can however, contribute to the delays in achieving a resolution.

Understandably, AEL does not favor delays. I don’t believe the same can be said of the BOE who has done little to timely meet and share proposals. In labor negotiations, an impasse marks a significant moment of stalemate where progress halts and both parties face difficult decisions about next steps. While it signals a breakdown in bargaining, it also often serves as a turning point—pushing the parties to consider alternatives. Whether this impasse is a speed bump on the negotiation highway or the resolution will cause us to forsake all hope on this path remains to be seen. I am certain, however, the failure to pursue this trip would be far more dangerous. If we don’t pursue any and all available remedies when we legitimately believe our proposals are worthy of consideration and implementation our future bargaining strength will be diminished by our own doing.

### 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**.



# Treat Yourself with Kindness

*By Edie Picken, President/Director Emeritus*

You survived last school year and now you are in the throngs of this new one. My hope is that over the summer you took time to recoup, regroup, allowing yourself to go on vacations without your laptop and cellphones.

I get the cellphone thing, but don't get hung up on doing work when you are on your time. Those days you take are yours and you need to allow yourself the time to relax and rest.

Every new year brings on additional new projects, expectations, changes. You need to build in opportunities to take the time you earned so that you stay refreshed.

In retirement I have learned: my time is my time and the job will be

there when I get back. I did not take enough time for myself and held on to the notion that "I am necessary" in order for things to get done. What I needed to do was take care of myself. So, close your eyes, think of your happy place, and spend some quality time there whenever you want. And physically take time to go there. You deserve it!

Principals, APs, Curriculum Coordinators, and Special Assistants, need to support one another and work together so each colleague can take off his/her earned time and not worry about what is at work. It will be there whether you are or not. Working cohesively to get jobs done makes getting

the school year ready, and the school year in general, seem effortless and adds to the support necessary everyone needs.

Remember, you are only as important as you make yourselves out to be. We are all replaceable. But, working as a unit makes the job feel less stressful and now more than ever, this is necessary.

In closing, I implore you to treat yourselves with kindness and to take time for yourselves. Hindsight is always 20-20, and in retirement I have made certain that I do not make the same mistake. I take time for myself, family, and friends. Do the same while you are still working. It makes you a better person, a better colleague, and a better employee.

## 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.

## The Impact of Best Buddies in an Elementary School

*By Mollie Dwyer, Lead Special Educator, Waugh Chapel Elementary*

Waugh Chapel is a unique elementary school in AACPS as our school community includes a Regional Resource Room and three Alternate Curriculum Classrooms. Having these classes in our school gives us the opportunity to teach



and learn with students who have a variety of intellectual disabilities. This opportunity helps all Waugh Chapel students grow as accepting citizens. In May 2023, one of our Special Educators was contacted by a representative from Best Buddies of Maryland with an opportunity to open a chapter. We soon learned that “Best Buddies International is a non-profit organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, inclusive living, and family support for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities”.

Once we heard about the

dedication to inclusion that Best Buddies supports, we knew Waugh Chapel needed to join the movement. After some collaboration and planning from our Admin and Special Educators, we proudly opened the first Best Buddies elementary chapter in AACPS in September 2024. The chapter has helped fulfill Anne Arundel County Public School’s vision of being a “school community where everyone can belong, grow, and succeed” by fostering friendships among students in an accepting environment during our monthly after school meetings. We started with 52 student members and have received applications from over 100 students for the 25-26 school year. This growth and high-interest in our Best Buddies chapter shows how impactful the program is to our school community. Three main action steps helped our school in year one of implementation. First, we introduced Best Buddies at Back to School Night and partnered with our local high school to staff a table where families could go to

receive information about the program. Second, we formed an inclusion committee which met monthly to plan events and support the special educators leading the work. Third, we engaged several parent volunteers to help facilitate the after school events.

Our success with Best Buddies helped us win the Elementary Chapter of the Year award in May 2025 among 14 other chapters throughout Maryland! Our dedicated Special Educators presented about Best Buddies at the summer Special Education Symposium which inspired at least five other elementaries to open chapters this year. If your school is interested in expanding inclusive friendships among your students, Best Buddies would be a great choice. Contact the Maryland Director of Programs, Amber Yates ([amberyates@bestbuddies.org](mailto:amberyates@bestbuddies.org)) to learn about the next steps. She can also answer questions you may have about cost, registration forms, potential challenges, and how this opportunity can help your school community.

## AEL Highlights 5- Star Recognition

### Rebecca Donovan, Arundel Middle School

Ms. Donovan is a tremendous assistant principal. Her level of dedication, commitment, follow-through, and care for students is second to none. She has been and continues to be an integral part of the Arundel Middle administrative team. Additionally, she has created a positive and lasting impact on Arundel Middle. I (and we) am lucky to have her! *(Scott Edwards)*

### Shakiyla Shockley, Hilltop Elementary School

As an Assistant Principal, Shakiyla Shockley already utilizes highly effective practices when managing student behaviors that significantly improve student outcomes. Through positive relationships and communication, she helps students understand the impact of their behavior above and beyond the schoolhouse. Ms. Shockley is fair and consistent in her practice. *(Farah Springer)*

### Heather Garris, Tracey's Elementary School

Heather's dedication to her students and families is truly inspiring! Whether she's personally ensuring students get to school, making sure they have the resources they need, or creating exciting ways to celebrate their successes, she goes above and beyond every day. Her passion, commitment, and tireless efforts make a lasting impact on her school community and all South County! *(Christie Acri)*

### Kim Vermeris, Edgewater Elementary School

Kim's leadership shines through in everything she does! She brings creativity and enthusiasm to school initiatives, finds innovative ways to celebrate student achievements, and provides unwavering support to her teachers. Beyond that, she's an incredible colleague, always ready to listen, offer advice, and share resources to help those around her succeed. Her generosity and dedication are truly appreciated! *(Christie Acri)*

To nominate a Unit II member, please complete the google form: [AEL 5 Star Highlights](#)

Let's keep the celebrations going!



# Upcoming Events

## 2025-26 General Membership Meetings/ Social Dates 📅

**December 18, 2025**, 4-7pm, Blue Dolphin  
(Crofton, MD)

**June 18, 2026**, 4-7pm, Blue Dolphin (Crofton, MD)

## AEL Information and Q&A Evenings 📅

**October 16, 2025**, 6-7pm, virtual

**January 15, 2026**, 6-7pm, virtual

**April 16, 2025**, 6-7pm, virtual

\*More information will be forthcoming but mark  
your calendars.

## Open Forum with Rick Kovelant- Executive Director/Attorney

**November 19, 2025**, 7-8pm, virtual

**February 25, 2026**, 7-8pm, virtual

\*More information will be forthcoming but mark  
your calendars.

## 2025-26 AEL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE/BOARD/STAFF

|                           |                   |                         |                 |  |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Tracey Ahern (2022-26)    | President         | P, Richard Henry Lee ES | (o)410-553-2200 | <a href="mailto:tahern@aacps.org">tahern@aacps.org</a>       |
| Stacey Smith (2022-26)    | 1st VP            | P, South River          | (o)410-956-5600 | <a href="mailto:smsmith1@aacps.org">smsmith1@aacps.org</a>   |
| Jessica Alvear (2025-27)  | 2nd VP            | P, Ridgeway ES          | (o)410-222-6524 | <a href="mailto:jialvear@aacps.org">jialvear@aacps.org</a>   |
| Ted Nilsson (2025-27)     | Secretary         | AP, Southern MS         | (o)410-867-0050 | <a href="mailto:tnilsson@aacps.org">tnilsson@aacps.org</a>   |
| Lindsay Abruzzo (2025-27) | Treasurer         | P, Magothy River MS     | (o)410-544-0926 | <a href="mailto:labruzzo@aacps.org">labruzzo@aacps.org</a>   |
| Shira Dowling             | Director at Large | P, Rippling Woods ES    | (o)410-760-7900 | <a href="mailto:sdowling@aacps.org">sdowling@aacps.org</a>   |
| Kristy Snyder             | Director at Large | P, Piney Orchard ES     | (o)410-672-7591 | <a href="mailto:klsnyder1@aacps.org">klsnyder1@aacps.org</a> |

### Network Representatives

|                 |                |                          |  |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------------------|--|
| April Umile     | Network 1      | Jacobsville ES           | <a href="mailto:aumile@aacps.org">aumile@aacps.org</a>         |
| Erica Garren    | Network 2      | BrockBridge              | <a href="mailto:egarren@aacps.org">egarren@aacps.org</a>       |
| Brittany Owens  | Network 3      | Central MS               | <a href="mailto:bmowens@aacps.org">bmowens@aacps.org</a>       |
| Heather Stalker | Network 3      | Rolling Knolls ES        | <a href="mailto:hstalker@aacps.org">hstalker@aacps.org</a>     |
| Kellie Anderson | Central Office |                          | <a href="mailto:kjanderson@aacps.org">kjanderson@aacps.org</a> |
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| Ruth Goldstraw  | Central Office | Curriculum & Instruction | <a href="mailto:rgoldstraw@aacps.org">rgoldstraw@aacps.org</a> |
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| Stacie Henson   | Specialty Site | Glendale ES EDR          | <a href="mailto:shenson@aacps.org">shenson@aacps.org</a>       |
| April Murphy    | Specialty Site | Monarch Global Academy   | <a href="mailto:almurphy@aacps.org">almurphy@aacps.org</a>     |

### STAFF

|  |                  |  |
|--|------------------|--|
| Rick Kovelant, Executive Director and Legal Counsel) | (c) 443-848-8022 | <a href="mailto:rick@kovelantlaw.com">rick@kovelantlaw.com</a>   |
| Will Myers, AEL Liaison                              | (c)410-570-9031  | <a href="mailto:wtm1588@gmail.com">wtm1588@gmail.com</a>         |
| Edie Picken, President Emeritus                      | (c) 410-371-9527 | <a href="mailto:rag_qb@hotmail.com">rag_qb@hotmail.com</a>       |
| Denise Hofstedt, Publicity & Website                 | (c) 443-223-0273 | <a href="mailto:dm.hofstedt@gmail.com">dm.hofstedt@gmail.com</a> |

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