



KAYITZ 5774  
SUMMER 2014

### this issue

- ★ TEACHER PROFILE: NEIL LANDERS 4
- ★ A CONVERSATION WITH... JEREMY COHAN 5
- ★ PRESCHOOL ENTREPRENEURS 6
- ★ ECONOMICS 101 7
- ★ BUTTERFLIES IN FLIGHT 8



Experiments  
in Education

## 10 YEARS AND STILL RUNNING

On Sunday, May 18, Akiba celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the Akiba-Shuffle, a 5K run/walk/bike ride for Akiba families and alumni. Over 200 people turned out for the event.



## LAG B'OMER

Lag B'Omer: a fun-filled day of multi-age, outdoor, color war activities.



## ISRAEL TRIP

**LEFT:** Since 2011, the 8th graders have culminated their studies with a graduation trip to Israel, for which they fundraise for two years.

**COVER:** A 5th grader examines the way light moves through water on the first day of a light waves unit in Science.



on my mind

# Strong Foundations

Thriving schools have two things in common: enthusiastic students and dedicated teachers. At Akiba, we want our students to be active agents of their learning; thoughtful, moral decision makers, and good citizens in our community and beyond. To do that, our teachers must live those traits as well.

This year, it was my privilege to help nurture in our teachers a culture of learning, reflecting, collaborating and challenging one another. What I witnessed in turn was a renewal of spirit and a culture of risk-taking.

Here's an example. For eight months, I had the honor of facilitating a group of eight teachers who met regularly as a Professional Learning Community (PLC). In weekly sessions, we studied the thematic approach and how best it could be applied within a Judaic Studies context. The group spanned teachers from grades 1-8 and General and Judaic studies. As the year wore on, we designed a two-week thematic unit for the 7th grade Judaic studies classes while the 8th graders were in Israel (read more on page 6). In her evaluation of the PLC, one teacher wrote, "It was a treasured and rare experience to collaborate with colleagues in a safe and respectful environment."

Michael Brandwein, an internationally renowned educator and author, led several workshops for teachers and one for parents. He reminded us to be good listeners and gave us tools create the warm and supportive climate we want. We articulated what he calls "level two life skills": perseverance, initiative, respect, responsibility, and honesty. Armed with a common vocabulary, teachers could be heard throughout the school implementing and discussing Brandwein's approach.

I am excited to announce that Akiba-Schechter has been selected to be a partner school with Facing History and Ourselves (FH), an organization committed, in short, to helping students be "upstanders"—not bystanders



(see sidebar). Seven of our teachers participated in FH workshops this year and they came back immersed in conversations about how best to cultivate responsible citizenship and strong Jewish identities. One teacher reflected, "These conversations enable me to view teaching as, above all, a human sport. This, in turn, empowers me to think more deeply about how to make teaching more human, which translates into richer and more sophisticated pedagogy and the blossoming of students."

These are a few examples of what we, as a community, have experimented with this year. Together, we look forward to building on this foundation--for ourselves, and most importantly, for our students.

**Miriam Kass**  
Teacher Development Coordinator

## WHAT IS FACING HISTORY?

"People make choices. Choices make history." This is the core philosophy behind Facing History (FH), an organization that works with schools to "shape a humane, well-educated citizenry that practices civility and preserves human rights." Through discussion, identity exploration, primary

sources, and group exercises, students use case studies to see that history is the collective result of individuals' actions. This allows them to make personal connections between history and the moral

choices they face in their own daily lives.

"Facing History pushes students to interrogate their identity and their role in society," says Neil Landers, who recently co-taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* using FH resources. With a presence in 150 countries, FH reaches over 3 million students yearly.

**ABOVE:** The Facing History approach begins every case study with a sustained reflection about personal identity. This whiteboard conversation took place in a 7th/8th grade English class.

## teacher profile



## NEIL LANDERS

### SCIENCE & LANGUAGE ARTS

**Q>** You just finished your PhD in French Literature and now you're teaching middle school. How do the skills transfer?

**A<** There's a certain mindset of analyzing complexity and distilling it down to something simple. For instance, how do waves of light interact with our eyeballs? It's taking that complex reality and figuring out its basic structure. In my research, I dealt with the Algerian Civil War. It was exceptionally contentious, and I had to analyze it carefully before I could present it to an audience that wasn't familiar with it.

**Q>** Biggest difference between middle school and academia?

**A<** Teaching kids means letting your guard down. No one cares if you're wearing a tie or not. Kids are so much more eager to learn than in academia, where people are focused on institutional consequences. There, you're motivated to be a professor, but not excited deep down to the bone. With kids, there's a certain jubilation.

It's also worth noting that Akiba is different from just any middle school. Here, it's much more unbounded. As a PhD, you're a world-class

specialist in something, but no one cares what you think about anything else. You don't have the institutional privilege of a voice. So for me, this is a huge breath of fresh air. I've always had a strong interest in science that I developed privately. To get to practice that? It's fascinating, liberating, and frankly, fun.

**Q>** Could you summarize your approach to teaching?

**A<** Yes! Make the material live and breathe for students. Produce self-motivated, autonomous and self-confident learners. Stimulate kids' interest and give them means to develop as strongly as they can. I don't want to lead them by a leash to answers. I'm a resource, not a provider. Of course, I have to create this mold, but the goal is to make myself irrelevant.



**Q>** What do you like most about teaching here?

**A<** 1. Working with kids. 2. The freedom to teach my own way, rather than swallow a mold. 3. Working with eager, collaborationist colleagues. Seriously, in academia people are frantically focused on the next thing they're going to publish. They don't have time to be good pedagogues. Here I can sink my teeth into my own values.

**Q>** Most excited about next year?

**A<** Getting to teach more literature! That, and science, will be incredible.



**TOP:** Examining bacteria on a field trip with students. **LEFT:** To culminate their evolution unit, Mr. Landers' 5th/6th grade class created "cosmic calendars." By breaking time into months, minutes, and seconds, students grasped how old the universe is. Learn more and browse photos and footage at the class website: [www.akibascienceref.wordpress.com](http://www.akibascienceref.wordpress.com).

## alumni profile

## AN EDUCATION IN EDUCATION

One-on-one with Jeremy Cohan, Class of 1998

Jeremy Cohan has been involved with education his entire life—on one side of the desk or the other. Currently, he's working on his dissertation at New York University, where his focus is education reform and the role teachers' unions play in it. In fact, Jeremy just recently returned to Chicago, where he'll use the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) as a case study. The CTU has been both more radical and more successful in achieving their aims than teacher unions elsewhere.

But Jeremy's passion for education has been in the making a long time. After completing his Bachelors Degree



at the University in Chicago, Jeremy—both of whose parents are retired teachers—joined Teach for America (TFA), an organization aimed at improving education by pumping idealistic college graduates into the system.

Through TFA, Jeremy was

assigned to MS 325, a middle school in the Bronx. There he taught special education his first year and English and drama the second. But, it had the opposite effect TFA had hoped for. "I moved away from teaching because I found myself overwhelmed and saddened at what education in South Bronx looked like," says Jeremy. "And I went to grad school to try to process it."

Which doesn't mean he's left teaching—only that now he teaches adults. Specifically, Jeremy is one of the founding members of a Masters program in critical theory and the arts at the School for Visual Arts in New York. As a graduate student, he has also served as a teacher's assistant for numerous classes—including Nazism and the Third Reich and the sociology of medicine.

What's the difference between middle schoolers and college students? "I like the high level of material and self-discipline in universities," says Jeremy. "But there's a loss of spontaneity, a loss of feeling. There's a special reward that you get from seeing a person develop that you can't really find in academia." Which is perhaps why he hasn't ruled

out returning to teaching children in the future.

So what role did Akiba play in his trajectory? "It was a formative experience for me," says Jeremy. "There wasn't this gulf between those on the top and those on the bottom. It was based on collaboration and respect." Bottom line: "It allowed me to believe that something better is possible."

**LEFT:** In his spare time, Jeremy (class of '98) sings in a choral group called Cantori New York. Through Cantori, he has performed both locally and abroad. Here (2nd row, middle), he performs at Lincoln Center in New York.



For Yom Ha'atzmaut, the Purple Room turned their classroom into a Kibbutz. Some features: a cow to milk (**LEFT**) and a "fruit tree" the students made (**RIGHT**)—which, of course, they get to "harvest."

# Preschool Entrepreneurs

To culminate their year-long study of animals and insects, the Afternoon Explorers held a boutique and sold items they had personally created or decorated. The children raised \$317.69, which they voted to donate to ARKive, an international organization dedicated to protecting endangered animals.

This is not the first time the Afternoon Explorers have held a boutique. Every year, the children decide what they'll study. This

exciting for the children to create these items. They knew they'd be going to an organization that was helping wildlife around the world--the same wildlife they knew so much about and had grown to care about."

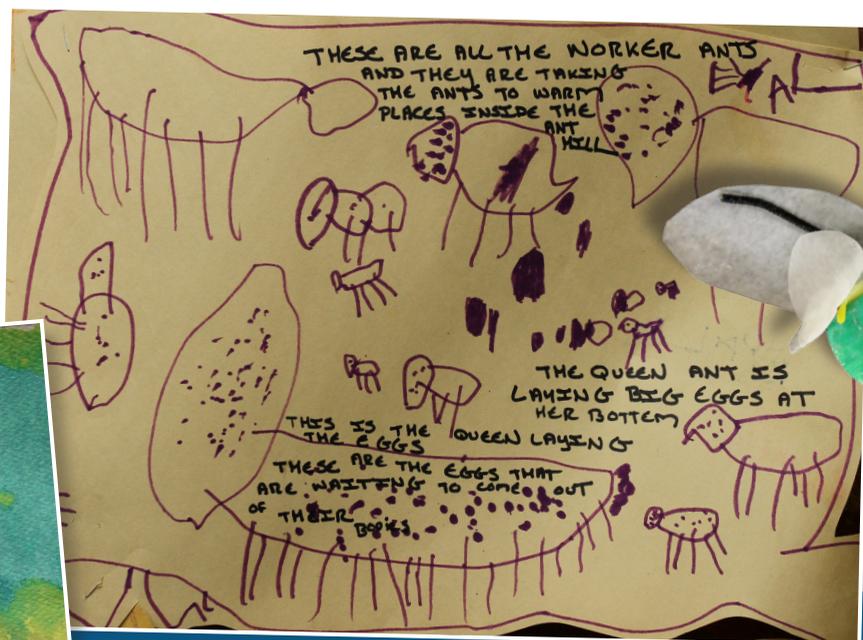
**BELOW:** Snapshots of the Afternoon Explorers' boutique, which raised \$317.69 for a wildlife-protection organization.



ranges from cultures to habitats to various animal species. This year, the children opted for bugs--which led to insects, spiders, and finally, snakes. ARKive seemed a natural fit for the children's efforts.

"The best part was having Liana Vitali [an outreach officer from the organization's D.C. office] come to see us," says Emily Schoenberg, who co-teaches the class. "When I wrote to ARKive, I never expected them to say we'd love to visit with you and your students. It was so

**BELOW:** In their study of insects, the Afternoon Explorers got to know cicadas, ants, spiders, and snakes. Shown here are the children's various depictions. Read more on insects on page 8.



**OPPOSITE:** The 1st/2nd grade bee study included collecting honey from a local hive, turning their room into a hive and giving tours, and simulating the intricate power plays of bees. **LEFT:** the bees pause for a photo on the rug. **RIGHT:** Anna displays her queenly lashes.



# Happy Hour

If you stepped into the lunchroom during the last week of May, here's what you might have seen: 7th graders strolling with notepads, interviewing students and teachers with questions like, "What is happiness?" "When are you most happy?" and "What are the barriers to your happiness?" Not exactly easy questions, but what else would you expect from a unit whose curriculum design was eight months in the making?

The Happiness Unit was the product of Akiba-Schechter's first ever PLC, or Professional Learning Community. Starting in the fall, eight teachers met weekly to explore "integrated learning": immersing oneself in one essential theme by exploring a plethora of sources. After asking the 7th graders what they wanted to



study while their 8th grade classmates were in Israel, the PLC settled on the age-old question of happiness--what it means and how to achieve it.

At the core of the unit was personal reflection. So, students were asked to choose which teacher they wanted to correspond with privately through a daily journal. Many identified

this as their favorite part of the project. Other threads of the unit: small group study of both Judaic and secular texts, student surveys of the public, guests speakers, and the sharing of a personal "happiness object"--a physical item that somehow symbolizes the source of one's happiness. In an anonymous end-of-unit evaluation, one student wrote, "I feel like this unit really gave me the tools to think deeply about my own happiness--which is what I then chose to do."



# Econ 101

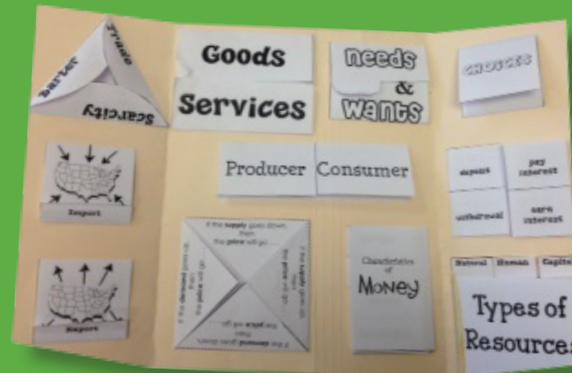
What's the difference between socialism and capitalism? Here's an idea: ask a 3rd/4th grader. For the students in Mrs. Esse

and Mrs. Leonard's classes, this

spring saw a whirlwind Economics unit that included the history of money, different economic systems, balancing a budget, and supply and demand. "At its core," says Mrs. Esse, "this was about making kids aware of money—its role in history and everyday life. My thought was simply, these kids don't know how lucky they are."

The unit included a series of simulations. For instance, students received 16 bags of different "goods"—like celery sticks, crackers or M&M's—and bartered their way to economic stability. When learning about the Industrial Revolution, they created cars to sell. Most of them were part of the "assembly line" system—that is, one student was responsible for producing windshields, another for coloring in doors, and all cars were identical—and a minority of the class was the "cottage industry." This meant each student created a car from beginning to end, and that the cars were unique and expensive. When adult visitors entered the room, they were given a profession, education level, and salary, and then asked to purchase a car.

The students dappled in op-ed writing when they produced papers on budgeting and taxes, child labor and government regulation, and communism vs. socialism vs. capitalism. Throughout the unit, students earned a salary for the "work" they produced—i.e., test scores or good behavior—and when they received their weekly paychecks, they had to calculate deductions for taxes and interest earned. Their favorite part? "Spending" their money at an end-of-year auction!



**ABOVE LEFT:** 7th graders write in their journals during the PLC-driven unit on happiness. **ABOVE RIGHT:** one way students organized their budgets.



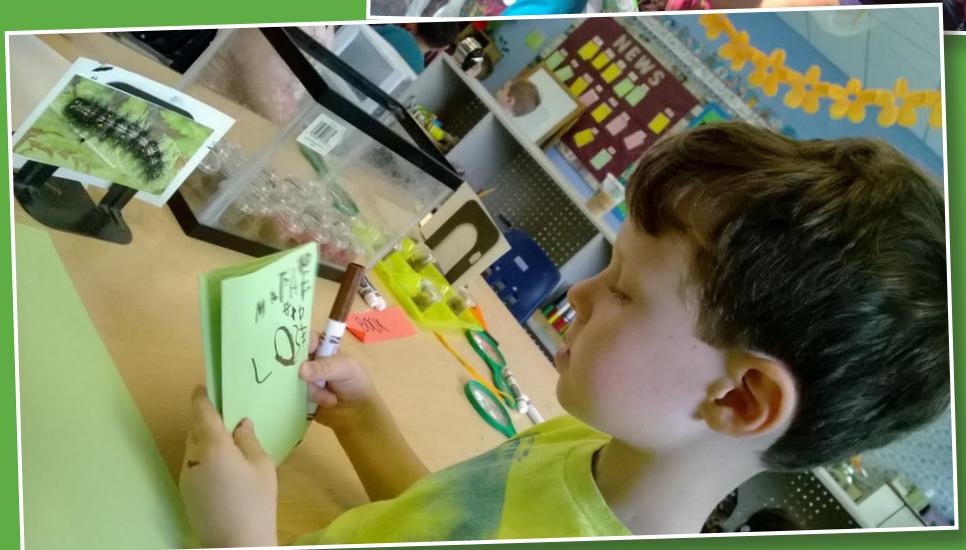


**LEFT:** 5th/6th grade students in Mr. Esse's class better appreciated the engineering feats of the Egyptians when they made their own pyramids--to scale! The students, who were given only sugar cubes to work with, learned geometry, problem solving, and even had to write proposals for more resources.

# Out of the Cocoon



Butterflies abounded throughout the Preschool this past spring. Classes adopted caterpillars, observed and recorded data about their growth over time, and then finally released the butterflies at various celebrations. "It's not only learning about metamorphosis," says Blue Room teacher Arun Srimani. "We connect the natural change that happens in nature to the change that happens in our children. They are the hungry caterpillars in their hunger for knowledge, and their experiences lead them to different stages. At the end of the year, they turn into beautiful butterflies and fly to the next stage of their



lives." **FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:** the Green, Blue and Lime Rooms at various stages of the unit.