

The View From Down Here

By Ben Teague [photo]

Herewith begins a regular column by Ben Teague, a former ATA President, who resides "down there" in Athens, Georgia.

ANY KID CAN GROW UP TO BE ATA PRESIDENT, -AND WHY IT DOESN'T WORK LIKE THAT

When ATA finds good leaders, it's through luck, not planning. If you don't believe that, ask any Board member what names are likely to appear on the ballot next year. Says who? I'll begin these opinion pieces, on the association and where it may end up, with a paragraph about myself. I was one of ATA's youngest officers (secretary, president-elect, president) and maybe one of the longest-serving (eight mortal years). At one time or another I've headed about half the committees. My native idiom is Polemic. I don't want to provoke discussion; I prefer to finish it. If you have served on our nominating committee, you don't believe there are enough leaders. But ATA has members with ideas, vigor, even management skills. What's more, we have a good number of positions for them to occupy. Every chapter, division, committee, and conference session needs at least an Alpha and a Beta. That must come to a good hundred spots.

Why do we have such trouble finding people to run for national office? Two reasons: penalties and preparation. As I got ready to take office as ATA president, my predecessor Tom Bauman shocked me by saying the office had cost him thousands of dollars: His freelance business had suffered, and it would take time to rebuild it. A loss like that makes a powerful argument against running for office. Tom's figure applied to the

dual position of president-elect and president. The first has to plan conferences and help choose future sites. The job involves huge amounts of time on the phone, letters by the quire, worry enough to turn a person's beard gray. The president plans no conferences but must recruit and evaluate people, negotiate everything from leases to agenda items, answer crank letters, and be ready to do whatever someone else fails to do. Most of our presidents have been inhouse translators, teachers or bureau heads, and small wonder! The job (and to a lesser extent all our other leadership jobs) costs somebody a lot, and the cushion of steady employment is essential to the victim's peace of mind. Does this mean that ATA will never again have a full-time freelancer as president? That's exactly what it means.

Unless . . . Our bylaws now provide that no officer gets paid to serve. It's time we considered which principle we hold dearer: Any kid can grow up to be president of ATA, or all our officers should be volunteers. Once, officers and directors not only served gratis but paid their own way to meetings. We changed that rule for better representation of ATA's diverse members; now the association pays certain travel and lodging costs. The Board made that change, but can't make the one I suggest: The members must decide whether to amend the bylaws (and how to pay any income replacement awarded to officers). Financial loss is the biggest disincentive to taking an ATA job. What's more, we don't prepare members for such work. If someone has performed well and wants to seek a higherlevel job, the people who vote (or the person who appoints) should keep that experience in mind and reward those good services. Years ago, ATA didn't honor this principle. Only two things were guaranteed to help you get elected: You were the incumbent, or your name came early in the alphabet. A bylaws change has given challengers a better chance, and ballots now list candidates in shuffled order. And today's voters often do recognize length and quality of ATA work. Recent Boards have included contributors like Marilyn Gaddis Rose

and Leslie Willson, and this year's election put three workers in as directors. (Don't conclude that I think less of the people I don't name; this is supposed to be a one-page essay.) So what's my problem? It's the haphazard way we involve members in our projects and bring them up through the leadership ranks. People get into top positions in local chapters, and ATA takes no notice. Others do good work in committees but still find themselves passed over when chairs become vacant. Nominations occasionally go to "famous" members instead of those who've actually done something. The result is that folks who could help aren't asked to, ATA loses the benefit of their talents, and they miss out on the pleasures of national office.

Here are eight practices ATA leaders should adopt to reduce the element of chance:

- Keep track of who's in charge and how well they are doing. Don't let a good worker slip through the cracks.
- Do at least an informal search every time you make an appointment. Run lists of ATA activists through your mind.
- Hire the busiest people you can find. It's no accident.
- Promote. If a division administrator is able and energetic, find her an ATA job.
- Stroke. Remember that good performance, anywhere in ATA, makes you look good too.
- Tell the nominating committee what you know about the contributors.
- Work fast. It's rare that ATA gets four years of useful service from a member.
- Think positive. You won't sell many people on running for president if they think it will cost them thousands of dollars

Next: How our conferences may hurt us.