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August 2024

neaToday



STRETCHED FOR TIME?

YOUR UNION CAN HELP

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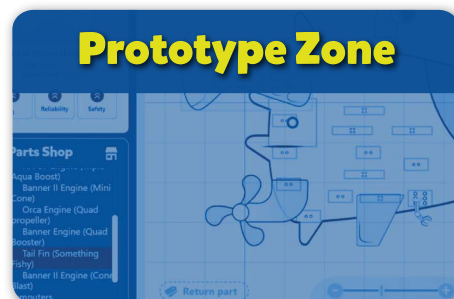
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We, the members of the National Education Association of the United States, are the voice of education professionals. Our work is fundamental to the nation, and we accept the profound trust placed in us.

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OUR MISSION
To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

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These principles guide our work and define our mission:

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.
We believe public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character.

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We believe public education is vital to building respect for the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our diverse society.

DEMOCRACY.
We believe public education is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

PROFESSIONALISM.
We believe that the expertise and judgment of education professionals are critical to student success. We maintain the highest professional standards, and we expect the status, compensation, and respect due to all professionals.

PARTNERSHIP.
We believe partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to quality public education and student success.

COLLECTIVE ACTION.
We believe individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As education professionals, we improve both our professional status and the quality of public education when we unite and advocate collectively.

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Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!

Meet these inspiring educators and many others in this magazine.



RUCKER GRIMLEY THOMAS

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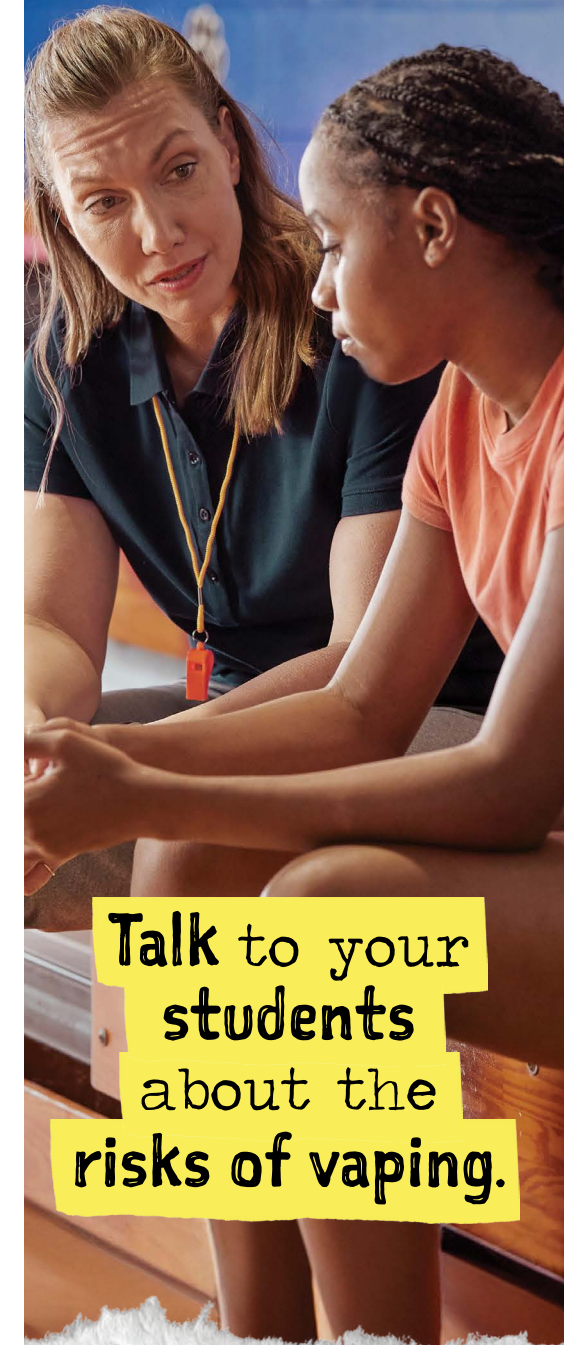
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Joy, Justice, and Excellence

Dear NEA members,
I am honored to serve as
your president.

United, we will reclaim public education as a common good and transform it into a racially and socially just system that actually prepares every student—not one, not some, but every single student—to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. *Onward!*

Becky Pringle

Becky Pringle
NEA President



“

“NEA, in all of my years on this earth, this is what I know: The human spirit has always remained undefeated. Call on its power and determination. And keep going. Because, in the midst of every challenge ... during every moment of change or perceived chaos ... we will remember who we are. *We must keep going!*”

—Becky, at the NEA 2024 Representative Assembly

Face to Face With NEA Members

Something I love to do: Surprise educators in their workplaces with an unexpected—but oh-so deserved—expression of appreciation. This spring, during Teacher Appreciation Week, I traveled with the National PTA president to Montgomery Blair High School, in Silver Spring, Md. We had a big surprise for teachers Michelle Elie, Jeremy Stelzner, and Maria Eugenia Tanos! This amazing trio advises the Blair student news publication, including a Spanish-language section. Balloons and flowers in hand, we delivered a check for \$5,000, funded by Lysol, which the teachers plan to use for printing and photography costs. I also met with their students, who said how grateful they are for these teachers, who help them think and grow, and urge them to be the very best they can be. I, too, am grateful—as they remind us all of our passion for education and our power as educators.



(Top) The three educators holding the check are (left to right) Michelle Elie, Maria Eugenia Tanos, and Jeremy Stelzner. (Wondering about the figure on the far left? It's a “blazer,” as in “one who blazes,” and it's the school mascot.) (Bottom) “Señora Tanos,” joined by her students, accepts a blooming token of our appreciation.

PHOTO, LEFT: NEA; ABOVE: JATI LINDSAY

JOIN ME 3 Things To Do For Yourself, Your Students, and Your Union

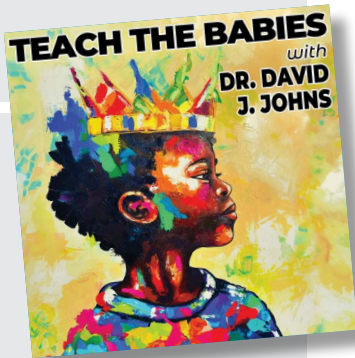
- 1. Support your new colleagues!**
It's been a minute since I was a baby teacher in Philadelphia, but I still remember the educators who helped me find my footing. Attend your union's new-hire orientation events this month and find ways to be supportive. Be the colleague whose door is always open!
- 2. Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month!**
Despite some politicians' efforts to erase or whitewash our history, educators will persist in teaching students—and each other—about the vibrant heritage and contributions of Hispanic and Latino people. Visit nea.org/HispanicHeritage.
- 3. Get involved in the 2024 election.**
So much is at stake in November's election—our ability to teach the truth, to support our LGBTQ+ students and colleagues, and even to maintain our democracy and the right to vote. President Biden is the most pro-public education president in modern history. Turn to Page 31 to see how the candidates compare on public education. And learn how you can help, even if you have just a few minutes to spare, at educationvotes.nea.org.

Find out how NEA is working every day for educators, students, and public schools in “NEA in Action” (Page 10).

In the News

“It should be Teacher Appreciation Week every week of the year. Our teachers, our education support professionals, nurses, counselors—every educator!—should see that support every day of the year. And it's not just elected leaders talking about the important role educators play, they should be demonstrating that support by investing in public schools and making sure educators don't have to have two or three jobs to take care of their own children.”

—Becky, FOX 7, on May 7, 2024



What I'm Listening To

On the 70th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision this past spring, the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC) launched a podcast called “Teach the Babies,” focusing on whether the promise of *Brown* has been fulfilled. Not only have I put it into regular rotation for listening, I appeared on the podcast earlier this summer to talk with NBJC Executive Director David J. Johns about how our union is working to defend democracy and support every single student in our classrooms. Seventy years after *Brown*, we see some politicians banning books and restricting educators from teaching the truth about race and racism. We see these politicians striving to take money out of public schools—which educate 90 percent of the nation's students—and put the funding into private schools instead. So my answer is no: The promise has not yet been fulfilled. But we will not rest until it is.

X
Stay connected
with me through X
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NEA Helps New Mexico Educators Win Big!

NEA-New Mexico (NEA-NM) succeeded in advocating for a new state law giving public school students and educators critical resources! With vital support from an NEA Legislative Crisis Grant, NEA-NM achieved these victories:

- Free breakfast and lunch for all K–12 students. New Mexico is now the fifth state to pass a law requiring universal free meals in schools.
- \$14 million for early literacy and reading supports.
- \$13.3 million for extended learning programs for tribal and rural communities.

Learn how your state affiliate can apply for an NEA Legislative Crisis Grant at nea.org/LegislativeCrisisGrants.

NEA Supports Collaboration for Student Success!

Thanks to a long-term investment from NEA, the New Jersey Education Association brings educators, administrators, school board members, parents, and students together to solve problems with equal voices.



Called the New Jersey Public School Labor-Management Collaborative, the initiative's key outcomes include:

- Increased student achievement.
- Improved educator retention, especially in high-poverty schools.
- Empowered educators.
- A transformed role for local unions, which thrive in a culture of collaboration.

Learn more about labor-management partnerships at nea.org/CollaborativePractices.

NEA Locals Win in Rhode Island School Bond Vote

Two NEA Rhode Island locals, NEA South Kingstown and the South Kingstown Education Support Professionals, helped organize a historic voter turnout to pass a \$150 million school bond for a new high school.

Partnering with parents, municipal workers, and community allies, they knocked on doors, distributed yard signs, organized a rally and car parade, and more, to mobilize thousands of voters.

The new high school will feature the latest technology, science labs, and career and technical education studios.



Join NEA in Protecting Public Schools

Are you ready to do something to ensure all students attend a welcoming, equitable, and fully funded school?

Then join Public School Strong—a national campaign that trains and organizes educators, parents, students, and school board members to influence policymakers and ensure all students have the



schools they deserve. Launched by Heal Together, an NEA partner, the campaign will train you in:

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- **What to look for** at your district's school board meetings.
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ARE YOUR STUDENTS READING ENOUGH NONFICTION?

Every year, new fiction books hit the market with a rainbow of diverse and engaging characters for young readers. But there are just as many terrific new titles in nonfiction.

One isn't better than the other, and educators should offer and teach both, says the National Council of Teachers of English.

To learn more about nonfiction trends and how to help students connect with these books, *NEA Today* spoke with Melissa Stewart, who has authored more than 200 nonfiction children's books.

Is nonfiction making a resurgence, or has it always been popular with teachers and students?

Melissa Stewart: Nonfiction has always been popular. But teachers often don't realize that many students prefer nonfiction. We need to do a better job of making teachers aware of the wide variety of titles.

What is different about nonfiction now?

MS: We are really in a golden age of nonfiction. Twenty years ago, there was only one kind of children's nonfiction, with traditional, survey-style writing. Now we have five distinct forms that also include browsable nonfiction, expository literature,



narrative nonfiction, and active nonfiction—such as how-to and activity books.

The genre is blossoming with titles that are beautiful and dynamic, with a range of formats and text structures. They feature rich, engaging language that excites and inspires young readers.

There is so much to offer students that can be used for instruction, read-alouds, book talks, book clubs, and author studies.

Why do you think many young readers prefer nonfiction?

MS: Why wouldn't they? If adults enjoy it—60 percent of adult books sold are nonfiction—it follows that children would, too. But kids don't buy their own books, and only 24 percent of children's books sold are nonfiction. We need to get more great nonfiction books into the hands of children.

The goal is to help kids fall in love with reading and books. For some children, nonfiction is the gateway to literacy. I recommend that educators and parents offer children both fiction and nonfiction and watch closely to understand each child's preferences.

How can teachers find quality nonfiction titles to offer?

MS: Ask a librarian! The librarian's job is to help teachers connect a book to a student or lesson. The library is the heart of the school, and the librarian is what makes it beat.

Stewart is developing a nonfiction-focused personal learning community to help educators build students' awareness of and access to nonfiction. Visit melissa-stewart.com.

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

NEA REPORT: TEACHER SALARIES AND SCHOOL FUNDING BY STATE

Every year, NEA releases Rankings and Estimates—a comprehensive report that provides comparative state data and national averages for key K–12 public education benchmarks—including average teacher salaries and per-student expenditures. Check out highlights from this year's report, which covers the 2022 – 2023 school year:



The national average public school teacher salary was \$69,544, an increase of 4.1 percent over the previous year. Average teacher salaries were highest in California (\$95,160), New York (\$92,696), and Massachusetts (\$92,307), and lowest in West Virginia (\$52,870), Florida (\$53,098), and South Dakota (\$53,153).



U.S. public schools employed 3,222,170 teachers. Texas (371,802), California (292,378), and New York (215,761) employed the most teachers, while Alaska (7,030), Wyoming (7,277), and the District of Columbia (8,052) employed the fewest.



In fall 2022, U.S. public schools enrolled 49,033,092 students, an increase of 0.3 percent from fall 2021. The largest increases occurred in Arizona (3.5%), the District of Columbia (2.4%), and Texas (1.7%). The greatest declines were in Hawaii (–1.7%), Illinois (–0.8%), and Rhode Island (–0.8%).



The national average per-student expenditure was \$16,281—up from \$15,808 in 2021 – 2022. The states with the highest per-student expenditures were New York (\$30,867), the District of Columbia (\$26,766), and Vermont (\$26,749). The states with the lowest were Idaho (\$9,599), Utah (\$10,282), and Oklahoma (\$11,089).

See how your state compares at nea.org/rankingsandestimates.

84%

is the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth who wanted mental health care in 2023. Only 50 percent of those who wanted the care were able to access it. Top barriers cited were fear of speaking about mental health concerns with someone else, lack of affordability, and students not wanting to get parent or caregiver permission.

SOURCE: THE TREVOR PROJECT, 2024 U.S. NATIONAL SURVEY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE



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Les Schofield, *Microlit Almanac*, teacher, writer & artist, North Carolina

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WHY TEACHERS SELF-CENSOR

Since January 2021, 18 states have passed laws that restrict how so-called “divisive” subjects, such as racism and LGBTQ+ people, can be addressed in the classroom. These laws impose gag orders on classroom teachers. Even in states where no law has been enacted, some school or district leaders have directed local school systems to adopt restrictive new policies.

But these regulations, and the “culture war” politics that produced them, have far greater reach.

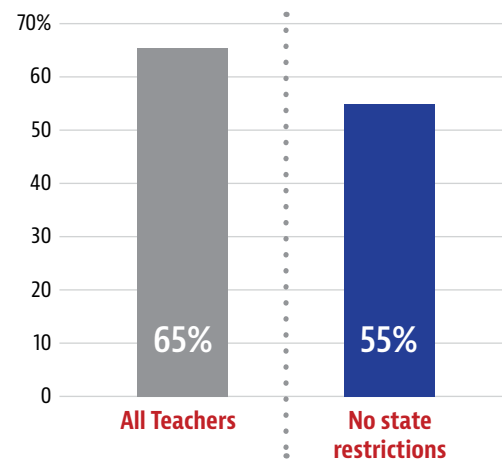
Many educators, fearful over reprisals from community members and a lack of support from school leaders, are deciding to limit instruction in their classroom, or self-censor. According to a RAND Corporation survey released in February, two-thirds of U.S. public school teachers are choosing on their own to limit what they teach.

Furthermore, 55 percent of teachers who do not work under any state or local regulation have chosen to limit instruction. In addition to concerns about upsetting parents, fear of losing their teaching job or license was a top reason for why these teachers decided to take this step.

“We expected that a large number of teachers are taking this step in those states that enacted restrictions,” says Ashley Woo, RAND researcher and lead author of the report. “But when you look at the teachers deciding to do this on their own with no state or local restrictions—and where community support is high—the numbers are surprisingly very high.”



Percentage of teachers who said they decided on their own to limit classroom discussions of political and social issues



16 STATES STILL ALLOW CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

The vast majority of schools in the United States—roughly 90 percent—prohibit corporal punishment, but the practice remains legal in 16 states. Major public health organizations oppose its use.

The World Health Organization classifies corporal punishment as a “violation of children’s rights to respect for physical integrity and human dignity, health, development, education and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Proponents of corporal punishment argue that inflicting some level of physical pain upon a child deters misbehavior and helps instill discipline. However, extensive research demonstrates that the practice has potentially long-lasting negative effects on student’s overall well-being.

Studies show that schools that have used corporal punishment have not been as successful at correcting unwanted behavior as schools that do not use the practice. Students who have been exposed to paddling or other forms of corporal punishment are more likely to exhibit aggression, anxiety, and depression.

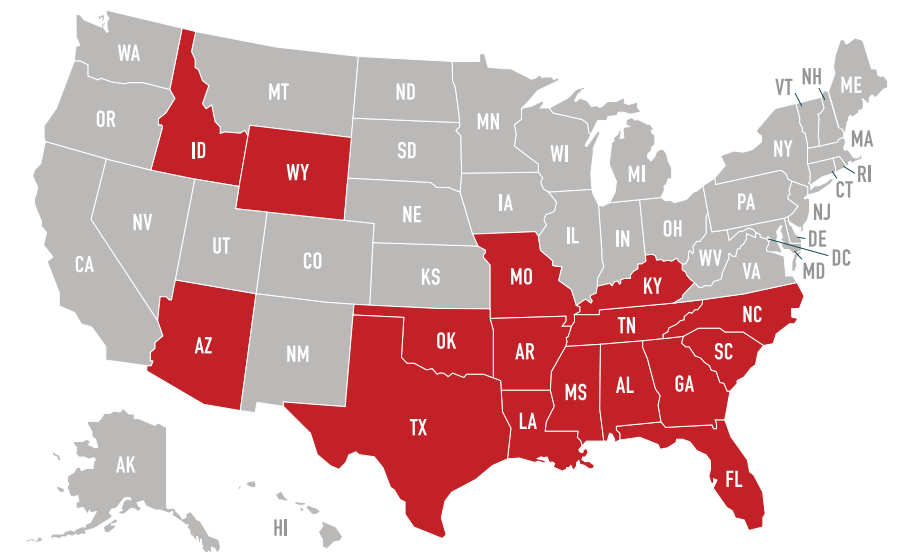
In 2023, the American Academy of Pediatrics called for a ban on corporal punishment in school settings and for it to be replaced with practices that better support student behavior.

That same year, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona penned a letter to administrators and policymakers calling for the ban of corporal punishment in education settings.

“Unfortunately, some schools continue to put the mental and physical well-being of students at risk by implementing the practice of corporal punishment,” said Cardona. “Corporal punishment can lead to serious physical pain and injury. It is also associated with higher rates of mental health issues.”

States That Expressly Allow Corporal Punishment

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

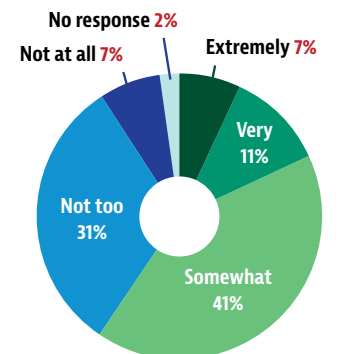


Fear of School Shootings Grows

Twenty-five years after the mass shooting at Colorado’s Columbine High School—and countless more school shootings since—the majority of U.S. teachers (59 percent) are worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. Thirty-one percent of teachers say they are not too worried, and only 7 percent say they are not at all worried.

A majority of teachers are worried about a shooting occurring at their school.

Percent of public K-12 teachers who say they are _____ worried about the possibility of a shooting ever happening at their school.



SOURCE: SURVEY OF U.S. PUBLIC K-12 TEACHERS CONDUCTED OCTOBER 17 – NOVEMBER 14, 2023

HOW TO STOP DISINFORMATION —AND WHY IT MATTERS

By Amanda Litvinov

DISINFORMATION:
Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.

Consider how you would respond in this scenario: You come across a Facebook post that talks about your school, but the facts are all wrong. The post—which has dozens of shares—claims that the school library is stocked with inappropriate titles for your elementary students, which you know to be false.

Should you: a) Comment on the Facebook post to debunk the false narrative; b) comment on the article itself; or c) both?

Often, the best thing to do is none of the above, says Katie O’Connell, a specialist in NEA’s Center for Communications with expertise in countering false information. “When you interact with disinformation online, it gets a boost from the platform’s algorithm,” she explains.

“Of course, educators want to correct false claims about public schools—but we have to be careful about how we do that to make sure we aren’t inadvertently giving the false narratives more credibility,” O’Connell says.

Anti-public education and anti-union forces often circulate disinformation online. The goal? To undermine trust in public schools, educators, and unions. This can harm our schools—and our democracy!

So what can you do to get the truth out there? Read on for step-by-step advice from O’Connell on how to evaluate and counter disinformation. [➔](#)

Help stop the spread of “fake news” about public schools!

DON’T: Boost bad content

When you come across a video, article, or social media post that smears public schools, don’t inadvertently give it a boost by commenting or responding directly.

DO: Assess the threat

First, determine the content’s reach. Is it circulating broadly or stuck in partisan spaces? Next, consider its impact. Could this content change the



situation offline? For example, could it affect voter turnout for a pro-public school candidate? Is it chipping away at local support for public schools? Minor threats can be ignored, but if you see high-profile content that could do damage, move on to the next step.

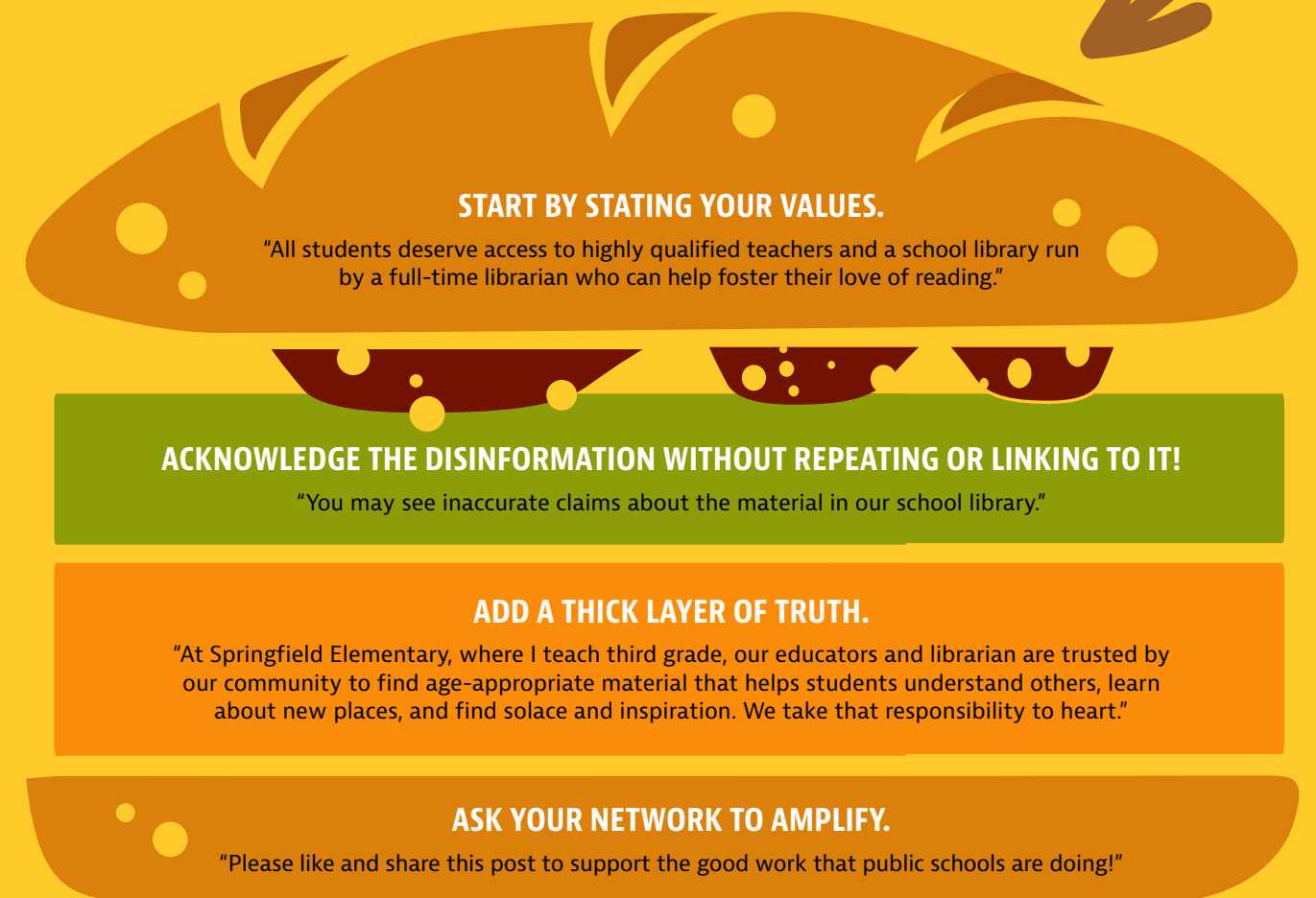
DO: Add your voice—the right way!

Counter disinformation by seeking out content that you do want circulating. Add comments and give your “thumbs up” to articles, videos, and posts that give an accurate picture of what public schools do or that call out the bad actors. Share content that your state affiliate posts. You can also make memes, videos, or graphics in free programs like Canva.

DO: Make a “truth sandwich”

Let’s say you want to counter a social media post that falsely accuses your school of pushing “inappropriate materials for children.” Use the ingredients below to deliver a heaping helping of accurate information.

HOW TO MAKE A TRUTH SANDWICH



LOCAL UNION CHALLENGES DISTRICT OVER TEMP HIRES— AND WINS!

By Cindy Long



Just before the 2023 – 2024 school year started, Illinois paraeducator Stephanie Lieurance received a curious text message.

“Hi Stephanie. This is Roland from Sunbelt. Are you in the market for a school paraprofessional position? I have an opening in your area. Please let me know if you’d like more details.”

Turns out Sunbelt is a staffing agency and, yes, she wanted more details.

Lieurance is already a paraprofessional. She is also president of the Crystal Lake Association of Support Staff (CLASS), representing school employees in a district about an hour northwest of Chicago. She also heard from several colleagues who had received the same message. Where did these mystery texts come from?

Right away Lieurance contacted her Uniserv director and the Illinois Education Association. The state association discovered that Sunbelt had been retained by the district to fill vacant paraprofessional positions.

The district did this without notifying the union, let alone working with them to find other solutions to staffing shortages. “This really speaks to the severity of the educator shortage,”

Lieurance says. “This crisis has been looming for years, and ... the district waited until the last minute to bring in temporary help who aren’t committed to our students and our community.”

Unfair labor practices

Crystal Lake Community Unit School District 47 was paying the employment agency \$65 an hour, while the temps were earning \$30 to \$35 an hour.

Lieurance, who has dedicated 20 years to the district as a learning resource paraprofessional, still makes less than \$20 an hour, as do many of her veteran colleagues. The starting hourly salaries for permanent, full-time paraeducators is a meager \$16.14.

The district leaders’ decision to hire temps for more than double the hourly wage of some staff was an outrageous affront to these hardworking employees.

What’s more, hiring a firm to recruit temporary employees without bargaining first is a direct violation of the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act (IELRA) and the Illinois School Code. In October 2023, CLASS filed an unfair labor practice charge with the IELRA.

“We have tried to work with the district multiple times on shortages and

(From left) Members of Illinois’ Crystal Lake Association of Support Staff (CLASS), which filed an unfair labor practice charge against their district; CLASS President Stephanie Lieurance updates members on the union’s complaint.

recruitment issues. However, District 47 continues to pay our paraprofessionals less than many of our neighboring districts,” Lieurance said at the time.

“We are constantly reminded by District 47 administrators that due to budgetary constraints, wage increases for new hires and current employees cannot be sustained,” she added. “They



are now seeing the consequences of their own decisions.”

Instead of working with the union to offer attractive positions to fill shortages, the district took a shortcut that is now creating more shortages, as current staff leave out of frustration.

“We’ve had nine people quit,” Lieurance says.

Lack of respect

The new employees hired by the staffing agency started in fall 2023. They worked with general education students as well as students with special needs. Current staff members were tasked with training the temps to teach, change diapers, and manage behaviors.

“Our paraeducators are working two or three jobs to make ends meet, but are devoted to their work with students,” Lieurance says. “Having to train the new

staff, who they knew were making so much more than they were, really took a toll on morale.”

CLASS members were shocked that administrators chose to hire expensive temps instead of investing in the people who put years into the district and love their jobs.

According to the union members, if the district increased wages and offered health insurance to attract new employees, they would need to apply the same benefits to current staff. So it was easier for them to contract out the positions.

“This is why people are leaving,” Lieurance says. “[District leaders] don’t see us as a priority.”

Big wins!

In May, the union and district finally reached an agreement, awarding CLASS members with life-changing wins, including: A \$2,000 payment at the end of the school year; an immediate raise of \$1 more an hour; a 5 percent raise starting in July; and an extra paid professional development day, so they can train alongside the teachers they work with.

Lieurance admits she was hesitant at first about standing up. It was scary, and she feared retaliation.

“It was very daunting, but I’ve heard from other districts that are going through this,” she says. “I want the story of our small local to be told to bring awareness to what can happen. Our jobs are not hobbies. Our contracts are not suggestions. Our contracts are there to protect us.”

Who pays the price for outsourcing school staff?

Filling school support positions has been a problem for decades and has now spiraled into a crisis. Instead of funding these roles, districts have kicked the can down the road for so many years that today they must resort to last-minute outsourcing—and pay big sums for services.

How do private contractors offer services for less cost, while covering their overhead and making a profit? Most do not provide health care, retirement, or paid time off. They offer comparable, if not higher, hourly pay, yet workers are stealthily being cheated out of thousands of dollars.

Workers catch on to this, so contractors have high turnover rates. The result is a parade of strangers through our schools. Instead of having caring career professionals who build relationships with students, we have folks looking for short-term jobs.

So who pays the price for privatization? Our students.

NEA is here to help

NEA consults with affiliates on individual privatization battles when requested. NEA’s Education Support Professional Quality (ES PQ) department can provide campaign strategy, corporate and procurement research, messaging, and sometimes campaign funding. ES PQ has also formed a cadre of affiliate staff with privatization expertise. For more information, visit nea.org/ESPJobSecurity.

—Tim Barchak, Senior Policy Analyst, NEA Education Support Professional Quality

LEARN
MORE

Find out more about ESP pay, job security, and the ESP Bill of Rights at nea.org/ESP.



2024 TEACHER OF THE YEAR HELPS STUDENTS THRIVE IN RURAL TENNESSEE

By Tim Walker

“Learning takes place when they have someone who believes in them.”

—Missy Testerman, 2024 Teacher of the Year

The rural Appalachian town where Missy Testerman teaches is home to families who have lived there for generations. But a growing number of students are newer to the small town of Rogersville, Tenn., and they represent diverse cultures from around the world.

Many in the community view these newcomers with suspicion, but Testerman has dedicated herself to building bridges and ensuring that every student, no matter their background or circumstances, has a chance to succeed.

For this tireless dedication to all of her students and her support of new immigrant families, the Council of Chief State School Officers named Testerman the 2024 National Teacher of the Year.

“Missy’s message of advocating for inclusivity and success for all students meets the moment we’re in as a country,” the selecting committee said in a statement announcing the award, in April. “We believe her knowledge of both the issues and the people involved in education policy and practice will lead to better outcomes for students.”



Every student in every public school in this country deserves a teacher like Testerman, said NEA President Becky Pringle, when the award was presented.

“She stands up for those students who feel unseen, unheard, unappreciated, and undervalued in America,” Pringle said.

Typically, the national and state teachers of the year are honored at a daytime White House event. This year, thanks to First Lady Jill Biden, they were celebrated at a formal White House state dinner for the first time. On May 1, Testerman joined the 2024 state teachers of the year at the event, which Mrs. Biden and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona attended, among others.

President Joe Biden made a brief, surprise appearance at the event,

(Clockwise from left) National Teacher of the Year Missy Testerman with students at Rogersville Elementary, in Tennessee; with NEA President Becky Pringle at a White House dinner, in May, honoring the finalists; with President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden at the event.



telling the honorees how much he values their work and contributions. “You’re incredible,” he said. “You are the kite strings that lift our national ambitions aloft.”

THERE ARE NO BAD STUDENTS

A Tennessee native and first-generation college graduate, Testerman has served as a teacher for 31 years. At Rogersville Elementary School, Testerman prioritizes instruction that ensures her students have the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve.

Testerman says there is no such thing as a “bad student.”

“There may be kids who are having a bad day. There are kids who are struggling with the circumstances they are in, but there is no such thing as a bad kid,” she explains. “Learning takes place when they have someone who believes in them.”

In 2022, Testerman added an English as a second language (ESL) licensure to her credentials (acquired through her state’s “Grow Your Own” teacher recruitment and retention initiative). Testerman currently serves as the district ESL specialist and program director.

She works with 21 children who hail from 5 countries on 4 continents and

speak 5 different languages. Determined to see everyone succeed in school, she wants the town’s immigrant students to have an advocate.

Testerman loves Rogersville, but she concedes that the town square has seen its share of “anti-anything different” rallies, as she calls them. That conflict and division can seep into the classroom.

To help build connection between local families, Testerman designed a curriculum that incorporates a study of Americans from diverse backgrounds, allowing students to better understand that people are more alike than different and that everyone belongs.

From this curriculum came the Rogersville Elementary Second Grade American History Wax Museum, which began in 2017. Students pick and research an important historical figure from a list Testerman draws up. Then they write a one-page biography. At an annual event, students dress up as their character and station themselves across the elementary school’s front lawn.

When Testerman accepted the award, she said that incorporating other cultures and backgrounds in the assignment was “a calculated, yet risky move that I was willing to take because of my deep-rooted teaching belief that exposure to new experiences and people outside of our own culture leads to growth and acceptance.”

The Wax Museum was a resounding success, and it is still a marquee event at the school seven years later.

EDUCATORS ARE EXPERTS

Testerman develops close ties with the families of her newcomer students, who can lead very sheltered lives.

Day after day, students arrive at school every morning and then return home in the afternoon or to a parent’s workplace—without interacting with or leveraging the resources in the community.

Testerman enjoys taking students to the post office, a bank, a coffee shop for the first time, and teaches them the local library system.

Sometimes simple gestures can mean the most. Testerman makes it a point to sit with the families at major school events, such as graduation ceremonies or student performances.

“I have belonged to this community for decades and others trust my lead,” she said at the award ceremony. “I take this role as ambassador seriously, and I am thankful for the opportunity to connect these groups.”

Testerman says teachers are the true education experts, as opposed to many lawmakers who shape education policy.

As president of the Rogersville Education Association, Testerman believes unions are critical in elevating educator voices to advocate for schools and students. “Union” can be a “dirty word” in her rural community, but the positive changes educator advocacy has brought to the learning conditions in their schools have not gone unnoticed.

“The students in my school now have the benefit of hot water to wash hands, and clean, remodeled restrooms that were free of sewer odors,” she reports. “Instead of people being negative or resentful, they were appreciative that we cared enough about our students’ well-being to become tireless advocates for change.” 🌟

LEARN MORE

Meet the finalists

The three other finalists for the 2024 National Teacher of the Year came from Alaska, Georgia, and New Jersey. Read about their inspiring work at bit.ly/TOY2024Finalists.

OUR VOICES

quick takes

WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE?



"When I see that [as a school nurse] I am making a difference. A kid gets glasses and the world opens up! Or she goes to the dentist and isn't in pain anymore!"

—Jane Ann Sykes, Missouri

"Being part of a strong union that has our back—even when the world forgets to appreciate our work!!!"

—Greg M.

"Genuine curiosity in students." —Anne N.

"Those little notes from the toughest and sweetest, saying, 'I want to be an art teacher like you when I grow up!'"

—Debi B.

"My amazing students! Especially my middle school's newcomer immigrant students. These kids have lived through incredibly challenging life experiences, and yet they show up at school with positive attitudes, ready to learn."

—Jennifer H.

"THAT EVEN ON MY LONGEST, HARDEST, MOST DISPIRITING DAYS, I WILL HAVE A STUDENT BRING ME A BAG OF CHIPS OR SOMETHING FROM THE VENDING MACHINE, AND SUDDENLY NOTHING SEEMS AS TERRIBLE BECAUSE ONE RANDOM TEENAGER, WHO IS BIOLOGICALLY GEARED TO BE TOTALLY SELFISH, THOUGHT ABOUT ME ENOUGH TO BRING ME FOOD." —Echo M.



"My union family!" —Amy Harrison, North Carolina

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SHARE THIS

We want to know what's on your mind. We asked this question on NEA Today's Facebook page and received so many great answers! Keep an eye on facebook.com/neatoday for our next question, and share this link with your fellow NEA members.

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engage



HOW TO COLLABORATE WITH YOUR ADMINISTRATORS

By James Paterson

Until recently, science teacher Val Chuchman would run into administrators in the hallway and enjoy friendly chats about local sports teams, music, or the students.

But that all changed when she became the union representative at her school in the Hillsborough County Public Schools district, in Tampa, Fla. After 23 years as an educator, she realized it was time to think more deeply about those connections.

"On one hand, it is very much about relationships. You need to have respect for each other, and you really must be genuine," Chuchman says. "But you don't have to be their friends and go out for drinks. It is a fine line between being collegial and being too cozy."

Walking this line can be a challenge, especially as educators advocate for better working conditions and more resources for their students.

A focus on students, Chuchman says, is the key to making those relationships work.

"If your heart is in it, and you want to make the school better and

improve circumstances for the kids, an administrator will know that," she adds. "You both can come to respectfully understand that you each have a job to do that can put you in adversarial positions, but that [you have] similar fundamental goals."

The extra effort will pay off. Research shows that when collaborative teams work, student performance and school culture improve, and student absenteeism decreases. Positive working relationships also significantly improve teacher retention.

"[This] is a volatile time and people are triggered easily," Chuchman says. "That perhaps makes this more challenging, but also all the more critical."



Val Chuchman

To address this need, NEA joined with seven national educators' organizations to develop the *Collaborating for Student Success* guidebook, which provides a step-by-step road map to building partnerships and increasing shared decision-making.

The guidebook suggests a three-step structure that requires preparation,

BARGAIN THIS

Share this contract language, from New York's Greece Teachers Association, with your local union leaders:

"We believe that teachers and administrators should share the responsibility for effective school management. That is, as equal partners, teachers and administrators should establish expectations for their school, together plan how to best realize these expectations, and together evaluate the outcomes of their effort."

action, and reflection. Here's what that looks like on the ground:

Prepare a solid foundation

The first step, Chuchman says, is to establish mutual goals and a shared understanding that when teachers are satisfied and engaged, both retention and student learning improve.

"It is all about students being successful, but we need happy, healthy teachers," she says. "That's what is best for the kids and where we have to come together. Administrators who understand that are good partners."

Conversations can start with an agreement about what a great school looks like. Chuchman begins by asking questions like: What ideas do you have about the school culture? How do we work on that together? How do we help our kids succeed?

Alan Young, a teacher and project manager for the Educator Growth System with Jefferson County Public Schools, in Louisville, Ky., has been involved in negotiations at the district and school level.

His advice? "You have to establish explicit goals that everyone has a role in defining," Young says. "It could be a problem you want to define and solve or a future that you want to create. Everyone has to be doing something substantive."

It's helpful to break down larger goals into smaller projects, he advises, and then assign specific tasks to each member of the team.

Brian Ebertz, president of the Greece Teachers Association (GTA), in New York, says collaboration occurs at the school level in his district in part because it is written into the association's contract, with a section that states:



Alan Young

"We believe that teachers and administrators should share the responsibility for effective school management. That is, as equal partners, teachers and administrators should establish expectations for their school, together plan how to best realize these expectations, and together evaluate the outcomes of their effort."

Take action

To achieve real results, this work must be a priority for both educators and administrators, Young advises, and it's valuable to develop a team that includes both experienced members and people who are new to the process and bring fresh perspectives.

Teams with all veterans of the collaborative work or with a completely new membership both have diminished effectiveness, he notes.

Attitude also matters. People need to understand it's not about getting a win. It's not about a 'gotcha,' Ebertz says. It's about trying to support people and create an environment that's really successful for students in a way that honors the profession of teaching.

In Greece, he says, school leaders on both sides found common ground through a nonprofit, developed by the union, that provides students with food and clothing, dental care, book drives, and college and career support. The organization also offers teacher mini-grants.

GTA's collaborations at both the school and district level have paid off.

Educators and administrators came to an agreement on a wide range of issues, including redesigned standards-based report cards that include ratings for social and emotional competencies; better information about special education; a more restorative code of conduct; and a culturally responsive education course, among other improvements.

Reflect on results

Once an agreement has been reached, the guidebook suggests that teams evaluate the outcomes and the effectiveness of the group's processes and systems.

"I would advise that once the system is set up, you have to regularly review the work," Young says. "It is important that the agreement be reviewed any time new leadership steps in."

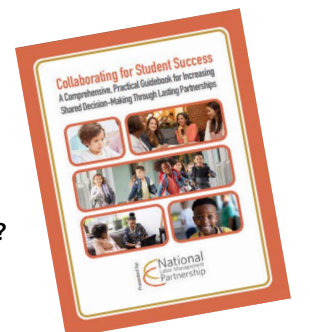
Input from a third party at this stage is helpful, he says: "It keeps the process clean and ensures no one feels manipulated."

Finally, the guidebook calls for "scaling and spreading" successful processes. In other words, if you find something that works well, share what you've learned!

James Paterson is a contributing writer for NEA Today.

LEARN MORE

How do healthy collaborations work? Get more information and download the *Collaborating for Student Success* guidebook at nea.org/collaborate.



TRY
THIS
Technology



WHAT TO DO WHEN TECHNOLOGY FAILS

By Jacqui Murray

Has this happened to you? You spend hours rewriting an old lesson plan to incorporate rich, adventurous online tools. You test it several times just to be sure. It's a fun self-paced lesson plan with lots of activities and meandering paths students undoubtedly will adore. Technology enables it to differentiate authentically for the diverse group of learners that walk across your threshold.

Everyone who previewed it is wowed. You are ready.

Then, on the day of the lesson, the technology fails. Hours of preparation wasted because no one could get far enough to learn a d*** thing. You blame yourself—why didn't you stick with what you'd always done? Now, everyone is disappointed.

Implosions like this happen every day, sometimes because the network can't handle the increased traffic or the website server goes upside down. Really, the reason doesn't matter. All that matters is an effort to use technology to add rigor and excitement to a tired lesson plan fails, leaving the teacher more technophobic than ever.

With the pride of place iPads and Chromebooks have in curriculum

decisions, tech problems will be wide-ranging: Everything from a student's device not having the required software to the classroom systems not hooking up to the school's network or Wi-Fi. Students will look to their teacher for solutions, and the teacher will become best friends with a tech-savvy colleague, whose conversation includes words like gig, server, and modem.

For many, "tech problem" equates to the mind-numbing, bone-chilling feeling of "I have no idea what to do."

In a word: Failure. Not a feeling teachers like. But tech failure is inevitable. There are too many circuits and algorithms and wires shoved under a desk to expect it to go right all the time.

So what should you do to prevent the inevitable epic tech failure? Prepare for it before it happens.

Have backups of data, as well as redundant devices, hardware, and systems. For example, install three browsers on your computer so if Firefox won't work, Chrome will. Build in time for system reboots (because that solves at least half the tech problems that plague a classroom). Pre-test relevant systems to become familiar with glitches.

Be a problem-solver

Embrace problems. Own them. And try these basics to get you through many a stressful tech day:

- **These two steps** have solved about half of the tech traumas I've faced: If the computer won't start, check that it's plugged in; then, if power isn't the problem, reboot.

There are 18 more problems that I'm equally prepared for. Track your tech woes by writing down each incident as it happens. Soon, you'll find it's the same ones over and over. The tech version of the movie *Groundhog Day*.

- **Do a web search for the problem.**

You'll find an answer about 70 percent of the time. If you're looking for general, narrative information, ChatGPT (or another generative AI source) could offer assistance.

- **Don't expect technology to remain unchanged.** Links die. The website you used last week may not work today.

The favorite software you've used for years could be incompatible with system updates.

Your new computer might not run programs you used regularly on your old computer. Prior to presenting, go through the tool you're planning to use or the process you're teaching—see if it works like it used to.

- **Use failure as a teachable moment.** Show students how you handle stress, problems, frustration. It's an opportunity to stretch that magnificent big brain and devise a solution. It's a chance to ask students, What would you do?

- **Don't apologize.** Save apologies for something you caused. Tech failures are caused by the Universe.

Tech is the third leg in the "inevitable experiences" stool, along with death and taxes. Personally, I don't know anyone who hasn't had a major tech failure. You know it's coming. Control how you react to it. 🦄

California educator Jacqui Murray has taught K-18 technology for 30 years. You can follow her on X @AskaTechTeacher.

NEW DIGITAL LESSON

The Impact of the Gold Rush on California Native Americans

Using primary sources, students and teachers can gain insight into a vitally important aspect of one of the most iconic events in American history.

Access the lesson and sign up to learn more at AmericanIndian.si.edu/nk360

Lead funding for the Native Knowledge 360° education initiative provided by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies and Bonnie and Jere Broh-Kahn.

Image: Portrait of Captain Tom's Daughter in Partial Native Dress, Wearing Abalone Shell Necklace, and Deerskin Girdle and Headband with Abalone Pendant 1874



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ARMING TEACHERS STILL A TERRIBLE IDEA

By Amanda Litvinov

TWO STATES PASS LAWS TO ALLOW TEACHERS TO CARRY CONCEALED WEAPONS, HEIGHTENING THE SAFETY RISK TO THE ENTIRE SCHOOL COMMUNITY.

Iowa teacher and statehouse Rep. Molly Buck had an ideal expert to consult for feedback on a proposed bill last year: her dad. The bill was HF 2586, which would make educators eligible for a permit that would allow them to carry concealed weapons in schools. Her dad is a former Nebraska state patrol officer who spent much of his career training other tactical officers.

“I almost never talk politics with my dad—he’s a rock-ribbed Republican,” says Buck, a member of the Iowa State

Education Association (ISEA). But it turned out that he agreed with his Democrat daughter that teachers should absolutely not be armed.

“My dad explained that even with regular, advanced tactical training, some officers aren’t as good in high stress situations as others, and educators simply don’t have any of that training,” says Buck. “It doesn’t even work on a practical level—even if I do think I’m capable of taking down a shooter, who’s taking care of my 25 frightened 4th-graders?”

ARMING TEACHERS

Though Buck was a vocal opponent of the bill, the conservative-dominated legislature passed it in April. Tennessee also passed a bill allowing educators to carry concealed weapons in schools. A similar bill passed in Wyoming, but was later vetoed by the governor.

WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

There has been a sharp spike in school shootings over the past five years, and 2023 saw the most ever—348 shootings in K-12 schools and 30 on college campuses.

School shootings with fatalities and injuries often prompt a response in state legislatures, with proposals that range from solid, research-backed ideas to curb gun violence to potentially dangerous plans, including efforts to arm teachers.

NEA tracked roughly three dozen proposed gun laws this legislative session. At least nine of them would have put more guns in schools, by arming teachers and other staff members. Though most of those efforts ultimately failed, the laws passed in Iowa and Tennessee are deeply concerning to many educators who live in those states, regardless of their views on gun ownership in general.

ISEA and allies were able to stop bills to arm teachers in previous legislative sessions chiefly because they could show that the companies that insure the school districts would not offer liability coverage if educators were carrying firearms.

“The way the legislators pushing this bill got around it is by providing qualified immunity both to the district and the school



Iowa teacher and statehouse Rep. Molly Buck

personnel,” explains Melissa Peterson, ISEA Legislative and Policy Director. That means if an educator injures or kills someone when responding to an incident, both the employee and the school district are free of financial liability.

In such situations, Tennessee’s law provides immunity from monetary claims to the district, but not the school employee, a fact that the Tennessee Education Association is working hard to inform its members about.

The two laws share several features in common. Both leave the decision whether to arm educators a matter of local control: School boards will decide whether to allow their employees to carry a firearm at school. Both laws also require that if educators are armed, weapons are always concealed, and which school personnel are carrying firearms would be kept strictly confidential—a feature that does not sit well with many educators.

“My students’ safety and well-being are paramount,” says Sarah Amos, a Response to Intervention and parent involvement coordinator at Vonore Elementary School in Monroe County.

“My students deserve to be protected by someone whose sole concern is their safety—not a fellow educator balancing 100 different things in a school day,” Amos says. “At the end of the day, we just want to focus on teaching.”

ELECTIONS: KEY TO CURBING GUN VIOLENCE

Making progress in keeping schools and communities safer from gun violence begins with elections.

In 2023, ISEA helped elect progressive candidates to the school board of the Ankeny Community School District, where state Rep. Molly Buck teaches. That school board was one of the first in Iowa to vote against allowing educators to carry concealed weapons, which Buck believes will keep the district’s nearly 13,000 students safer.

“My students’ safety and well-being are paramount.”

—Sarah Amos, Response to Intervention and parent involvement coordinator, Monroe County

The Des Moines Independent Community School District, which serves more than 30,000 students, and the Council Bluffs Community School District, which serves 9,000 students, have also opted out of arming educators.

Buck knows that her colleagues in the state legislature genuinely want to curb gun

violence, “but a large faction believes that the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” she says. “But in reality, more guns just put more people in danger. It’s time for us to focus on prevention.” ❖

DISCOVER EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE RISK OF INCIDENTS OF GUN VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS IN THIS GUIDE, CREATED BY NEA AND THE EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY SUPPORT FUND:



[HTTPS://WWW.NEA.ORG/RESOURCE-LIBRARY/GUN-VIOLENCE-PREVENTION-RESPONSE-GUIDE](https://www.nea.org/resource-library/gun-violence-prevention-response-guide)

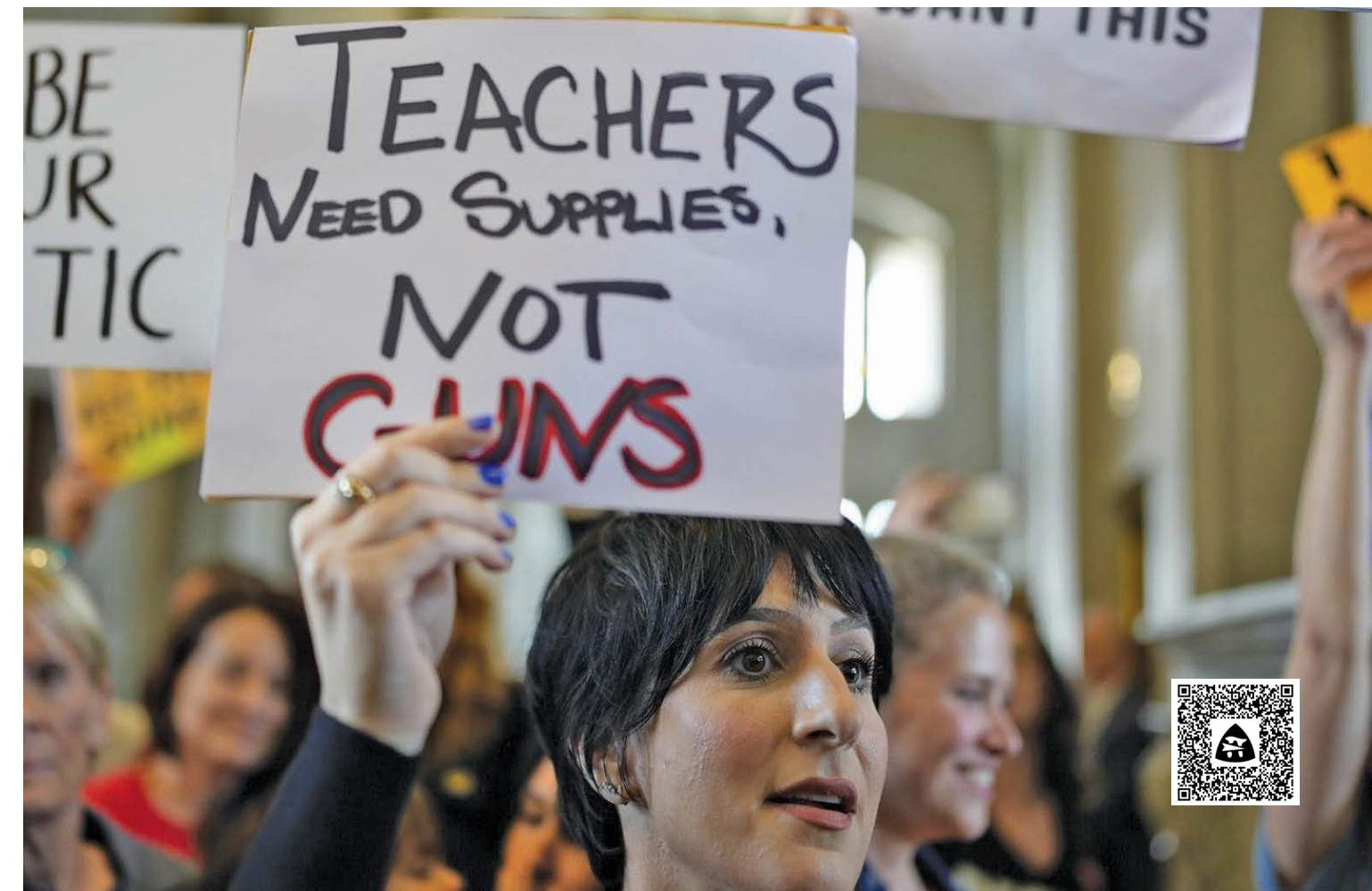
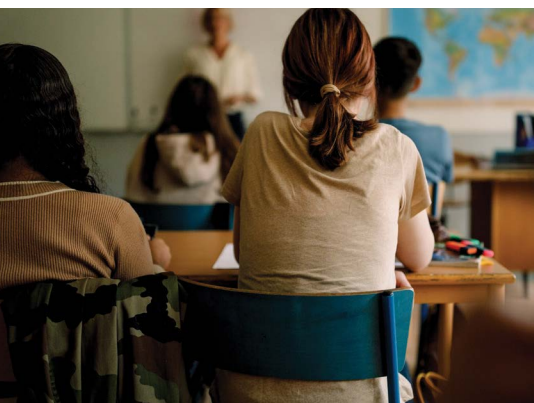


KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 New laws in Iowa and Tennessee make it possible for local districts to allow educators to carry concealed weapons.

2 Many educators are concerned about the safety risks that arming educators poses for the entire school community.

3 A new resource from NEA and Everytown for Gun Safety offers sound gun violence prevention strategies for schools.





BIDEN-HARRIS BREAKS DECADES OF INACTION ON GUN VIOLENCE

The Biden-Harris Administration heard the many educators and other advocates who demanded meaningful action on gun violence. The Administration spearheaded the first major federal efforts to curb gun violence since the 1990s.

Here are some of the pivotal actions the Administration has taken:

SIGNED A NEW FEDERAL LAW

Signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, landmark legislation which:

- Expands background checks before the purchase of firearms.
- Targets interstate gun trafficking.
- Supports state "red flag" laws, which allow courts to temporarily prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.
- Provides nearly \$1 billion for mental health supports in public schools.

CREATED AN OFFICE OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Led by Vice President Kamala Harris, the office will:

- Provide on-the-ground crisis response.
- Coordinate government agencies on programs and new research that can prevent gun deaths.
- Help implement the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.

TOOK EXECUTIVE ACTION

The Biden administration has taken more than 20 executive actions to reduce gun violence, from working to curb gun trafficking and the proliferation of "ghost guns" to investing in community violence prevention initiatives.

CONGRATULATIONS

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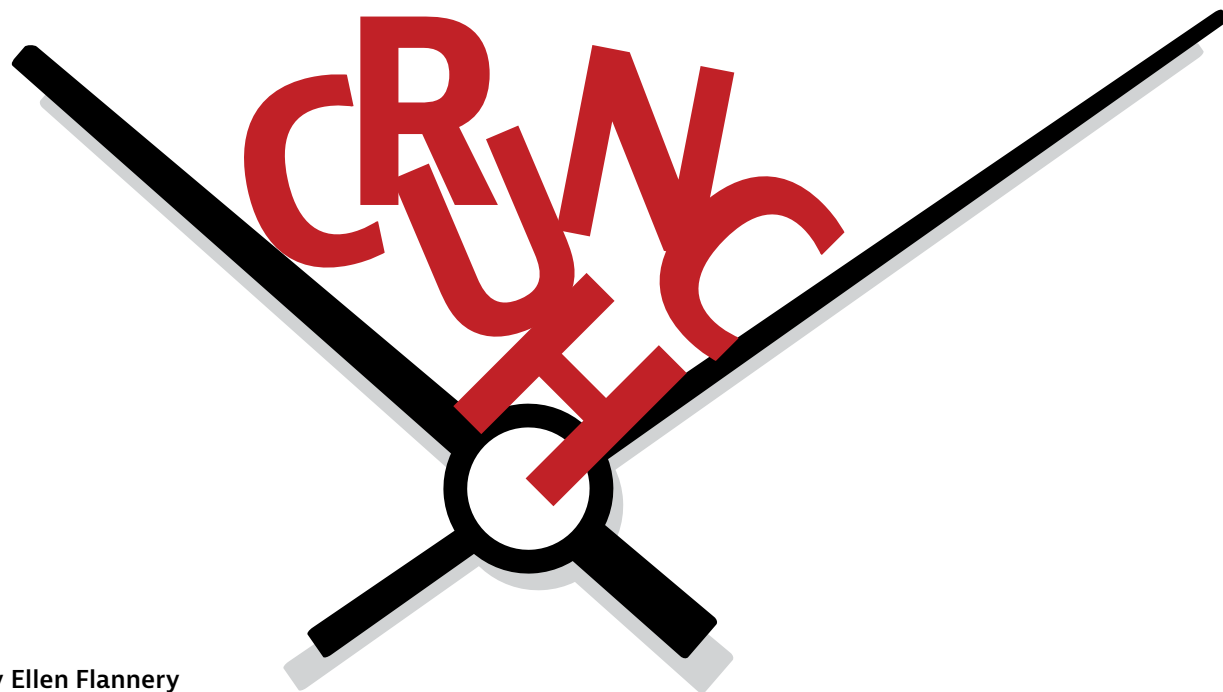


Visit neafoundation.org to learn more.



THE TIME

CRUNCH



By Mary Ellen Flannery

TOO MUCH WORK, TOO LITTLE TIME. HOW CAN EDUCATORS WIN THEIR RACE AGAINST THE CLOCK?

Middle school teacher Natalia Fierro gets 50 minutes a day to plan lessons, run to the front office for supplies, call or email parents, analyze test data, do paperwork, maybe attend an IEP meeting, confer with school counselors or social workers, respond or reach out to administrators, chat with a student who might stop by, run a few hundred copies, go to the bathroom, wash her hands, and grade the papers of about 135 students.

"Is everybody feeling this tired?" asks Fierro, who teaches at Mesa Middle School, in Las Cruces, N.M.

Yes, everybody is! Eighty-four percent of teachers don't have enough time in their workday to get everything done, according to a 2024 Pew Research Center report. The reason? Their workloads are too heavy. According to new NEA research, on the average day, about half don't have time for grading or planning lessons. More than 4 in 10 don't even have time to eat lunch or go to the bathroom.

"I never feel satisfied at the end of the day that I have completed all my work. I'm not sure I

even know what that feels like," says Jared Washburn, who teaches AP English and creative writing at Red Land High School, near Harrisburg, Pa. Instead, Washburn takes work home every night, mostly piles of students' papers to read and evaluate, and makes himself unavailable to his wife and son on Sunday afternoons.

"Work/life balance is sort of a mythical creature to me right now," he says.

What teachers are saying

It's only getting worse, educators say. Students' needs are increasing, parents' demands are growing, and dictates on teachers' time are multiplying.

These burdens are leading to burnout, which causes educators to quit, which feeds the national educator shortage, which, in turn, makes more work for the remaining staff.

The No. 1 reason teachers can't get to their grading, lesson planning, or other essential work? Some 98 percent told Pew they simply have too much of it. Other reasons cited: Having to do non-teaching duties, like lunch duty; helping

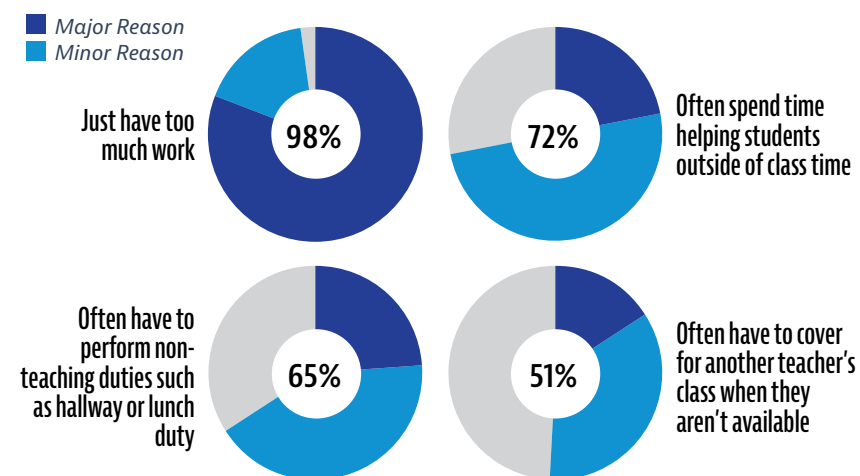


"Is everybody feeling this tired?"

—Natalia Fierro (left), middle school teacher, Las Cruces, N.M.

Why can't teachers get everything done during their paid day?

In a recent survey, K-12 teachers cited the reasons they can't get all their work done. Among those who are overwhelmed, the common reason is that they simply have too much work.



SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER, "WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A TEACHER TODAY?" A SURVEY OF U.S. PUBLIC K-12 TEACHERS CONDUCTED, OCTOBER 17-NOVEMBER 14, 2023.

PHOTO: STEVEN ST. JOHN

struggling students outside of class; and covering other classes.

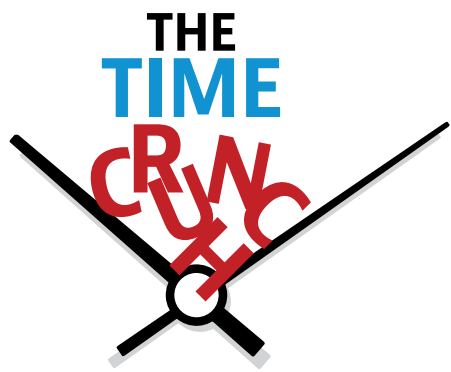
The mandates around standardized tests are particularly infuriating, teachers say. And it's not just the 16 days, on average, dedicated to test-taking, according to a Council of Great City Schools study. The bigger problem is the incessant demand to analyze that data and develop lesson plans targeting individual student's deficiencies, according to a test they took weeks or months earlier.

"I prefer to teach according to the needs I see," says Debbie Baker, a third-grade teacher in northwest Georgia, who actually has the highest test scores in her region.

Paying the price

Who suffers the consequences when educators don't have enough time? Students do!

"Probably the biggest thing is students get less personalized feedback," says Fierro, who, after teaching language arts for 20 years, recently switched to a media elective. "We probably also give fewer innovative assignments. There's not time to plan them and get the resources for them."



Of course, educators bear some of the brunt of the time crunch, too. A large majority find their job to be overwhelming (74%). And although stress is common across the profession, it is more pervasive in elementary grades, the survey shows. It is also very common among special educators and specialized personnel, says Christina Rojas, a speech-language pathologist in Lancaster, Pa.

"It's not about making our jobs easier," she says. "The focus is students. How can we make this job manageable to provide better services to students?"

Solutions are possible, say NEA members, especially when educators work through their unions.

"How do we keep teachers in the classroom? How do we keep them from ... burning out?" asks middle school teacher Michael Sniezak, president of Washington's Eatonville Education Association. "The solution is to make it so teachers don't feel spent beyond [reason]."



After 18 years in the classroom, Wyoming teacher Cassie Gambler has learned to prioritize—and say no.

What would you do with 10 more minutes?

Last year, the Andover, Mass., educators' union won contract language extending students' recess by 10 minutes. For teachers, it's time "for catching your breath," says Andover Education Association President Matt Bach. With this win in mind, we asked NEA members on *NEA Today's* Facebook page what they'd do with an extra 10–15 minutes in their paid day. Here are a few of their answers:

Eat sitting down.

— Melissa M.

Collaborate with my team.

— Maritza F.

Definitely take a bathroom break!

— Aisha B.

Paperwork.

— Heidi C.

Fifteen minutes would be nice, but we need bigger changes in the world of special education.

— Amanda M.

Positive contact with parents!

— Laura A.

The things I do now unpaid: prep, plan, grade, contact parents, and confer with my colleagues regarding common students.

— Celia M.

IEP paperwork!

— Chandra M.

Collaborate with special ed teachers.

— Peter S.

Lunch. I get 10 minutes to eat.

— Mindy I.

Casually walk to the bathroom, unworried about whether there will be an empty stall.

— Shane P.

Meditate, pray, and go to the bathroom.

— Jaydene M.

Make copies

— Susan F.

Ditto to all above—plus, I'd clean my room because our custodial positions are understaffed.

— Debbie B.

Honestly, I would take a mental health walk around the school.

— Sonja H.

Maybe cry.

— Allison D.

5

Things You Can Do to Make Time

1) Learn to say no. "Honestly, I don't know if this is something I could have done when I was young," says Cassie Gambler, an elementary teacher in Riverton, Wyo. "It's probably something I learned more as I became a mom," says the mother of three.

2) Figure out what matters less. For Georgia elementary teacher Debbie Baker, formal grades take a back seat. After 22 years, she knows her students are just as motivated by hand-drawn stars or smiley faces on their papers. "Or I circle something for them to work on," she says. The best use of her time is conferencing with students, she says. The worst? Analyzing outdated test score data.

3) Use your time smartly. Try doing similar things at the same time, like answering emails at one specific time of day. (Tell parents at back-to-school night when they can expect to hear from you.)

4) Let others help. When administrators or colleagues offer help, say yes, Gambler advises. And use their stuff, especially great lesson plans. "You don't have to create everything yourself!" she adds.

5) Use artificial intelligence to help with administrative tasks. ChatGPT, for example, can save time on emails. Then those minutes can be used for higher priorities!



Tiffany Koyoma-Lane



Jared Washburn



Christina Rojas

3

Things You Can Do Through Your Union

1) Bargain for more planning time. Last year, in Portland, Ore., third-grade teacher Tiffany Koyoma-Lane had not one minute of planning time on Mondays and Tuesdays. This year, it'll be different. Her new union contract provides "no less than 410 minutes per standard work week" with at least "one daily block of 40 minutes." On top of that, Portland's elementary special education case managers also will get "at least 40 minutes a day" for paperwork.

In Lewisberry, Pa., high school teacher Jared Washburn's union won additional pay for middle and high school educators when their planning time dips below 270 minutes across six days. (Or 320 for elementary teachers.)

2) Bargain for less work. In 2022, "everything we did in bargaining—our whole aim—was workload," says Eatonville Education Association President Michael Sniezak, of Washington. Today, for example, if a third-grade class exceeds 17 students, the district's options, per the contract, include "pay to the employee \$13 per student/per day above the cap" and "an extra period of specialist time per week."

In Lancaster, Pa., Christina Rojas' union won a 45 to 1 staffing ratio for speech-language pathologists, like her. "We are able to provide better quality, more one-on-one services for students, and more time for better evaluations and collaborations with teachers," Rojas says.

3) Advocate to your state legislators. Unions are legal in every state—but not every state allows them to collectively bargain. Flex your union muscles by meeting with state lawmakers. Currently, Virginia Education Association members are working to improve a state law that provides just 30 minutes of planning time to elementary teachers. (In Virginia, some local unions can bargain; others are working on it!) Last year, members of the Georgia Association of Educators helped pass a Republican-sponsored bill requiring districts to provide daily planning time. Unfortunately, many districts are failing to live up to the spirit of the law by requiring teachers to use that time before students arrive in the morning. ❌

Get sample contract language on planning time and class sizes at nea.org/time.

BARGAIN THIS

Breaking the CYC of Bad Behavior

By Cindy Long

WE LOVE OUR STUDENTS, BUT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS HAVE REACHED A CRISIS POINT. WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

Students throw furniture, overturn desks, shout insults, threaten violence, and curse out teachers, support staff, and classmates! Behavior that was once rare or unthinkable is becoming commonplace. An NEA survey found that disruptive and even violent behavior became so rampant during the 2022 – 2023 school year that many educators cited student behavior as a top concern—second only to low pay.

The reasons for this spike in bad behavior are, of course, complicated.

“These children are quite literally screaming out for help,” says Joshua Tracy, an elementary school teacher in Springfield, Mo. Teachers’ workloads are overwhelming, which impacts students, who are already going through too much, he explains. “It’s a recipe for an explosive situation!”

According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center, about 1 in 5 teachers surveyed said major problems include students getting up and walking around when they’re not supposed to and students being disrespectful. A majority of teachers (68%) also said they’ve experienced verbal abuse from a student—such as being yelled at or threatened. Many (21%) said this happens at least a few times a month.

Educators know all too well that students are still recovering from the trauma of the pandemic and struggling from missed social and emotional development opportunities. Educators and families are still trying to make up for what was lost. Stress and anxiety are palpable, and sometimes the charged environment erupts.

A mental health crisis

“I’m talking about ... a child who, the night before, saw their guardian overdose and is facing troubles that we can’t imagine. I’m talking about the kid who ... goes from place to place, never knowing where they’re going to have a meal or bed or anything else,” says West Virginia Education Association President Dale Lee. “And we wonder why we have disruptions in class. It doesn’t take an expert to figure that out. We have to make sure that our students’ mental health is addressed.”

Educators agree that managing behavior also means using trauma-informed practices and multitiered systems of support across the school setting.

Fanta Lee-Sankoh, a high school prevention and intervention specialist in Fairbanks, Alaska, has students who sleep in tents or cars. Some



struggle with addiction. Many suffer from depression and intense anxiety.

When a student’s behavior is unmanageable in the classroom, the next stop is Lee-Sankoh’s office.

With a degree in social work and training in addressing behavior issues, she is able to build trust with her students and help them manage their emotions. But she can’t begin to keep up with the demand.

“We simply don’t have enough trained staff to handle this crisis,” she says.

What you can do today

While behavior problems and staffing are systemic issues that take time and money to resolve, educators need help now! You can’t solve all of the problems yourself, but there are steps you can take—and the beginning of the school year is the perfect time to start.

All educators, no matter their role, can build trust with students, Lee-Sankoh says. She shares these tips:

- **Show genuine interest and care.** Everyone wants to feel valued and respected. Get to know your students as people, ask about their interests, listen actively, and check in regularly.

If they’re interested in music, ask about new songs or artists they’re listening to, and share some of your favorites. If it’s sports, ask about a student’s latest game or favorite team.

- **Lift up student voices.** Allow them to contribute to classroom culture and decisions. Find ways for them to be leaders.
- **Be approachable and accessible.** Show empathy, even in your body language.
- **Take time to recognize their efforts and achievements.** Celebrate your students.

Once you have established this trust, students are more likely to tell you about their feelings and when they need a break, before behaviors spiral. When students have a strong relationship with you, they will feel more positively toward you and toward school.

Long-term remedies

The bigger solutions come down to funding to hire more school staff.

“A smaller class size would be ideal, as it would enable teachers to work closely with students individually, while also having better control over classroom behavior,” says kindergarten and first-grade teacher Dirk Andrews.

Prevention and intervention specialist Fanta Lee-Sankoh builds trust with her students to reduce behavior problems.

“We simply don’t have enough trained staff to handle this crisis.”

—Fanta Lee-Sankoh, Alaska

Breaking the CYCLE of Bad Behavior

Andrews recognizes the importance of teaching students to work independently and in small groups, as well as the need to have one-on-one time with them. A paraeducator in the classroom would help make all of this possible, he says.

"As an educator, I always strive to be patient," he adds. "But there are times when it's best to step back and allow someone else to take over."

"A smaller class size would be ideal, as it would enable teachers to work closely with students individually, while also having better control over classroom behavior."

—Dirk Andrews, elementary school teacher, Wyoming

Your union and community can drive change

Bargaining for the common good is a strategy where educators and their unions join with parents and the community to demand change that benefits not only educators, but the students and community as a whole. Demands can include lower class sizes, more paraeducators, and mental health supports, among others.

It worked in Oregon. The Portland Association for Teachers won pay increases and more planning time, in addition to class-size committees and an expansion of a mental health rapid response team.

It worked in Maryland. The Montgomery County Education Association

bargained for the incorporation of restorative practices in school behavior management plans. They also won improved training for educators in restorative practices and trauma-informed teaching and learning.

It worked in Colorado. Denver educators bargained for smaller class sizes; restorative practices; wraparound services, including a full-time nurse and social worker in every school; and the expansion of community schools. (What's a community school? Find out at nea.org/communityschools.)

"NEA locals across the country are organizing and bargaining to improve student behavior and ultimately provide a safe, quality learning environment for the entire school community," says NEA senior policy analyst Brian Beallor.

Join them! Contact your local union, learn about bargaining for the common good at nea.org/BCG, and apply for an NEA grant to help at nea.org/bargaininggrants. Advocate for funding at nea.org/actioncenter.



Dirk Andrews

How to De-escalate

Some students go from zero to 60 in what seems like a split second, and as the educator in the room, your adrenaline can fire up just as fast. But there are techniques that can help you defuse the situation.

Paraeducators Fred McMahon, from Michigan, and Jason Fletcher, from Delaware, are certified in crisis prevention intervention and conduct trainings for NEA members. They offer these tips for what to do when a student's behavior is spiraling:

Keep calm

"Soaking in a student's negative energy is taxing," McMahon says. "It's natural to get emotional or feel angry."

Once you recognize your feelings, work on restoring your own sense of calm. Only then can you fully de-escalate the student.

Behavior influences behavior, he explains. The goal is to reduce



Fred McMahon

tension in a crisis and bring the student back to using the rational part of the brain. Also, don't take anything personally.

Speak in a level tone and in short, clear sentences. "Remember that 70 percent of communication is non-verbal, so ensure your body language matches your calm tone," Fletcher adds.

Recognize triggers and respond to agitation

A trigger is an event, such as a challenging assignment, that leads to a change in behavior.

Does your school have a calming room? It should!

What can teachers and support staff do when a student's behavior is out of control? It's not always effective to send them to the principal's office. The student needs a place to settle down and learn strategies to cope with anger, anxiety, and other difficult emotions.

Some schools have calming rooms staffed with trained educators.

This should not be a punitive seclusion zone, nor should it be used as a "get out of class free" card. It's a place for students to calm down and learn self-regulation strategies so future outbursts are less likely.

NEA Today asked our Facebook followers if their schools have calming rooms. Hundreds of educators responded! Here's what a few had to say:

Cortney Kindall-Ritchey— "Yep! And it's with me, the counselor! It is designed to help reset and take accountability for disruptive choices.

"This doesn't mean there isn't a consequence for poor choices later, but we try to help students reset and return to class as soon as possible without rewarding undesirable choices or further disrupting students engaged in the learning."

Stephanie Bradley—"We have a Zen Den where students can go to refocus themselves through a sensory break or by speaking with our SEL staff."

Michelle Cobb—"We have a Responsible Thinking Classroom where they write

For a student on the verge of losing control, a calming room can provide a brief break and an opportunity to refocus.



a plan about their behavior choices and how they will change those behaviors to be more successful in the classroom."

If you don't have a calming or refocus room, take the opportunity to collaborate with your administrators. Go to your principal with a thoughtful

solution rather than just stating a problem.

Ask for a place for students to learn regulation tactics. Also ask if trained community partners can volunteer to staff the room, if there aren't enough school-based resources. (For more on collaboration with administrators, see Page 24.)

whatever the trigger is and how you felt when it happened.

Have a plan

When a student is defiant and unwilling or unable to communicate, and the situation could get violent, you must have a protocol in place.

The beginning of the year is the time to talk to administrators and counselors to establish a solid plan.

"In our school, we have a code system to call for additional staff to deal with behavior," McMahon shares. "It's a team effort."

Train all staff

"Everyone who works with students needs to be trained in de-escalation," McMahon adds. "It benefits the entire district if we're all speaking the same language and acting

in the same accord with redirections and empathy. The trauma we're seeing is heavy and the mental health is real."

Everyone who interacts with students needs training, including teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and administrators, he says. "If everyone had de-escalation training, we would all feel safer and more supported at school."

Breaking the CYCLE of Bad Behavior



How Counselors (and their data) Can Help

Fabion Vicks, a middle school counselor in Hampton, Ga., is continually collecting data on students' achievement, attendance, and behavior. He looks for gaps and problems and sets goals so students get the support they need.

Vicks shares that data with teachers, advisory councils, parents, and students themselves.

"Students are also stakeholders," he says. For example, his data showed that a lot of kids were gathering in unauthorized areas.

"They'd ask to go to the nurse and be gone for 30 minutes," Vicks explains.

He set a goal with teachers, support staff,

and administrators to have an educator at the popular gathering spots at all times, reducing the problem behavior.

His work is grounded in data. "When does it occur—before or after lunch, on Mondays after a long weekend, before math or during reading? Behavior is going to kick up a notch when a student isn't doing well on a standard," Vicks says.

Like most school counselors, Vicks also uses data to inform tailored classroom instruction, focusing on individual or group sessions to build skills that help overcome social and behavioral challenges.

He recommends that educators

document what's happening in their classrooms and share that information with a counselor, who can help create a program.

"We definitely need more counselors," Vicks says. "We need to advocate for counselors, social workers, and security officers."

The American School Counselors Association recommends a counselor to student ratio of 250 to 1, but the national average stood at 385 to 1 during the last school year. Vicks has one fellow counselor for 1,100 students.

NEA members made a difference!

When NEA members called for more support for mental health, the Biden administration responded with the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), signed into law in June 2022. The law provides \$1 billion through grant programs to increase the number of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists in schools, and help train these professionals in providing the mental health services students need.

Find out more about these grants and share this link with colleagues and administrators: nea.org/mentalhealthgrants.

LEARN MORE

NEA offers webinars, micro-credentials, and more resources for managing student behavior at nea.org/behavior.

PHOTO: ELEY PHOTO

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Hello, Columbus!

TWO YEARS AFTER A WINNING STRIKE, THESE OHIO EDUCATORS ARE STILL REAPING THE REWARDS

By Mary Ellen Flannery

When Joe Decker walked into his classroom on the first day of school last year, he got chills. Literally and figuratively. His school finally had air conditioning!

"I was a little teary-eyed, to be honest," he says.

A year earlier, in August 2022, Decker and his colleagues in the Columbus Education Association (CEA) had gone on strike—and one of the chief reasons was to compel Ohio's largest school district to invest in safe, well-maintained school facilities. At the time, about a quarter of the city's schools didn't have air conditioning. In an attempt to improve learning conditions, Decker, a social studies teacher at Mifflin Middle School, bought his own industrial fan from Lowe's and tried not to drip sweat on students' desks or papers.

Today, things are different. Every school in Columbus has air conditioning. Class sizes are lower in every grade. Art teachers have classrooms instead of carts. Educators have paid family leave! And pay is higher, too. What's more, Columbus' first community school is in the works.

Two years after CEA's three-day strike—and all the organizing work that led up to it—the results are both measurable and immeasurable. The union got stronger. And it's still flexing its muscle today.

"What the strike brought us, for sure, is that sense of solidarity," says high school English teacher Kelsey Gray. "And I think we maintain it through organizing actions."

Strikes build power

In 2022, the picket line brought parents and educators together, and bridged common gaps between academic teams or departments. Union members felt a part of something powerful, educators recall. "It was the best professional development we ever had," Gray says.

But it's not like you walk into school the day after a strike ends and all is better, she adds. Everything was the same, except educators—especially union leaders—were even more exhausted than usual.

One significant change did happen fast: Within months of the strike, school-based

substitutes moved to join CEA. These educators had been the only full-time, frontline employees in Columbus City Schools without union representation. Not only were they poorly paid, they also didn't have a voice, notes Kim Maupin, who became a building sub after a 32-year teaching career.

"We are teachers—we are teaching—but we weren't being recognized or respected for that work," she says. In 2023, the subs' first-ever union contract not only boosted their pay, but also provided paid family leave and professional development.

'We are the union!'

In 2023, CEA's "member action team" rolled back into high gear when Columbus City Schools proffered a new tax levy to infuse nearly \$100 million into public schools. Frankly, it looked like it was going to fail, says Izetta Thomas, lead organizer for the Columbus Education Justice Coalition.

Thomas, a former special education teacher, has led conversations with more



Izetta Thomas



(Clockwise from top) Columbus teacher Kelsey Gray, bullhorn in hand, rallies for better wages, and more; parents and children join the picket line; teacher Annelise Taggart, third from left, with union colleagues.

than 1,000 community members over the past two years. She says she has found that many residents don't think the district "speaks to them," or invests adequately in their students. "A lot of our folks [are] tired of the status quo, tired of a district managing decline," Thomas says.

The levy would help fulfill the promise of better, safer schools, but the school board was doing a poor job of talking to voters. Weeks before the election, only 36 percent of voters supported it. So, union members stepped up and mobilized their partners.

"We went to the neighborhoods nobody else was going to and did phone banking with the voters nobody else deemed important," Thomas says. And the levy passed!

Now the school board is talking about closing schools to save money—and, of course, it'll be schools in communities of color, which can then be turned into for-profit charter schools, Decker says. "Obviously, it's a Trojan horse to attack public education," he adds.

But teachers are ready. The key thing they learned two years ago is this: "We are the union," says art teacher Annelise Taggart. "Our leaders aren't the only people in the union. It's all of us." 🦋

"What the strike brought us, for sure, is that sense of solidarity. And I think we maintain it through organizing actions."

—Kelsey Gray, high school English teacher



3 Things That Changed After the Strike

1) Family leave

"I was like 10 weeks pregnant when we went on strike," says art teacher Annelise Taggart. That turned out to be excellent timing! Under the old contract, "paid family leave" didn't exist. Teachers used sick leave, if they had it. Under the new contract, Taggart first accessed 10 days of sick leave from the teachers' sick leave bank, and then the district covered an additional 20 paid days—for a minimum of six weeks of paid leave. "It was a huge weight lifted off my shoulders!" she says.

2) Heating and air conditioning

"I was a coach for 20 years in a gym that wasn't air-conditioned," says high school teacher and longtime coach J Sanchez. Making it worse, the district roofed over his gym's attic fans. Today, every Columbus school has air conditioning and heat. "Now the gym teacher and students in there can work out without risking death!" Sanchez says.

3) The district's first community school

The 2022 – 2025 contract provides up to \$50,000 a year for a School Transformational Pilot Program. In its first year, the union selected NEA's community school model. In 2023 – 2024, they reviewed applications from schools wanting to become Columbus' first community school. This fall, the transformational work at that school begins!

"W" IS FOR WORKER

OVERWORKED & UNDERPAID, TODAY'S TEACHERS NEED A HERO.

WRITTEN BY JUSTIN CONLEY, MARY ELLEN FLANNERY, ERIC LEWIS, AND ANNIE ROSENTHAL
ILLUSTRATED BY NICCOLO PIZARRO

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...NO PLANNING TIME...

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WEALTHY FACTORY OWNERS DON'T LIKE LOSING PROFITS TO WORKERS. THEY DECIDE TO FIGHT BACK. THEIR FAVORITE TACTIC? DIVIDE AND CONQUER. IN 1947, THEIR FRIENDS IN CONGRESS PASS THE TAFT-HARTLEY ACT, TAKING AIM AT UNION POWER AND ENABLING STATES TO PASS ANTI-WORKER LAWS THAT BAN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING.

TAFT-HARTLEY

I TELL MY STUDENTS THEY CAN LIVE THE AMERICAN DREAM!

BUT I THINK MY PARENTS WERE BETTER OFF THAN ME.

FOR SALE

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

YEAH, HOW DID THIS HAPPEN--

ZZZ...

WUMP!

LABOR HISTORY

HUH?

THESE LAWS HELP BOSSES GROW MORE AND MORE POWERFUL. IT BECOMES HARDER TO ESTABLISH NEW UNIONS AND TO COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN FOR BETTER PAY. WAGES DROP.

WHITES ONLY

UNIONS=COMMUNIST

SCHOOL PRIVATIZATION

WE HAVE TO HOLD THE LINE--

IT'S 1942. THE NEW DEAL IS IN FULL SWING, THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT IS A FEW YEARS OLD, AND ONE OUT OF THREE AMERICANS BELONG TO A UNION.

INCREDIBLE!

UNIONS ARE BUILDING THE NATION'S NEW MIDDLE CLASS--AND WORKERS ARE WINNING!

STRIKE

WHILE NOT EVERYTHING IS GREAT FOR EVERY WORKER, THE BOSSES WOULD SOON MAKE IT WORSE FOR ALL.

RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE

WOAH!!

HEY, YOU! C'MON!

THE BOSSES DON'T BACK DOWN. IN THEIR DRIVE TO GROW PROFITS AND WEAKEN WORKERS, THEY BEGIN ATTACKING PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITH FUNDING CUTS, PRIVATIZATION EFFORTS, AND MORE.

IT'S NOT OVER YET!

FOLLOW ME!

THERE'S A BETTER PATH!

UNION-MADE DREAM ROAD

THE QUEST CONTINUES! SCAN TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!

HOW DID WE BECOME THE EMPATHY ENEMY?



Illinois restorative justice coordinator Eboni Rucker and paraeducator Roland Terry Sanders provide a safe space for students.

By Brenda Álvarez

WHEN EXTREMISTS ATTACK SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING, STUDENTS PAY THE PRICE

Megan Bain recently helped a young student overcome social anxiety. “He would freeze up in the face of unstructured social interactions,” says Bain, a special education social worker for Falmouth Public Schools, in Maine.

To reduce the student’s anxiety during recess and lunch, she helped him learn to socially engage with a friend or two. Together, they worked on how to initiate conversations and transition from one topic to another.

Bain now sees the student searching for friends without her support.

Eboni Rucker, a restorative justice coordinator for Illinois’ Thornton Township School District 205, says she helps students “put out the fires.”

“It is my job to help them solve conflict, recognize the feelings and perspectives of others, and support them in their social and emotional endeavors,” Rucker says. “The

biggest thing is giving them the resources and the skills they need to be most successful. I’m teaching my students life skills.”

Known as social and emotional learning (SEL), these skills include how to navigate social situations, stand up for people from diverse backgrounds, and empathize with others. But these important teachings

have come under attack by certain lawmakers and anti-public education groups, such as Moms for Liberty.

Their goal? Spread disinformation and vilify schools and educators.



Megan Bain

A manufactured crisis

Since 2021, attacks on educators and public education have been relentless. Some politicians deliberately conflate any talk of diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the teaching of “critical race theory”; censoring discussions of LGBTQ+ people; and criminalizing the teaching of an honest and accurate history.

“These opposition groups are not reacting to reality,” says Denise Specht,

president of Education Minnesota (EdMN). “They’re reacting to a conspiracy network that runs through some churches, *Fox News*, and QAnon.”

She adds, “It’s not an organic movement. It’s a national campaign through national media channels that has popped up here.”

Disinformation creeps into schools

In June 2022, *The New York Times* reported how right-wing activist Chris Rufo made SEL a “flashpoint for conservatives.” Rufo spread lies that SEL was being used to “groom” students.

His messages were picked up by groups like the Center of the American Experiment (CAE)—a political think tank, which pushes the agenda of its right-wing corporate donors and runs campaigns to get EdMN members to leave their union.

At an event earlier this year, a CAE guest speaker accused educators who use SEL practices of teaching students a

“worldview that is anti-God, anti-family, [and] anti-American.”

While comments like these are baseless, the worst part is that they’re making their way into establishment organizations.

“These types of groups are not outlandish outliers,” Specht says. “The Center of the American Experiment is very much right in the middle of the conservative movement in Minnesota.”

In April 2024, Matt Audette, a member of the Anoka-Hennepin School Board, posted on Facebook that he and two other board members would reject the \$20-million school budget if it included SEL.

The budget is expected to pass, but the threats to SEL remain.

‘A serious disconnect’

Minnesota school counselor Ambrosia Doty shares how one day, while leading a staff meeting focused on students’ concerns, one teacher walked out of the room.



Ambrosia Doty

Another asked: “How long until this is over?”

“I am frustrated with the general lack of understanding, support, and misrepresentation of social-emotional learning, especially amongst other educators,” says Doty, who at the time worked for Atwater Cosmos Grove City School, in western Minnesota. (Her job was eliminated at the end of the school year for budget reasons.)

“Helping kids to learn conflict resolution is not a Marxist concept!” Doty adds. “Teaching coping skills and how to advocate for one’s needs is not a form of rebellion in schools.”

She recalls one of her colleagues saying that the research on SEL proves schools need and want it. In the next breath, he said students don’t need to leave the class to take a walk, as a coping skill.

“There’s a serious disconnect,” she says.

Attacks on emotions

The contentious rhetoric around SEL hit close to home for Hannah Grimley, a third-grade teacher in the Anoka-Hennepin district, the largest district in Minnesota.

“These [extreme conservative groups] think we’re indoctrinating students toward an ‘LGBTQ lifestyle,’” Grimley explains. “If they were to look at the content, enter our classrooms, and see what’s happening, they would realize very quickly that that is not what social emotional learning is.”

At her school, they focus on nine words in their SEL curriculum: Empathy, cooperation, respect, responsibility, perseverance, courage, gratitude, honesty, and creativity.

Students face real danger

A few years ago, Grimley’s district had the highest rate of death by suicide among LGBTQ+ teens—eight in under two years.

HOW DID Empathy BECOME THE Enemy?

Grimley shares that SEL has helped high schoolers feel welcome, seen, and heard in their schools. It's given middle schoolers resources to help them use their voice to advocate and express themselves. For elementary students, they're learning how to talk to one another in kind, respectful ways.

"If that is taken away, they're going to lose the base of good, human decency," she says.

Foundational skills for a better future

"When we think about social-emotional learning at our school, we're not just thinking about preparing students for the world they exist in now," Bain says. "We're thinking about ... the world that they're [going] to enter into, which is why some topics feel controversial to certain families.

"[SEL] is about exposing kids to different ways of life, different walks of life, different humans so that they can interact with them in a way that's kind of respectful." ❧



"These [extreme conservative groups] think we're indoctrinating students toward an LGBTQ lifestyle. If they were to look at the content, enter our classrooms, and see what's happening, they would realize ... that is not social emotional learning."

—Hannah Grimley (above)

LEARN MORE

Visit nea.org/SEL to support students' freedom to thrive by strengthening their life skills.

PHOTO: ACKERMAN + GRUBER

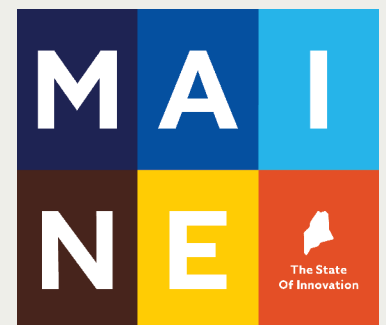
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An Educator's Commitment to LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

By Brenda Álvarez

In 2017, a Holicong Middle School student, from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, shared with his school principal how they were having a difficult time being in a school that had little supports in place for them. At the time, the student was beginning to identify as a transgender male and wanted a more supportive environment. They suggested a GSA club. The principal obliged.

Keith Willard, the student's social studies teacher, jumped at the opportunity to launch the club. He recalls telling his principal: "I'll absolutely do it, and it's going to be the best GSA."

With help from a local nonprofit, the school's English teachers and librarians, Willard started the GSA by creating an LGBTQ+ classroom library, with curated titles that were appropriate to a middle school audience.

Within two years, he amassed about 60 titles.

Willard's library collection and field trips were always pre-approved by school administrators.

"Things had been fine," he says, "until the fall of 2020."

SO, WHAT HAPPENED FALL 2020?

It was a Monday, early in October, when Willard heard rumblings of a video making the rounds on far-right media. The video was of his classroom library. Set to music one might hear in a horror film, the video shows someone going into Willard's classroom, after school hours, and scanning book titles.

"I was very stressed about this," shares Willard. "I thought that despite my due diligence in selecting books, I had done something wrong. The books



Keith Willard, a social studies teacher, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

that were chosen were deliberate and mirrored the stories of the LGBTQ+ youth in the club. I felt very alone, and suddenly the library and my work for students were a liability. That is, until my union called me Friday and provided support."

No group ever claimed credit for producing the video, which had a similar look and feel to a flyer that appeared in district office mailboxes by an individual sympathetic to the Moms for Liberty agenda.

But one thing was clear: "They were looking for nefarious or inappropriate books in my library," Willard explains.

Not finding any controversial titles, the trespassers superimposed into the video two books, including the title, "Lawn Boy."

The targeted attacks to his classroom would last more than two years and would come to include audits to determine which books were age appropriate. Equally as bad, if not worse, were the lies spread about Willard on social media and at school board meetings to insinuate "grooming."

COMPELLED TO ACT

When Willard first learned of the video, he was nervous.

"I really believed I must have done something wrong because I didn't know anything about Moms for Liberty back then."

His feelings shifted after he was personally attacked, and learned more about the group's agenda to whitewash history and censor books that positively represent LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

"I went from feeling like I did something wrong to being angry," he says. "Ever since then, I've been fierce about trying to preserve

every one of those book titles," adding that he didn't remove one single book from his collection.

CHAOS CAN BE STOPPED

At the height of Willard's ordeal, the Central Bucks School District School Board, which oversees schools in Bucks County, included members—some of which ran on M4L platforms—and others who were pro-public education.

Willard believed community members were on his side. This proved true when education friendly candidates completely flipped the school board during the 2023 November election.

The attacks against Willard and the LGBTQ+ community within the Central Bucks district ended after educators, parents, and community members came together to reject school board candidates with ML4 agendas.

"If people aren't informed, and we don't win elections, we'll have the wrong people in place," he says. We need to be paying attention ... or your community could be the next Central Bucks." ✨

TAKE ACTION

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Show your support and uplift their good work to the national stage by submitting a nomination for a 2025 Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Award.

Honorees are recognized during the annual HCR Awards program, held in July prior to the NEA's Representative Assembly.

- **Identify and honor** exemplary individuals, organizations, and affiliates for their contributions to human and civil rights, and racial and social justice.

- **Celebrate** NEA's multicultural roots and commitment to justice.

- **Recognize** today's human and civil rights victories and chart the path forward.

- **Honor** the rich legacy of the merger between the American Teachers Association (ATA) and NEA, from whence the HCR Awards program began.

The work of civil rights and social justice heroes is as critical today as it was yesterday. Let's work together to remind everyone that the cause endures, the struggle goes on, and hope still lives!

Identify your nominees now! It is never too early to begin profiling nominees and potential HCR Award winners!

Find information on past winners and submit nominations for the 2025 HCR Awards at nea.org/hcrawards. Nomination forms and instructions will be available online Oct. 7, 2024 – Dec. 6, 2024.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please email NEAHCR Awards@nea.org.



HEADS UP on Concussions

Concussions can lead to serious challenges in schools. Nine out of 10 children who have had a concussion will have symptoms that affect them academically, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That's why the CDC is providing free, online HEADS UP training to school staff. This training will help educators identify signs of concussion; recognize when concussions are affecting students' learning, emotions, and behavior; and help them return to school after a concussion.

Visit cdc.gov/HeadsUp.



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Visit nea.org/resource-library.

BACK-TO-SCHOOL UNION BINGO

Greet new hires at orientation	Hang a union poster at work	Serve as a building rep	Donate to your union PAC	Share a selfie with why you love your union
Attend your local school board meeting	Write your legislator about an upcoming bill	Remind colleagues to register to vote	Read your contract or MOU	Fill out a year-round organizing card
Commit to an upcoming action with your union	Host a recruitment training		Add your union join link to your email signature	Mentor a new educator
Share a local win on social media	Lead a recruitment phone or texting bank	Bring a friend to your next union meeting	Print out your union's event calendar	Plan a back-to-school event for new hires
Put a union sticker on your laptop	Discuss a union benefit with a colleague	Wear a union T-shirt to work	Organize a worksite recruitment blitz	Grab coffee with a potential member



NEA HAS THE TOOLS YOU NEED TO WIN!

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Your first week's lesson plans are perfect. Your bulletin boards look great. Now it's time to grow your union power! More educators join NEA during the back-to-school season than any other time of the year—and a bigger union means a stronger voice for educators. Take these steps to build your team, flex your union muscles, and grow your union!



TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Get the resources you need to build a more powerful union. Scan this code.



Build Your Team

✓ **Identify your site representative**—also known as a building or union rep or steward. Say hi! And mark your calendar for the next building or site meeting.

✓ **Introduce yourself** to your new hall or department colleagues. Make them feel welcome! Attend a new-hire event and see how you can support incoming staff.

✓ **Join your online community.** Find your local, state, and national unions on social media—and follow them.



Flex Your Muscle

✓ **Everyone has a role to play** in our unions. Not sure where you fit in? Take this fun and easy quiz at nea.org/quiz!

✓ **Read your union contract.** Circle parts you have questions about and meet with your union rep to learn more.

✓ **Show that you are a union member.** Get an awesome poster for your classroom at nea.org/UnionBulletin. And wear your local union T-shirt. You have a federally protected right to show that you're a union member!



Grow Your Union

✓ **Take the next step!** We build union power by increasing membership. Talk to your building rep about getting involved in back-to-school membership drives.

✓ **Use NEA organizing tools** to anticipate common questions. For example: "Are you sure unions are legal here?" Answer: "Unions are legal everywhere! In states where we can't collectively bargain, we still meet as a union with lawmakers, school board members, and administrators from all political parties to talk about better pay and working conditions."

✓ **Text BACK2SCHOOL to 48744 for resources, including NEA's guide to transformational conversations.**

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There was a time when manufacturing jobs symbolized shared progress and determination. With changing times, these critical roles have been unfairly diminished, seen not as esteemed professions but as fallback options. The work that forged industries, built our infrastructure, and raised our cities has been marginalized, viewed through a faulty lens that those who pursue these careers simply didn't "make it."

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