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January 2025

neaToday

Victory!

Social Security restored for millions of educators.

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Do You Dread the Grocery Bill?

FIND OUT HOW EDUCATORS ARE FIGHTING FOR BETTER PAY

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Silencing Cellphones in Class PAGE 28

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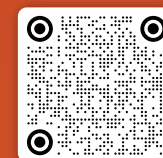
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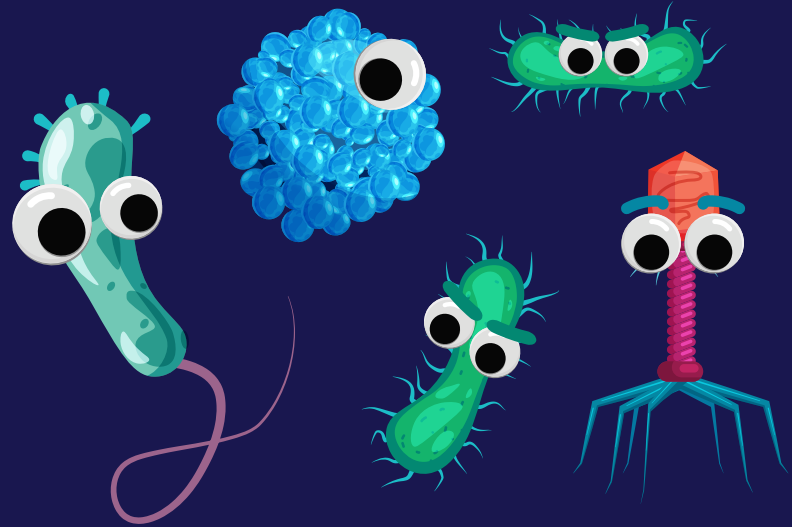
COVER: JUSTIN GREEN. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JUSTIN GREEN; REBECCA ALLEN; ALAN GRANT



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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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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.



VANDERPORT



GILZOW



PETERSON



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FERRONI

MIDWEST

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ESPEJO



TILLERY



BEAN



GILL

WEST

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JESSUP



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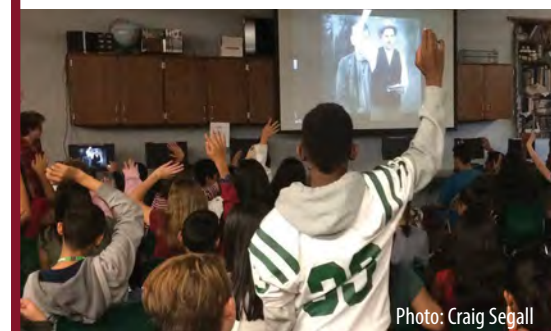


Photo: Craig Segall

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For more information, visit the Education Programs page at www.fords.org or email VirtualFieldTrips@fords.org.

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
NEA President



“

Educators dedicate their lives to public service, but when it is time to retire, far too many find that they were stripped of the Social Security benefits they earned. Public service workers advocated for four decades for this wrong to be righted. We are grateful that members of Congress put aside partisan politics to come together and do what was right: Pass the Social Security Fairness Act!

—Becky, in December, after Congress repealed harmful provisions of Social Security law. Read the full story on Page 52.

Face to Face With NEA Members

“You either win or learn.” That’s something my favorite NFL quarterback says—and I love that attitude. (Fly, Eagles, fly!) As educators we know it’s important to learn from both our losses and our wins. No question, our losses in November present major challenges ahead to promote, protect, and strengthen public education, but NEA members also won key races and important ballot measures that will raise education funding and scale back high-stakes testing. Learn more at EdVotes.org.



(Top) Nevada State Education Association members joined me in knocking on doors alongside actors Patton Oswalt and Meredith Salenger (next to me, holding signs). (Bottom) I also joined North Carolina Association of Educators President Tamika Walker Kelly in canvassing with the now-elected State Superintendent Mo Green!

JOIN ME 3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

- 1. Keep it up!**
We know that decisions made by school board members affect everything from your ability to choose the best books for your students to your ability to pay your own bills. Learn to be a more effective advocate at bit.ly/PublicSchoolsStrong.
- 2. Read a book by an African American author.**
February is the National African American Read-In, a time to celebrate and center on African American authors. One of my top picks? Heather McGhee, author of *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. Look for book recommendations for your students at nea.org/ReadAcross.
- 3. Open your 2025 calendar—and put your union meetings on it.**
January is a perfect time to mark up your calendar. Make a note to attend your building or worksite meetings, and take a look at your state affiliate’s events calendar, too. Show up and build a stronger union!

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

In the News: Vouchers

“Vouchers weaken our public schools and limit the opportunities for our students. [They] siphon critical funding from public schools, and we know that 90 percent of our students in America go to public schools. Vouchers redirect that money for 90 percent of our students to private institutions with no accountability. ... In rural areas, the neighborhood public school is most often the community’s economic engine and entertainment hub, with schools playing a vital role in bringing the community together.”

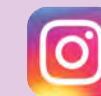
—Becky, on KVUE-ABC, November 13, 2024

What I’ve Been Reading

In 2023, South Carolina teacher Mary Wood asked her AP English students to read one of my favorite books, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, a memoir of his experience of what it’s like to be Black in America. Within days, she was reprimanded and told to stop. In 2024, Wood assigned the book again—and this time her students dove in, learning from Coates how to formulate arguments for their own persuasive essays. In his new book, *The Message*, Coates reflects on the experience of attending a school board meeting in support of Wood and on the conversations he had with her. He focuses on the power of stories, and I encourage you to do the same. Your own story—as an educator, a union member, maybe as a parent, too—has power. Use it.



Keep up with me and the rest of your union family at instagram.com/neatoday.





NEA Grant Helps Local Union Build Power

In Pueblo, Colo., new teachers will finally make more than \$50,000 a year. That's thanks to the advocacy of hundreds of Pueblo Education Association (PEA) members—including 70 percent of the bargaining unit that signed a "photo petition" (above).

The local has grown more powerful in recent years, as more educators have become active in the union.

"I'm really proud of what we've done to bring in more voices and more member engagement," says PEA President Mike Maes, who partly credits an NEA grant for the union's growth. The grant allowed Vice President Justina Carter to be a full-time release leader, which provided her the time needed to connect with members.

For more information on Student-Centered Bargaining and Advocacy Grants, visit nea.org/Bargaining-Grants.

NEA Protects Utah Workers' Rights!

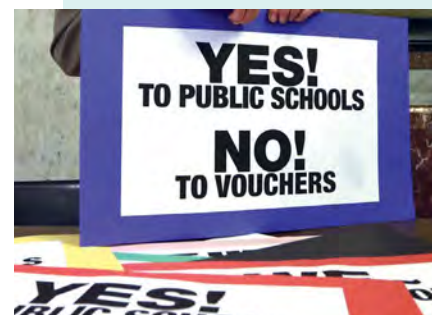
An NEA legislative grant helped the Utah Education Association derail an anti-worker bill that would have required public labor unions to be recertified every five years. The proposal also would have made it illegal to take union dues out of employees' paychecks—making it harder for educators to keep their memberships active. Learn more about the grant at nea.org/LegislativeGrant.



NEA Helps Block Voucher Schemes

Some 90 percent of students in the U.S. attend public schools. That's why NEA is helping state affiliates beat back voucher schemes across the country, so public dollars stay where they belong—in public schools! Here are some 2024 wins:

In Nebraska, Colorado, and Kentucky, voters overwhelmingly rejected school vouchers in the 2024 election. A united coalition of educators, parents, and community members, with NEA support, organized to stop ballot measures in these states. Their success continues a crucial trend: When school vouchers have been put to a vote, they have been defeated.



In Utah, NEA's legal council began litigating a voucher challenge in May on behalf of the Utah Education Association and several individuals. The universal voucher scheme would drain millions of dollars from public schools.

In South Carolina, the state Supreme Court struck down a voucher program that would have siphoned taxpayer dollars to fund private school tuition. This decision, handed down in September, comes after NEA brought the lawsuit on behalf of The South Carolina Education Association, along with six public school parents and the NAACP South Carolina State Conference.

Learn how voucher programs hurt students and educators at nea.org/Vouchers.

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RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND GENDER PAY GAPS PERSIST FOR EDUCATORS

K-12 teachers still make \$18,000 less than other full-time workers who have at least a bachelor's degree. According to the 2024 State of the American Teacher Survey, which provides an annual analysis of K-12 public school teachers across the United States, this pay gap is even more pronounced when broken down by race, ethnicity, and gender. Educators of color and female teachers generally earn less than their White and male peers respectively.

Black teachers, for instance, earn about \$22,000 less than comparable working adults and about \$5,000 less than White and Hispanic teachers.

Female teachers, on average, reported base salaries that were about \$9,000 less than those reported by male teachers.

Closing these pay gaps is challenging due to structural biases, which are embedded in initial salary placement, mandatory disclosure of salary histories during hiring, and the fact that equal pay is not always guaranteed for equal work.

Unions and collective bargaining, however, can significantly reduce pay discrepancies across genders and racial lines.



Unions increase pay equity

In a summary of research on pay gaps, the Center for American Progress concludes that collective bargaining has a significant impact on wage equity. This is how:

1. Wage increases: Unions raise wages for the workers they represent, particularly lower- and middle-income individuals. Since women and People of Color make up the majority of low-wage workers, increased wages help narrow the pay gap for these groups.

2. Objective pay standards: Collective bargaining establishes pay based on objective criteria, such as skills and education. It also sets rules to prevent harmful practices—like pay secrecy, which prohibits employees from discussing their wages with co-workers—and creates mechanisms for enforcement of these standards. This reduces opportunities for discrimination and ensures equal pay for equal work.

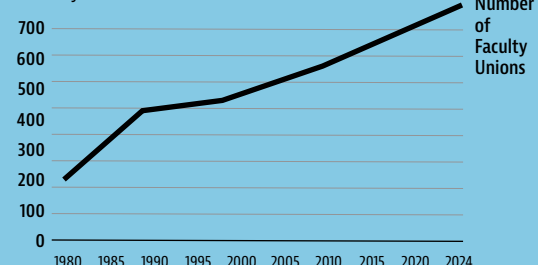
3. Work-life balance: Collective bargaining can secure essential work-life supports—such as paid-leave policies, which can help close the gender pay gap.

A Union Boom in Higher Education

Faculty and graduate-student employees are choosing to unionize, making higher education one of the fastest growing sectors of organized labor, according to Hunter College's National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions. Between 2012 and 2024, the number of unionized faculty grew by 7.5 percent. The number of grad-student employees in unions grew even faster, by 133 percent. Today, about 27 percent of faculty belong to unions, for a total of 402,217 unionized faculty.

Faculty Unions on the Rise

The number of faculty unions in the U.S. has increased steadily since 1976.



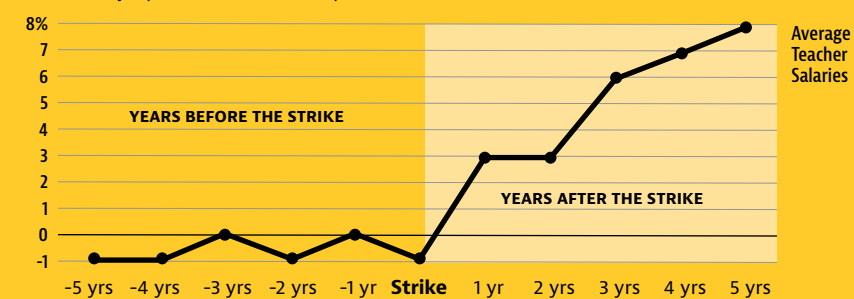
NEW STUDY: EDUCATOR STRIKES LEAD TO BETTER PAY



A first-of-its-kind study has found that teacher strikes lead to increases in pay. Strikes also generate additional per-pupil spending, lower class sizes, and more investment in non-teaching employees, such as nurses and social workers. According to the September 2024 study, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, strikes increase compensation by an average 8 percent—or roughly \$10,000 per teacher per year—by the fifth year after a strike. Strikes also improve working conditions, with student-teacher ratios decreasing by 3.2 percent on average. They also lead to about a 7 percent increase in spending on non-instructional staff, such as social workers and nurses.

The Effect of Strikes on Teacher Salaries

Researchers found that by the fifth year after a strike, teacher salaries had increased by 8 percent, or about \$10K per teacher.



SOURCE: NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH, AUGUST 2024

80%

is the percentage of students ages 13-18 who say they see conspiracy theories on social media at least once a week. Of those teens who reported seeing conspiracy theories, 81 percent reported that they believed at least one of them. Learn more about helping students navigate today's 'infodemic' of misinformation online: nea.org/misinformation.



SOURCE: THE NEWS LITERACY PROJECT, "NEWS LITERACY IN AMERICA: A SURVEY OF TEEN INFORMATION ATTITUDES, HABITS & SKILLS" OCTOBER 2024



Are You a Changeloger?

Rediscover EdTech this February in Seattle



Unite with educators from across the country this February for an edtech experience. Tech leaders, inspired voices and educators eager to learn are encouraged to attend!



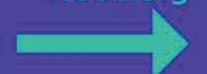
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SCHOOL VOUCHERS ARE A 'COMPREHENSIVE FAILURE'

In the new book, *The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers*, author Josh Cowen explores how school privatization advocates have been able to advance vouchers. This expansion has occurred despite overwhelming evidence showing voucher programs strip funds away from public schools, lack fiscal and academic accountability, and are used primarily by families with children already enrolled in private school. A professor of education policy at Michigan State University, Cowen traces the beginning of the voucher movement from White parents' resistance to integration in the 1950s through to the recent "culture wars." As he recently told *NEA Today*, the overriding goal of privatization has always been to destabilize the institution of public education—and vouchers serve that purpose.

NEA Today: Your book details how the privatization agenda slowly advanced over the past decade or so, but it seems almost like a dam broke a couple of years ago. What happened?

Josh Cowen: If you look at the past decade, you really can't find a more comprehensive failure than vouchers.

So why are voucher bills succeeding now? You can't look at the voucher question in isolation from the political climate we're currently in. Why are we also talking about book bans? Why are there new attacks on LGBTQ+ Americans?

These are things you would have thought were beyond the pale three or four or five years ago. This is about destabilizing public education.

Privatization advocates use phrases like "freedom" and "parents' rights" to shield against the overwhelming evidence that vouchers are a failure.

JC: Right. The talking point, "As long as the parents are happy, it's fine," has been around forever. We need to acknowledge and affirm the importance of parents as partners in the education space, but "parents' rights" has deeply negative and nefarious historical connotations, dating all the way back to the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* world, where your "rights" meant you got to segregate your child.



Public school advocates have scored some significant victories, pushing back voucher bills in some pretty red states. What are some lessons there?

JC: It's hard to overstate how much these voucher schemes are opposed by many rural Republicans in state legislatures. Schools are often the biggest employers in their district. They know the school board members and the superintendents, who are like mayors in those communities.

Public school advocacy groups are working really hard on the ground to push these bills back, and as long as those rural lawmakers are in office, those alliances are absolutely critical in fighting these bills.

What do you see over the next few years?

JC: We need to continue to oppose vouchers and school privatization and the radicalism that has undermined public schools.

At the same time, the positive, forward-looking policy is to fully fund public education. For years, the right wing said all we're doing is throwing money at a problem without academic results. It was kind of taken as gospel. As it turns out, we have strong research, based in social science, that shows that investments in public schools do have direct payoff over the short run and over the long run—on academics and on later-in-life outcomes like wages.

RECORD HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS PARTICIPATION

More than 8 million high schoolers are participating in school-sponsored sports—an all-time high, according to a survey by the National Federation of State High School Associations. The survey found that sports participation grew by 210,469 to 8,062,302 from the school years 2022 – 2023 to 2023 – 2024. The previous participation record was 7,980,886, set in 2017 – 2018. One driver of the increase is the growing popularity of girls flag football. Almost 42,000 girls participated in flag football in 2023 – 2024, compared with 21,000 the previous year.

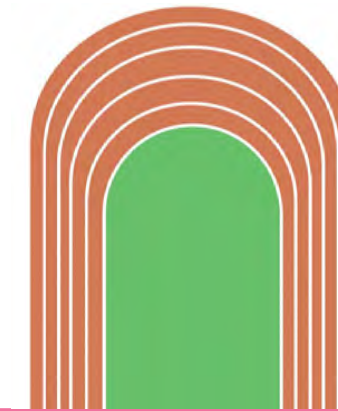
Top 10 Boys Programs (2023 – 2024)

SPORT	PARTICIPANTS
1. Football—11 Player	1,031,508
2. Track and Field—Outdoor	625,333
3. Basketball	536,668
4. Baseball	471,701
5. Soccer	467,483
6. Wrestling	291,874
7. Cross Country	239,381
8. Tennis	157,835
9. Golf	155,174
10. Swimming & Diving	116,799



Top 10 Girls Programs (2023 – 2024)

SPORT	PARTICIPANTS
1. Track and Field—Outdoor	506,015
2. Volleyball	479,125
3. Soccer	383,895
4. Basketball	367,284
5. Softball—Fast Pitch	345,451
6. Tennis	195,766
7. Cross Country	192,969
8. Competitive Spirit (Cheer)	181,023
9. Swimming & Diving	138,174
10. Lacrosse	101,204

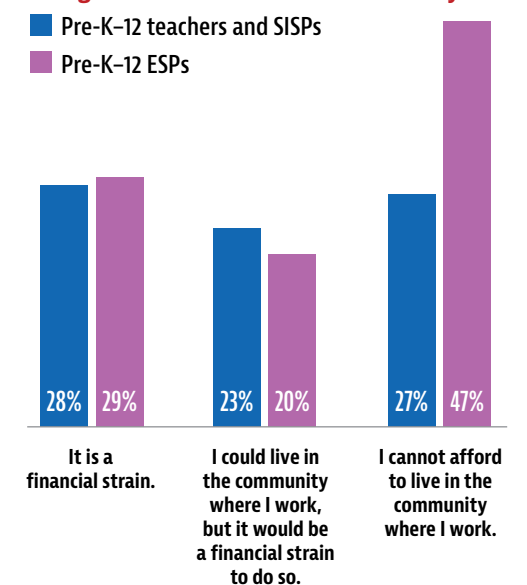


Can Educators Afford to Work Where They Live?

Despite recent increases in the average salary for public school teachers, when adjusted for inflation, they and other school staff are still making less than they were a decade ago. Housing prices and inflation have increased steadily over the past few years. According to a recent NEA survey, more than half of pre-K–12 teachers, education support professionals (ESPs), and specialized instructional support personnel (SISPs) (non-classroom educators) live in the community in which they work. But many find it a financial strain to do so.



Educators say they have financial difficulty living in the communities in which they work.



SOURCE: NEA MEMBER SURVEY, MAY 2024 – JULY 2024

DOES TAX FAIRNESS MATTER FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

YES! JUST ASK YOUR COLLEAGUES IN MASSACHUSETTS.

By Amanda Litvinov

Special education paraprofessional Susan Soares spent much of her free time in fall 2022 standing at the busiest intersection of her hometown of Arlington, Mass., with a sign that said, “YES on 1!” She was there to talk to passersby about a ballot measure that would make the state’s tax system more fair and also support public schools and transportation.

Soares was one of thousands of Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) members who worked with the Raise Up Massachusetts coalition to explain the Fair Share Amendment.

Their goal was to educate voters on two points: First, that the measure would affect only the top 0.5 percent of Massachusetts earners, adding a 4 percent tax on income after the first \$1 million. Second, all of that revenue would go to public education—pre-K through higher ed—and public transportation.

“I explained that the money would help their district get what their students really need,” Soares says. “Do they need reading support? Whatever it is, I want that for them, and this measure would help.”



Susan Soares

As time would tell, the measure would do all that and more.

Voters passed the measure in November 2022, amending the state’s constitution—which had required a flat 5 percent tax on all earners since 1915. The effort was worth it. As MTA and allies predicted, the measure has brought in over \$2 billion!

MTA advocated for one of the first major investments made with the funds: universal school meals, which passed the state legislature with bipartisan support in 2023.

“We’re proud to be a state that has universal school meals,” says MTA President Max Page. “If you’re talking about improving schools, you simply can’t do it if kids are hungry.”

Other equity-boosting investments include tuition-free community college and tuition- and fee-free attendance at public universities for students with family incomes under \$75,000.

Fair Share funds have also been used for much-needed school construction projects and major upgrades to public transportation. “[These] matter to our students and families, too,” Page says.

Read on to see how a “millionaire’s tax” can transform education budgets.

DID YOU KNOW?

FAIR SHARE TAX MEASURES ASK THE WEALTHIEST CITIZENS—WHO PAY LESS OF THEIR INCOME IN TAXES THAN THE REST OF US—TO PAY THEIR FAIR SHARE.

CASE STUDY MASSACHUSETTS: How Tax Fairness Lifts Public Schools and Boosts Equity

7 YEARS

is the time it took for Rise Up Massachusetts—a coalition that includes the Massachusetts Teachers Association—to pass the Fair Share Amendment.

\$1 BILLION

is the amount of revenue generated by the Fair Share tax in its first year (July 2023 – June 2024).

4% is the increase in taxes on income over \$1 million.

0.5% is the percentage of Massachusetts residents affected by the tax.

\$2 BILLION

is the amount the Fair Share tax is on track to generate in the second year (July 2024 – June 2025).

K-12 Schools

\$244.5 MILLION

- School meals (\$170 million).
- Boost to per pupil spending (\$37 million).
- Early literacy for pre-K through third grade (\$20 million).
- Clean energy public school infrastructure upgrades (\$10 million).
- Development of statewide framework for youth mental and behavioral health (\$5 million).
- Expansion of early-college, workforce, and technical-pathway programs (\$2.5 million).

Public Colleges & Universities

\$239 MILLION

- Financial aid for students (\$90 million).
- Tuition-free community college for all students beginning in fall 2024 (\$117.5 million).
- Supports for students, such as child care, counseling, and transportation assistance for those enrolled in public colleges (\$16.5 million).
- An endowment-match program for public colleges and universities (\$15 million).

TAKE ACTION

NEA is part of a coalition demanding tax fairness at the federal level. Learn more about Fair Share America and support the cause at FairShareUSA.org.



PARAEDUCATORS NEED A RAISE!

UNDERPAID THROUGHOUT HISTORY, PARAEDUCATORS ARE WORKING THROUGH THEIR UNIONS TO GET THE RAISES THEY DESERVE

By Cindy Long

Paraeducator Rebecca Winters would welcome administrators and legislators to spend a day in the classroom with her or any of her paraeducator colleagues.

"It's easy to make decisions behind a desk," she says. "It's not easy to spend days in a classroom with high-need students and observe how hard this job is—to see how draining it can be, how abusive, and how emotionally exhausting it is to take on challenging students."

Despite these difficulties, the rewards of helping kids are huge. Winters has worked at Hamilton Elementary School, in Port Angeles, Wash., for 20 years, and still loves her job. All she asks is that paraeducators get paid a living wage for the critical services they provide.

Her situation echoes that of paraeducators around the country—and it is not new. The long history of undervaluing paraeducators goes back to the beginning, when these positions were first introduced in schools.

"In the 1960s, districts started to bring in school aides, sometimes called teachers' aides, or auxiliaries, who'd eventually become known as

paraprofessionals and paraeducators," says Nick Juravich, assistant professor of history and labor studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. "It started with the baby boom years. Suddenly there were a lot more kids in schools, and the hiring of teachers wasn't keeping pace with the amount of students."

Administrators needed more staff, but wanted them to work for less pay. "The purpose was to free up teachers to teach and not get bogged down by disruptions that are inevitable in growing class sizes," Juravich says.

In the late 1960s, New York paraeducators unionized with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). The paraeducator contract of UFT became a model for local unions nationwide, but the problems of low salaries and a lack of respect persist to this day.

But there is some good news. District by district, paraeducators are organizing to get the raises they deserve.

Paras strike in Washington

Just last spring, in Washington state, the Port Angeles School District received a 39.8 percent boost in funding, in part to raise wages for paraeducators and

(Opposite) Teacher's aides have been underpaid since they were introduced in the 1960s. (Below, top and bottom) In 2023, paraeducators in Andover, Mass., fight for respect and better pay, with support from their kids. (Below, middle) In 2024, paras in Port Angeles, Wash., strike for better wages.

other support staff. But when paras asked for a 3.7 percent cost of living increase, the district refused to give them a raise.

The union went on a weeklong strike, with support from the community and the district's teachers. Finally, they came to a collective bargaining agreement with the district. Paraeducators won about a 3.4 percent increase.

That's progress, but salaries were so low that the raise amounts to an increase of about 50 cents an hour.

Why did it take a strike to get this modest cost of living increase?

It's a profound lack of respect, says Winters, who is president of the Port Angeles Paraeducators Association.

"Paraeducator worth, is outdated and unappreciated," Winters says.

The fight for respect in Massachusetts

On the opposite side of the country, in Massachusetts, paraeducators are also fighting to change this grievous legacy. During the last academic year, Holly Currier earned about \$30,000 as an instructional assistant in Andover, Mass., one of the wealthiest towns in the state.

Currier works in seven high school social studies classes, supporting the physical, academic, emotional, and social needs of students who have special education plans. In some classes, she has as many as a dozen students. On the toughest days, it's just about helping them get through the door, she says.

Currier's mother is an instructional assistant (IA) in the same district. She can't afford to continue living in her Andover home, nor can she afford to retire.

"She may not be able to remain here," Currier says.

The picture is brighter after winning a new contract—a victory fueled by the union's bargaining power. Now Andover's starting pay for IAs has increased from \$24,537 to \$39,142 per year. By the end of the four-year contract, the highest paid IAs will be earning \$50,103.



the autonomy and choices we have when we end up in the public sector and choose to serve children."

This gendered component is also rooted in the history of the paraeducator profession, Juravich says.

"A core and cruel paradox of this work is that while they are seen as critical, they are also seen as 'care workers' ... and are feminized," he adds. "Careers that have traditionally been held by women are devalued."

Paraprofessionals play key roles in early education, special education, language acquisition, culturally relevant education, and family engagement, Juravich points out, but they are perpetually underpaid.

"We find ourselves in this moment even today," he says. ❄️

"It's a significant material gain for those workers, and a statement that we're not going to allow public schools to operate on the exploitation of this workforce," says Andover Education Association President Matt Bach, who notes that almost all IAs are women, and many are People of Color.

Currier, who now earns \$33,000 annually, agrees that the contract was transformational, but many employees started from a very low wage.

"There's a really gendered component to this," she says. That limits



(Left) Richard Goodall on *America's Got Talent*. (Opposite, from top) Goodall with celebrity judges, left to right, Howie Mandel, Simon Cowell, Heidi Klum, and Sofia Vergara, and host Terry Crews; Goodall belts out the Journey anthem "Don't Stop Believin'" during the season finale.

INDIANA'S 'SINGING JANITOR' WINS \$1 MILLION ON AMERICA'S GOT TALENT!

"I've never been west of Missouri, I've never been on a plane. They put plane tickets on my phone, and I said, 'You've got to go.'"

—Custodian Richard Goodall, winner of *America's Got Talent*.

How did school custodian Richard Goodall become a rock star almost overnight? He captured fans' hearts on Season 19 of *America's Got Talent* (AGT)! It was all about "taking small chances," said Goodall, in an interview with *TV Insider*.

Goodall's journey began at West Vigo Elementary School, in Terre Haute, Ind., where he earned the affectionate nicknames the "singing janitor" and "Mr. Richard." In 2022, he performed at a school talent show, belting out the 1980s anthem "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey. As soon as he launched into the first verse, the atmosphere transformed. Soon students were on their feet and dancing.

When a teacher shared a video of Goodall's performance on social media, it quickly amassed millions of views. Former Journey front man Steve Perry even commented on the post. Before long, AGT's producers took notice and invited Goodall to audition for celebrity judges Howie Mandel, Heidi Klum, Sofia Vergara, and Simon Cowell.

Mr. Richard's dream comes true

When Cowell asked Goodall to share his big dream, his response was simple and heartfelt: "I love to sing." And sing he did, prompting Klum to hit the golden buzzer, which propelled Goodall from the audition stage straight to the quarterfinals.

"I've been singing in the halls for 23 years," Goodall said during the competition. "I know how lucky I am to be here, and it's not wasted on me."

His soaring performances of Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" and Michael Bolton's "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You" advanced him to the finale, which aired on Sept. 17.

Goodall capped off the season with another Journey classic, "Faithfully," leaving both the audience and the judges in awe.

Klum said, "You are such an amazing man—so humble and so kind. You're a bit quiet, but not when you're behind the microphone; then you're a big rock star." She added, "I want you to win this so badly, Richard."

Cowell chimed in: "We all need a hero right now, and you are our hero."

"You do what you do and don't think it's special," said Goodall. "This is the kind of stuff you see in movies."

After he won the grand prize, he shared, "My life has been transformed."

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ

View Richard Goodall's AGT performances at bit.ly/AGT-RichardGoodall.

PHOTO: TRAE PATTON/NBC



Q and A:

Meet AGT Winner Richard Goodall

By Joel Berger

NEA Today: When did you start singing in the school hallways?

Richard Goodall: It started in elementary schools. West Vigo is just my latest one. I've been in about three or four different schools, and I have [sung] pretty much all my life.

On Veterans Day, I would sing "God Bless the USA." But 2022 was a different year. Teachers asked me if I wanted to sing in the talent show. They said, "Just pick whatever song you want." I picked, "Don't Stop Believin'." The video took off, and then I got noticed by *America's Got Talent* (AGT), and here I am today.

Why do you think your performance at the school talent show spoke to so many people?

RG: I don't know. It was filmed on a Thursday afternoon. That Friday morning, I was scrubbing the floor,

because it was just before school was getting out for the summer. That morning, it was at 100,000 views. By the end of the weekend, it was at a million. When it reached 3 million, Journey and Steve Perry commented on it. Steve Perry put it on all of his social media.

How did you end up on AGT?

RG: I was supposed to be a part of Season 18 and, for whatever reason, I got dropped. After Season 18 was over, AGT judge Howie Mandel found the initial video and reposted it on his TikTok. The caption said, "Needs to be on AGT."

Then a senior producer reached out and asked if I wanted to be on the show. I said, "My shot's gone." He said, "I can't believe we dropped the ball on this."

Four months later—I've never been west of Missouri, I've never been on a plane. They put plane tickets on my phone, and I said, "You've got to go. You've got to get your shot."

What was your school community's reaction to your big win?

RG: I think people—not just Terre Haute, not just Indiana, Illinois, Ohio—people in general just needed a boost. A pick-me-up, you know. And the one wonderful thing that I've enjoyed out of all of this is there were families sitting in front of the TV again, rooting for me.

My hometown has just been over the moon. I'm getting ready to walk into my grocery store, and I'll have to take about three or four selfies before I can get through the line. To me, that's great!

What's next for you?

RG: Sky is the limit. Opportunities are coming in, and life for me and my wife, Angie, is unscripted. So, we'll see what happens. 🌟

PHOTOS: TRAE PATTON/NBC

OUR VOICES

quick takes

FILL IN THE BLANK:
ALL EDUCATORS DESERVE

!



To come home alive.

—Erin Hodel, Indiana

“ R.E.S.P.E.C.T. ”
—Brenda W.

Bathroom breaks,
lunch breaks, and
weekends/evenings
free from emails.

—Kim H.

A raise!!

—Roger M.

THE RIGHT TO UNIONIZE AND STRIKE.

—Victor A.

To be treated and paid like professionals.

—Jamie Gonzalez Downing, Washington



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Funding.
Gratitude.

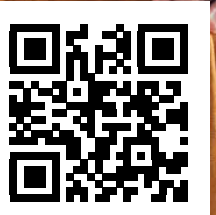
—Gail A.

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WORLD HISTORY IS ABOUT MORE THAN EUROPE

TEACHING STUDENTS TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT OUR TEXTBOOKS

By Jenna Vandenberg,
Washington Education Association

My high school world history students are burdened with a rather Eurocentric textbook. The lackluster tome devotes more than 80 pages to the French Revolution and two pages to the Haitian Revolution.

The book also does not contrast the European Dark Ages with the Golden Age of Islam, even though they took place during similar time periods. And WWI apparently only affected Europeans and Americans.

To help my students think about this, I assign each student a section of the textbook. They read about how men from Spain, France, and Britain explored the Americas, kick-started the Scientific Revolution, became “enlightened,” colonized the world, and fought the Nazis.

I ask students to think about who had power in those pages, and on what continent those people lived. Then I ask each student to write the continent on an index card.

Over 90 percent of my students write “Europe.” Then the students make a bar graph on the classroom wall. I write the names of the continents

on index cards and tape them to the bottom of the graph to create the x-axis. Students tape their index cards above the corresponding continent to create the vertical bars of the graph.

Looking beyond the pages

As the European bar begins to rise above the other continents (See photo at right), I start to hear “racist textbook” whispered around the classroom.

Students aren’t quite sure if they can say such a thing, despite the visual evidence right there on the wall.

I assure students that their whispered thoughts are valid. I provide a few definitions for the word “racism.” I also teach them the words “ethnocentric” and “Eurocentric.”

We discuss whether the textbook is racist, Eurocentric, ethnocentric, or all three. Different classes come to different conclusions. I don’t try to steer them toward one word or the other.

Finally, I ask students what we should do about this. I have them write and discuss in small groups, and then share out. Sometimes students focus



Jenna Vandenberg



on systematic change. They want to write to the school board, the curriculum committee, and the textbook publishers. So we do. I buy stamps, teach lessons on writing letters, and show them how to address an envelope.

Some students’ responses have more to do with the classroom itself. They’ll speak about the need to look for different perspectives as we learn. They’ll discuss the need to look outside the textbook for information. If their discussion moves this way, I teach the students how to research effectively and include a research component in all of their essays.

I promise the students that I’ll do my part by supplementing the textbook with material that highlights voices from around the world. We take a look at my classroom bookshelves and analyze the representation found there.

Filling in historical gaps

Students often want to know why historians have left so many voices out of the textbook. This makes for a great research topic.

Last year, I taught the class about Polynesian wayfinders. The Pacific

Islanders used the stars, sun, moon, and other signals from nature to navigate the ocean and settle remote islands, but had been left out of historical narratives about exploration. Western historians erroneously believed the Polynesians were incapable of traveling across the Pacific.

We read about how the Polynesian Voyaging Society, formed in 1973, built a canoe called *Hōkūle‘a* and sailed around the world using only ancient wayfinding techniques. This proved the Western historians wrong.

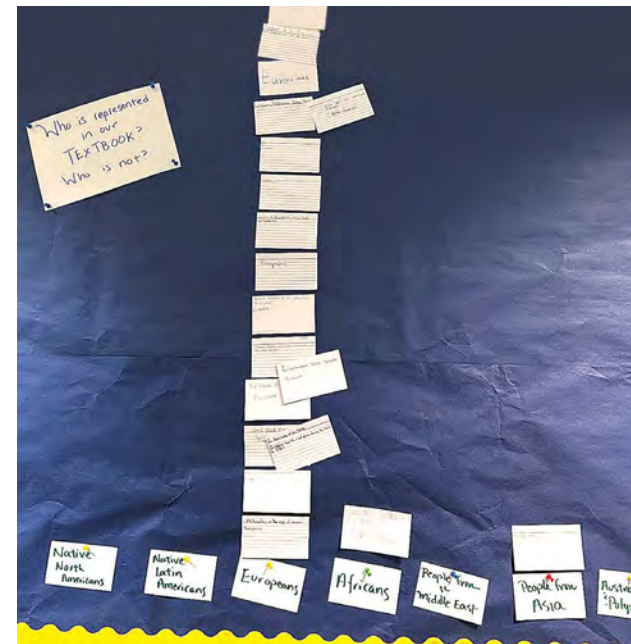
Then students learn about other explorers who do not appear in their textbook. I divide them into groups, each researching a different explorer.

They learn about the Islamic adventurer Ibn Battuta, who spent 30 years traveling the world in the Middle Ages; the 14th-century West African ruler Mansa Musa, who made a 4,000-mile pilgrimage across the Sahara to Mecca; the 13th-century Chinese admiral Zheng He, who led seven ocean voyages to explore lands around the Indian Ocean; or Sacagawea, the Lemhi Shoshone woman who traveled with the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Although I teach high school students, I often turn to picture books first. The visuals and context clues make the language accessible to most learners. When the textbook discusses Hernán Cortés, my students also read Duncan Tonatiuh’s picture books about Mexihcah word painters and biographies about ancient Aztecs.

When the textbook discusses the French Revolution, we talk about how it inspired the Haitian

Who is represented? Using notecards, Vandenberg’s students graph the cultures they read about in their world history text. Almost all of the cards are in the European column.



Where to Find Books for Inclusive Teaching

- Explore NEA’s Read Across America calendar at nea.org/ReadAcross.
- Check out the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People list, which offers diverse picture books on most social studies topics. Visit socialstudies.org/notable-trade-books.
- Find critically reviewed multicultural and social justice books for children, young adults, and educators at socialjusticebooks.org/booklists.

Revolution. My students read *Freedom Soup* by Tami Charles, a picture book that shows a family making a traditional New Year’s soup and explains Haitian independence.

After reading the story, we study the back matter. The author’s notes and timelines are a treasure trove of suggestions for further research.

I keep the student’s graph up on the wall all year long. Every few days something will come up in the news, in school, or in our lessons about representation. In the middle of a discussion about book banning or the media’s treatment of a specific topic, a student will simply point to the graph. The rest of the class will nod sagely.

They know what is going on. And they know that learning multiple perspectives is the only way to get to the truth.

—Jenna Vandenberg teaches high school world history and civics, in Seattle. Follow her @JennaVandenberg on Substack.

TRY
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Technology

CREATE PODCASTS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

GET STARTED WITH
THESE FOUR EASY
PROJECTS

By Jeff Bradbury,
Connecticut Education
Association

Over the last few years, the popularity of podcasts has skyrocketed, and many teachers are introducing audio and video activities in the classroom. For some educators, however, the thought of developing these projects can be intimidating. But I promise, you don't need to be the world's greatest podcaster to make these projects successful.

Since 2011, I have worked with classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and district administrators to implement audio and video projects. They range from simple activities to live morning announcements to full community-based podcasts with professional-looking YouTube channels.

Classroom audio/video projects can take many shapes, but there is always a way to use these projects to enhance learning and give students a chance to tell their stories.

That's because most of today's students walk around with a (semi-) professional podcasting studio in their backpacks. Their laptops, tablets, or

mobile phones serve as video camera, microphone, and editing equipment. To get started, try these four simple projects that will engage students of all ages and will meet your core curricular and digital learning standards.

Project 1: One student, one device

One of my favorite starter podcasting projects is to ask students to turn on their Chromebook camera application, hit the record button, and share everything they know about the lesson—which could include a science project, a book report, or any other topic.

You can give students prompts, or have them write a few paragraphs and make a video-recording of themselves reading it. This usually helps students get over stage fright.

Project 2: Two students, one device

Invite two students to sit in front of their camera application and have a simple conversation. This could be a question-and-answer session that is written ahead of time.



A variation would be to divide all students into groups of two, and then have them record Q&A sessions on different topics related to your lesson. At the end of the project, the students have an audio or video study guide that covers the entire chapter of study.

Project 3: Multiple students, one fun experiment

What happens if you have science students engaged in a lab and want to make sure they understand key concepts? You can turn the lab into a wild variation of Kitchen Stadium from the cooking show *Top Chef!*

Ask one student in each group to act as the documentarian, who will interview the students in their group while the activity is happening.

They need to capture the "Who, What, Where, Why, and How" of the project. After the lab is over, students edit their work, telling the story of the activity through audio, video, photos, or a fun slide deck.

Project 4: Turn traditional essays into interactive podcasts

One of my favorite activities to do with students is to take a traditional five-paragraph essay and kick it up a notch. The first paragraph gets recorded by the entire group. The three body paragraphs each get recorded by a different student. The last paragraph becomes a closing conversation by the entire group. Learn about this activity at bit.ly/fiveparagraph.

Meet Digital Learning Standards

Audio and video projects, like podcasting, meet each of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Digital Learning Standards—a set of seven guidelines. Find out how at nea.org/ISTEPodcasting.

—Jeff Bradbury is an author, podcaster, and creator of the TeacherCast Educational Network.



Jeff Bradbury



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I DON'T WANT TO BE THE PHONE POLICE

By Tim Walker

A TEACHER-LED MOVEMENT IS TRANSFORMING CELLPHONE POLICIES—AND HELPING STUDENTS FOCUS ON LEARNING

Two years ago, art teacher Devon Espejo attached a storage shelf with 36 pockets to her classroom wall. Before every class, her students stash their cellphones here, in what has become known as the “cellphone hotel.” Espejo was one of the few educators at San Marcos High School, in Santa Barbara, Calif., to adopt this measure before cellphone hotels became districtwide policy during the 2024 – 2025 school year.

“It’s better now that we all have them,” Espejo says. “A more uniform approach will help us control these devices in the classroom.”

At least during instructional time, students’ cellphones in Santa Barbara Unified School District (SBUSD) will be out of reach, out of sight, and (hopefully, eventually) out of mind. Better late than never.

Espejo and her colleagues had been dealing with these disruptions for years, and they were fed up. “In addition to all the other things we’re expected to do, we were policing cellphones by

implementing our own rules,” Espejo explains. “It was exhausting and not what I am here to do. I don’t want to be the phone police. I want to teach.”

SBUSD is just one of a rapidly growing number of districts across the country that have enacted some form of cellphone ban in schools.

And in many communities, it has been up to educators and their unions to make the case that the status quo is unacceptable.

“No one else was going to do it,” says Noelle Gilzow, a science teacher and president of the Columbia Missouri National Education Association (CMNEA). “Our No. 1 job is creating a sound and effective learning environment. Cellphones were making that impossible.”

Devon Espejo

Enough is enough

At press time, 15 states had passed laws or enacted policies that ban or restrict students’ use of cellphones in schools. And seven of the nation’s 20 largest school districts forbid use of cellphones during the school day.



Missouri science teacher Noelle Gilzow says schools need clear and consistent cellphone policies.

“Our No. 1 job is creating a sound and effective learning environment. Cellphones were making that impossible.”

—Noelle Gilzow

This new momentum behind state and local regulations did not happen overnight, says Victor Pereira, a lecturer on education and co-chair of the Teaching and Technology Leadership Program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. “This is really just the culmination of a decade and a half of schools trying to solve the problem of how much cellphones distract students from being engaged in learning.”

As smartphone ownership among young people started to accelerate 15 or so years ago, many districts banned the devices. A few years later, under pressure from parents, many reversed course—even as the word “addiction” emerged to describe teenagers’ reliance on their smartphones. Remote learning during the pandemic exacerbated this dependency, which then followed students back into the classroom.

A 2023 student survey by Common Sense Media found that, on a typical day, the average student receives hundreds of cellphone notifications, about a quarter of which arrive during the school day. That’s a lot of pings—and distractions—during instructional hours.

“Students are so reassured by that sound. They’re flipping it over and looking at the

screen without even realizing that they’re doing it,” Gilzow says.

A 2024 NEA poll found that 90 percent of teachers supported prohibiting student cellphone use during instructional hours. And 75 percent favored extending restrictions to the entire school day.

Educators are deeply concerned about the impact social media has on students’ mental health and believe those negative effects are another reason to limit access to phones at school, according to the survey. But the biggest concern about social media use in schools is the constant disruptions to learning.

“If the phone is in their hands, there is zero engagement, zero focus,” says Kim Tilton, a science teacher at San Marcos High School. “That’s the experience we were all having, and it became a major working condition issue for us.”

‘Off and away’

While school and district leaders acknowledge the challenges with cellphones, too many of them have avoided enacting formal restrictions, saying that a uniform policy would be complicated, controversial, and even unnecessary.

I DON'T WANT TO BE THE PHONE POLICE

Many districts' "advice" to educators? Do what is best for your individual classrooms. Enforce it yourself. And good luck.

"The district didn't really want to get involved or even make any effort to get feedback from us," Tilton recalls. "This had to be a teacher-led movement."

Tilton, who is an at-large representative for the Santa Barbara Teachers Association (SBTA), stepped into this leadership void. In 2021, she surveyed members about their views on cellphone use in schools. SBTA then presented the data to district leaders and successfully persuaded them to take the issue seriously.

In 2022, discussions between SBTA and the district led to a new policy called "Off and Away." After a slow rollout, the policy was fully launched in 2024, with "phone hotels" in every classroom across three high schools. Unless a student has a health exception, all phones must be checked in before class begins. The devices stay there during restroom breaks, but students can get their phones after class and use them during lunch and other breaks.

"Initially, Off and Away was more of a suggestion," Espejo says. "But the district came out stronger this past year, so the hotels became a uniform policy."

At Red Bank Regional High School, in Little Silver, N.J., English teacher Cassandra Dorn piloted her own cellphone hotel (an over-the-door shoe holder) in her classroom, in 2023. With the support of her colleagues and the administration, the practice became schoolwide policy last year. "An overwhelming majority of my colleagues see phones in the classroom as a major hurdle to effective instruction," Dorn says.

And in Missouri, a collaboration between CMNEA and Columbia Public Schools led to the adoption of new school cellphone regulations.

During the lead-up to contract bargaining, CMNEA surveyed members about their top issues. Unrestricted student access to cellphones was cited by 61 percent of respondents as their top concern about working conditions.

Educators asked the district to devise a new policy restricting access. Despite officials' reluctance, CMNEA persisted, and in April 2024,

the district approved new regulations.

Beginning this school year, cellphone use is no longer allowed in any high school classroom in Columbia public schools, and phones must be "out of sight" during instructional time. In middle schools, cellphone use will not be allowed at any time during the entire school day.

Concerns from parents

When designing and implementing a new policy, the voices of all stakeholders must be considered, Pereira says.

"You need to listen to everyone—educators, students, family, parents, and school leaders," he advises. "This is a complex issue, and all those folks come with very different perspectives."

Consistency is also critical.

"If the policy isn't clear and consistent in a school, you get a slippery slope," Gilzow cautions. "You have the 'cool' teacher who lets me use my cellphone in class. And then there is the 'mean' teacher who does not. Not only will the policy fail, but it also confuses students and

can set up a bad dynamic, an unhealthy culture in the building."

Any plan to restrict cellphones will draw concerns from at least a few parents. A recent poll by the National Parents Union found that 78 percent of parents want their children to have cellphone access during the school day in case there is an emergency.

In Santa Barbara, parents have been largely supportive, but some still have concerns, Espejo reports. They have legitimate worries about being able to reach their kids for a variety of reasons, but schools in the district have systems in place to handle emergencies, along with potential work-arounds to provide another access point for communication.

Ken Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, cautions that cellphone communication during an emergency can actually increase safety risks.

"During a lockdown, for example, students should be listening to the adults in the school who are giving life-saving instructions, working



Art teacher Devon Espejo was one of the first educators in her school to install a cellphone "hotel" in her classroom.



are prohibited from carrying or using phones in the hallways. "The school is taking this seriously, and hopefully that will make a difference," Dorn says.

At San Marcos, Espejo also struggles with the school's complicated reporting processes. She would like a system that sends parents a text if their child breaks the rules or has their phone taken away. The district already notifies parents via text if their student is absent or late to school.

"I would love to send messages to parents that's just like one click," she says. "Otherwise, there's too much red tape."

The policy in Santa Barbara has been in effect for only a few months, but the initial reviews from educators are positive. They report greater engagement, lower stress levels, and, on the whole, widespread acceptance.

"It was a long journey, but the district did listen to us," Tilton says. "That's the power of having a strong union. Our collective voice brought us a new systemic cellphone policy."

"Cracks are going to appear, and we just need to patch them, keep everyone on board," she cautions. "We will continue to lead on this, because our feedback, our ideas should be front and center. We know what works and what doesn't." 🦋

PUSHBACK FROM PARENTS AND STUDENTS MAKES CELLPHONE POLICIES HARD TO ENFORCE IN SCHOOLS.

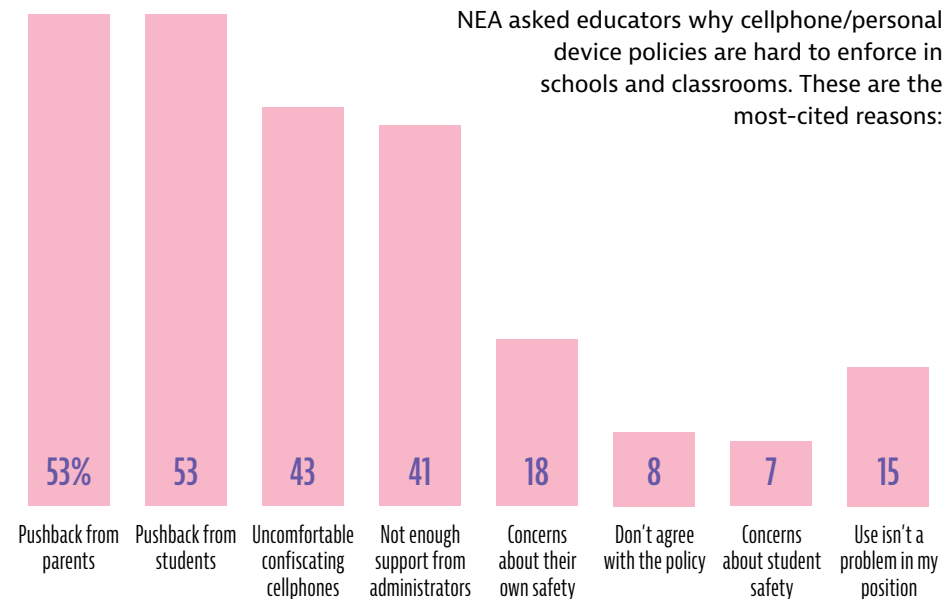


CHART SOURCE: NEA MEMBER SURVEY, 2024

to keep them safe," Trump explains. "Phones can distract from that. Silence can also be key, so you also don't want that phone noise attracting attention."

Trump understands the emotional security phones can provide. "I get it. I'm a parent too. But schools need to have these conversations upfront and explain the rationale behind new cellphone policies. The disruption to the educational environment is something parents understand."

Espejo says most parents do appreciate the challenges educators face in monitoring and controlling the devices during class. "We understand why some parents are uncomfortable with the policy," she adds. "But if they were to sit through a class with kids who have access to their phones and then sat through one where phones were not allowed, they would endorse it."

Patching the cracks

Enforcement is another perennial challenge. Students can be tricky. Some will lie about not having a phone, or they will put other things in the hotels to try to trick teachers, Espejo reports.

And Dorn acknowledges that the policy at Red Bank became less effective over the course of the last school year.

"Overall, I would say it was a qualified success, but there was some discipline fatigue, with the red tape involved in referrals," she explains. "It can become a question of priorities, and some chose the priority of teaching rather than policing."

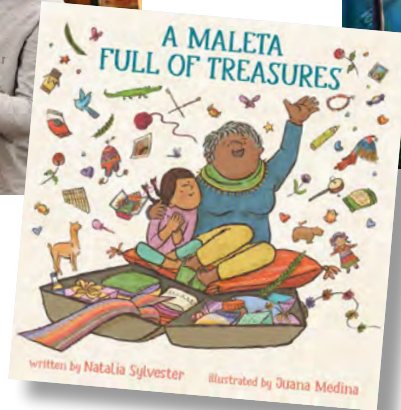
In 2024, however, the administration decided to extend the restrictions. Students must still use the cellphone hotels, but also



How do NEA members feel about cellphones in classrooms?

Check out the results from NEA's survey on Page 56.

It's Time to Read Across America!



THESE NEA-RECOMMENDED BOOKS HELP STUDENTS GROW AND LEARN

By Cindy Long

Celebrate books all year long with NEA's Read Across America calendar. For every month of the year, Read Across offers themes and book recommendations, along with lesson plans and discussion ideas.

The January theme is "Find Your Way," featuring books that prepare students to navigate life's challenges and adventures. Explore these great reads and check out more online at nea.org/ReadAcross.

For younger readers

A Maleta Full of Treasures is packed with lessons for students with family near and far. In the story, a girl named Dulce enjoys a visit from her Abuela (grandmother), who brings a suitcase full of treasures from Peru. Soon Dulce learns that home is not just a place, but the love between family.

For middle-grade readers

Students learn about courage, family, and friendship in *Abeni's*

Song, a West African and African Diaspora-inspired tale of adventure. A magical apprentice, Abeni collects a team of spirit allies who help rescue her village from the evil Witch Priest and from ghost ships bound for distant lands.

For young adults

In *Wings in the Wild*, a hurricane exposes a secret sculpture garden that belongs to Soleida's family. Soon, the Cuban government arrests her artist parents, forcing her to escape alone to Central America. That's when she meets Dariel, a Cuban American boy, and together they work to protect the environment and bring attention to the imprisoned artists in Cuba. 🌿

March 2 is NEA'S Read Across America Day!

With some 45 million people participating, Read Across America Day is the biggest reading celebration in the country. NEA offers book recommendations all year long, but this special day calls attention to the efforts of educators and parents who help children develop a love of reading. Check out the resources (at right) to join the fun!

Start planning your Read Across event now!

Find books and lesson plans for January and throughout the year as well as tips for inviting guest readers, starting book clubs, and more at nea.org/ReadAcross.

To get books into the hands of your readers, check out nea.org/FreeReadingMaterials.

Celebrate the freedom to read with this online toolkit—which includes posters, bookmarks, stickers, and more. Go to nea.org/BannedBooks.



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Say Goodbye to Guilt

LEARN TO DUMP NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND MAKE ROOM FOR JOY

By Brenda Álvarez

"What are you most proud of?" When Tricia Brown's principal asked her this question last year, she could have discussed her most significant accomplishment: Cultivating connection and safety among her second graders—all English language learners with little to no verbal expression. Brown could have mentioned her use of micro-labs (small breakout groups) that enabled her students to practice conversation and active listening. She might have underscored her efforts to build a strong sense of community, so her students could be physically and emotionally ready to pay attention, absorb information, and engage with others.



Tricia Brown

Instead, her eyes filled with tears. "I cried because what I was most proud of was so elusive to describe or measure," remembers Brown, who teaches in Lawrence, N.Y. "I felt like, 'That's all I did? I had so much more to do.'"

If unchecked, this feeling of always wanting to do more can spiral into teacher guilt.

This sense of not doing enough for students is common among educators. Learning how to redirect it is critical to fostering a healthier mindset, increasing job satisfaction, and creating a more positive learning environment for the entire school community.

What is teacher guilt?

Teacher guilt differs from compassion fatigue, where educators absorb their students' trauma to the point of emotional or physical exhaustion, and from toxic positivity, which trivializes a person's pain.

Teacher guilt can include feeling badly about behaviors such as taking sick days, leaving on time at the end of the workday, or not grading student assignments at home. For many educators, guilt surfaces from the dichotomy of wanting to do all you can for your students and school

community, while simultaneously feeling overwhelmed by a lack of support, says NEA's Crystal Foxx, whose work focuses on the health and mental well-being of students and educators.

"We have teachers who are not only covering their own classes, but also giving up their lunch and planning periods to cover for others," Foxx explains. "When you're facing nearly double the workload and can't complete everything you'd like to, it leads to feelings of guilt."

She adds: "The onus is not on educators, but on policymakers and politicians who perpetuate a system that creates this cycle of guilt. It's not possible for one person to get everything done without sacrificing something, such as family or personal time."

The heavy burden of underfunding

Darshanpreet Gill's early years as a science teacher were marked with a steep learning curve.

"I didn't understand how school funding worked," Gill explains, reflecting



For Darshanpreet Gill, a science teacher in Portland, Ore., maintaining a healthy work-life balance helps her stay in the profession.

on her initial two years as a teacher in California. "I bought everything for my classroom because I thought that was just what you did."

Nearly 95 percent of teachers spend their own money on school supplies and other items students need to succeed, averaging about \$500 per year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. But educators face other challenges as well.

It's especially problematic when schools lack the resources to support students who arrive at school hungry or bring in difficulties from home.

"What you are given in terms of resources and what you're expected to do are never aligned," says Gill, who now teaches science at a career and technical school in Portland, Ore. "This literally feels terrible on your body, because you want to do the right thing

5 Ways to Build Resilience in the Classroom

NEA's Brandy Bixler, who provides training in social and emotional learning, offers the following tips:

- 1. Seek mentorship:** This helps to build community and support for students as well as for teachers at different career stages. Speak with your administrators to help pair you with a mentor.
- 2. Manage emotions:** Use cognitive behavioral strategies to process emotions in a constructive way. Therapy is a good tool to help change thinking patterns and behaviors.
- 3. Break isolation:** Connect with colleagues, collaborate on lesson plans, or simply check in with a colleague.
- 4. Community responsibility:** Understand that addressing educational challenges is a collective effort, not the sole responsibility of individual teachers. Find out what others may know. A social worker may be able to connect a student's family with a food bank or shelter.
- 5. Recognize the journey:** Acknowledge that teaching involves both challenges and successes, and it's important to celebrate progress.

PHOTO: JAY FRAM

Say Goodbye to Guilt

for your students. But you have to come to a point where you say: 'I can't do everything, but I should do what I can, and then I have to leave it here.'

Letting go of the guilt

Today, Gill recognizes that elected officials are mainly responsible for underfunding schools. "We elect them to represent our best interests, and they should fulfill that responsibility," she says.

In 2023, when school officials fell short of this responsibility, Gill joined the Portland Association of Teachers in striking with thousands of her peers. Together, they advocated for changes that improved working conditions and student learning environments.

Their efforts secured a collective bargaining agreement that includes more planning time, limits the amount of time educators spend on standardized testing, and expands mental health resources.

Brandy Bixler, a former teacher who is now an NEA trainer on social and emotional learning, advises: "Think about your emotions as a guide to your actions and what you have control over."

She explains: "Anger can be a useful emotion if, for example, you see your superintendent getting a new office with a custom-built desk, while your class goes without textbooks. Anger can empower you to take action, but guilt over not being able to buy your students winter clothes isn't helpful—so let go of that guilt."

Instead, she suggests channeling your anger into something that makes you feel powerful, like voting for pro-public education candidates and attending school board meetings to address underfunded schools.



Gill holds a pipette as she helps a student solve a fictitious crime using DNA.

'Create boundaries and joy'

While Gill and Brown understand that district funds should be allocated to ensure schools are fully staffed and properly resourced, they do what they can to help students during school hours—and then reset at night for the next day.

"I made a decision to create joy in my classroom because without it, it would be too heartbreaking," says Brown, who finds comfort in creative outlets like knitting, gardening, cooking, and walking her dog—all of which give her a rest and provide space from the pressure and pace of teaching.

Gill grounds herself in her purpose as an educator—and a good one too. "I'm proud of the work I do, ... which is why I fight for it," she says. Her mental checkpoints include: Trusting herself as

LEARN MORE

Explore NEA's micro-credentials on adult social and emotional learning at nea.org/AdultSEL.

PHOTO: JAY FRAM



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YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO BUY STRAWBERRIES

By Mary Ellen Flannery

WANT TO STOP DREADING THE GROCERY BILL? GET ORGANIZED FOR BETTER EDUCATOR PAY.

“I’m feeling a little anxious,” says Florida teacher Tamara Russell, as she rolls up to the Costco cashier. Russell and her husband budgeted \$250 for this twice-a-month grocery trip, but it’s a struggle.

Apples, avocados, and other fresh fruits aren’t cheap. Simultaneously watching your cholesterol and your checking account? Almost impossible.

The scanner beeps. Today’s total is \$211, including a \$24 piece of salmon that will cost \$12 after Russell splits it with another teacher. “Yes!” says Russell, celebrating with a little shout. “You win!” says the cashier.

But who really wins when a National Board Certified teacher with 26 years of experience can’t afford to buy a box of strawberries? Or prescription medicine?

Not her. Not her students. Not their community or state either. With a base salary of just \$48,500, Russell can’t win for losing.

And it’s not just her. “I’m every teacher,” says Russell, who teaches fourth-grade math and science at Beverly Shores Elementary, in Lake County, Florida. “Every teacher can tell you stories like this. We teach because we love it. Because we feel like we’re changing the world every day. This is still the best profession in the world. But for the amount of love we pour into it, it breaks my heart.”

Her hope is her union. “I don’t want people to feel sorry for me. I want them to get organized with me. I want them to advocate alongside me. I want all of us to get organized and stand together,” Russell says. “I believe in the power of collective action!”

LISTEN UP



Listen along as *NEA Today* goes grocery shopping with Tamara Russell. Check out this *NEA Today* audio story—plus videos from more Florida teachers—at nea.org/FairPayForFlorida.



“I don’t want people to feel sorry for me. I want them to get organized with me. I want them to advocate alongside me. I want all of us to get organized and stand together. I believe in the power of collective action!”

—Tamara Russell, fourth-grade teacher, Florida

How Florida has fallen

Last year, the average teacher salary in Florida ranked 50th in the nation, at \$53,098, according to NEA’s annual report of educator pay. Decades ago, when Russell began her career, Florida was ranked 30th.

Since then, the state’s lawmakers have crusaded to divert taxpayers’ money to private schools, starting with former Gov. Jeb Bush in the late 1990s.

Today, voucher programs abound. So do high-stakes tests for public school students. In 2011, then-Gov. Rick Scott passed a law linking teacher pay to student test scores, promising it would lead to higher scores.

It did not. Instead, the state now has incomprehensible pay systems, differing from county to county, relying on “value-added models” with a scaled number for every student.

Scott’s law also eliminated tenure for teachers hired after 2008 and ensured that anybody who still has a multiyear contract can’t get a bigger raise than a new teacher. Because of this, some teachers with decades of experience are paid just a few hundred

dollars more a year than first-year teachers.


Test scores, teacher pay, and school funding have all gone down. Meanwhile, Florida’s educator shortage is escalating. Midway through the last school year, Florida had 7,553 teacher vacancies, while support staff jobs routinely go unfilled.

“We still have 145 staff vacancies,” says Valerie Jessup, a union leader and paraeducator in Volusia County, Florida. “Paras, office specialists, custodians, bus operators, bus attendants—they will not fill these vacancies.”

Low pay is not the only problem. Disrespect, safety concerns, and prohibitions on what Florida teachers can say about race, racism, and LGBTQ+ people also make it harder for teachers to do their jobs.

The cost of low pay

Like Russell, Jessup loves her job, providing one-on-one support to a student in Volusia’s special education program. But, after 8 years, it pays \$16 an hour. Jessup gets more from the parents who hire her as a weekend and evening babysitter.



Tamara Russell has done the math. Buying food in bulk twice a month is the most economical choice. She opts for apples over strawberries because they last longer.



YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO BUY STRAWBERRIES

She and her husband, a school custodian, grow vegetables and buy rice in bulk to save money. Their 10-year-old son is on Medicaid because the school district's family health insurance plan would eat an entire paycheck.

"I could go to the Buc-ee's on the highway and start at \$18 making sandwiches," Jessup says. "But I love my [student] too much to not be there. If I didn't do it, who would?"

Like Russell says, every Florida educator has stories like these. Zahira Pena-Andino, a test coordinator in Osceola County, has a master's degree, 17 years of teaching experience, and about \$20 in her checking account. "Right now, I'm making \$2,600 more than a brand-new teacher in my district," she says.

Lee Wright, who teaches high school English in Osceola, left his old job in aircraft maintenance 11 years ago. Last year, after 10 years of teaching, he finally got back to his former salary: \$52,500.

"There are days when I want to update my résumé and reach out to the right people at the airport," he admits. "But I'm fulfilled as a teacher. I feel like I'm living out my morals and values."

Change is possible!

Florida teachers know what's possible when they stand together and fight back. In 1968, the first statewide walkout by teachers in the U.S. took place here, with 35,000 Florida teachers handing in their resignation letters to protest crumbling schools, a lack of textbooks, and continued segregation.

Their power led to the then-governor's political ruin and paved the way for the state constitution to be amended, enshrining public employees' collective bargaining rights.

These rights are critical: Research shows that, as a rule, union teachers get



Zahira Pena-Andino

paid more than teachers without unions. "This is absolutely, definitely the case," notes Sylvia Allegretto, a researcher who has produced the Economic Policy Institute's annual study of the "teacher pay penalty" for more than 20 years. And the stronger the union? The better the pay. Look at the list of best-paying states (See opposite page). They're union strongholds. Today, Florida union members are hopeful and resolute. They know Florida can do better. In November, voters in 19 Florida counties approved local tax increases that will pump money into their districts. For example, in Hillsborough, homeowners opted to pay an average \$281 more a year to provide \$6,000 salary supplements for teachers and \$3,000 for school bus drivers and other educators. In Pinellas, a similar new tax will add \$11,000 to teachers' salaries and \$3,000 to support staff salaries.



Valerie Jessup and her son plant tomato seedlings in their backyard garden, which helps save on food costs. Jessup works multiple jobs and scrimps where she can. The bottom line? "It's exhausting," she says.

Across the state, union members educated voters about the need for more funds. These votes show that "when we work together, we can win!" says Florida Education Association President Andrew Spar.

But it does take time and commitment. "A few years ago, we got 5 percent salary increases," Pena-Andino notes. "We got ourselves to school board meetings, we spoke up, and we signed petitions, and it definitely made a difference."

Pay is still lousy, thanks to state lawmakers, but educators like Russell know what it will take to win more. Speak up. Get organized. Elect candidates who support public education. Become active union members, she urges.

"Here's what I tell people," Pena-Andino says. "You can't complain if you're not doing your part." 🍌

How does your state rank in average teacher salary?

California	\$95,160	1
New York	92,696	2
Massachusetts	92,307	3
Washington (state)	86,804	4
D.C.	84,882	5
Connecticut	83,400	6
New Jersey	81,102	7
Maryland	79,420	8
Rhode Island	79,289	9
Alaska	76,371	10
Pennsylvania	74,945	11
Illinois	73,916	12
Oregon	72,496	13
Hawaii	70,947	14
Minnesota	70,005	15
United States	69,544	
Delaware	68,787	16
Michigan	67,011	17
Vermont	66,536	18
Ohio	66,390	19
Georgia	64,461	20
New Hampshire	64,169	21
New Mexico	63,580	22
Utah	63,481	23
Virginia	63,103	24
Wisconsin	62,524	25
Wyoming	61,979	26
Nevada	61,719	27
Iowa	61,231	28
Colorado	60,775	29
Texas	60,716	30
Alabama	60,441	31
Arizona	60,275	32
Maine	59,964	33
Nebraska	58,763	34
South Carolina	57,778	35
Indiana	57,105	36
North Dakota	56,792	37
North Carolina	56,559	38
Kansas	56,481	39
Idaho	56,365	40
Kentucky	56,296	41
Montana	55,909	42
Oklahoma	55,505	43
Tennessee	55,369	44
Arkansas	54,309	45
Louisiana	54,248	46
Missouri	53,999	47
Mississippi	53,354	48
South Dakota	53,153	49
Florida	53,098	50
West Virginia	52,870	51

SOURCE: "RANKINGS OF THE STATES 2023," NEA RESEARCH, APRIL 2024

Jackpot! Your Union Can Help You Win Better Pay

From California to Colorado and Maryland to Michigan, unionized educators are winning better pay at the bargaining table and through state legislatures. Here are just a few examples of where, what, and how they won!

"It still gives me goosebumps. We got everything we asked for!"

Where: San Francisco, California

What: Two years ago, paraeducators here started at \$18 an hour. "We could make more money at In-N-Out Burger," says Teanna Tillery, United Educators of San Francisco vice president for paraeducators. Today, starting pay is \$30 per hour, thanks to a new collective bargaining agreement that has boosted average pay to \$35.92 per hour—an increase of 27 percent. "The idea is that one job should be enough," Tillery says.

How: Share your stories, Tillery urges. Be honest, vulnerable, and brave in telling school board members, state lawmakers, parents, and community members how low pay affects you and your family. "We had a para who talked about how he had owned just one pair of shoes for several years ... and rainy season was coming," Tillery recalls.

And don't be afraid to ask—to *demand*—what you need. Recognize your power. "They need us," Tillery says. "Let's be honest, especially in special ed, they need us to do that work. A lot of us have historical knowledge of things and people, and it's just so valuable. Appreciating people financially is just one way to show that our work is seen."



Teanna Tillery

"We want people to know this is a wonderful profession."

Where: Mounds View, Minnesota

What: Encouraged by Education Minnesota to "bargain boldly," Mounds View union members won a 2-year contract in 2023, with 6 percent raises in Year 1 and 10 percent in Year 2. "We have people giving up their second jobs, making down payments on homes and cars," says local president Stacey Vanderport.

How: Change your "frame," Vanderport says. Often, local unions look at neighboring districts for comparable salaries. "But teachers are underpaid everywhere," she notes. Look instead at area employers of college-educated professionals: hospitals, tech firms, pharmaceutical companies, etc. With their new contract, some Mounds View teachers will hit \$100K by Year 11. "By Year 25, we're able to make well over \$100,000, which is bridging the gap with professionals outside the system," Vanderport says.

Also, understand that elections matter! In 2023, a supermajority of Democrats in both houses of the state legislature, as well as a Democratic governor, boosted state education spending by nearly \$2.3 billion, freeing up funds in districts for pay raises. They also passed legislation that provides automatic increases to the budget each year to keep up with inflation. "We will never start at zero again," Vanderport says.



Stacey Vanderport

"We became a district that could compete."

Where: Harford County, Maryland

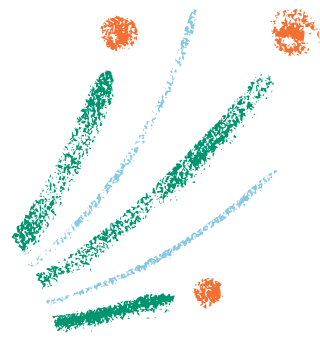
What: In 2022, Harford's union leaders won a 3-year contract that included 7 percent raises each year for education support professionals. It also included raises for teachers that took Harford from the bottom of the state's pay rankings to a more competitive place. "We reached third in the state for new teachers," says Harford County Education Association (HCEA) President Chrystie Crawford-Smick. "It only lasted a year, but we'd never been there before!"

How: HCEA partnered with the school district on a compensation study that looked at every type of district employee—administrators, teachers, classroom aides, etc.—and compared Harford's pay with other area districts. For support staff, it also looked at other types of jobs, not necessarily in education. The data showed that Harford educators were at the bottom in most areas, Crawford-Smick says. This data fueled the pay raises.



Chrystie Crawford-Smick

Building Body and Mind



By Cindy Long

EXERCISE IS CRITICAL FOR STUDENTS IN A DIGITAL WORLD. THESE EDUCATORS MAKE IT A LIFESTYLE CHOICE.

At a Thursday afternoon practice of the Lady Raiders Step Squad, at Eleanor Roosevelt High School, in Greenbelt, Md., coach Jonelle Argus walks through orderly lines of 21 team members, calling out moves like a drill instructor, each call punctuated by a sharp clap.

"Right D!" *Clap!*

The girls' arms snap to form a diagonal line—right arm up, left arm down, torsos forward, eyes looking down at their left fingers.

"Left D!" *Clap!*

Arms snap to the opposite diagonal, left arm up, eyes on right fingers.

As the coach shouts out more positions, she reminds the girls to breathe and move with tension and precision.

"We're not swimming, we're stepping!" she calls.

To do it right, the girls must move with quick, percussive, and synchronized movements that emulate rhythmic drumming.

The Lady Raiders' staff sponsor, Krystal Covington, is a health teacher and also an alum of the school. She was a stepper herself, joining the team in 2000, just three years after it was founded.

"I loved the art, the energy, and the sisterhood," Covington says. "That's what we strive for today—sisterhood and strong team bonds—but also life lessons on how to conduct yourself in school and outside the school's walls."



Krystal Covington

Across the country, educators like Covington are shaping after-school athletic clubs and physical education (PE) classes into body-positive, inclusive experiences. The goal is to help students manage stress and develop confidence, healthy habits, and lifelong well-being.

When students join the Lady Raiders, they must sign a contract agreeing to the rules and standards about everything from behavior and respectfulness to social media use and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Members must also keep a 3.0 grade point average (other school athletic programs require a 2.0).



The Lady Raiders Step Squad performs during a pep rally at their school in Greenbelt, Md.

"We realize it can be a struggle. It's a big commitment of three-hour practices twice a week, plus competitions," Covington says. "In addition to Tuesday and Thursday practices, we have Workshop Wednesdays where the girls meet in my classroom to study and tutor each other."

It's also a safe space where they can talk openly about anything that's troubling them, she adds.

Angie Ramirez-Alvarez, a junior and captain of the Lady Raiders, values the support she and her teammates get from each other. "High school can be chaotic," she says. "But the team draws us close. There's a support system that really helps."

Stepping boosts mental and physical health, Ramirez-Alvarez says. She used to suffer from severe asthma, but she has learned new breathing techniques in step, and her asthma is much better.

"Stepping has changed me as a person, inside and out. I'm stronger and much more confident," she says. "I see myself very differently now than I used to."

That's what movement is all about, Covington says. The earlier students learn about the benefits

of physical activity, research shows, the more likely they are to adopt active lifestyles.

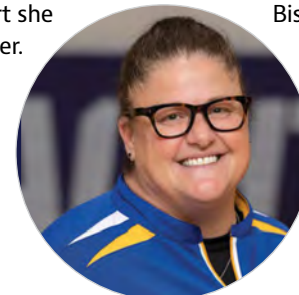
Exercise eases stress

"Movement can help students get through the stress of friendships and relationships, the pressures of schoolwork, and even traumatic situations outside of school," says Sheila Peterson, a physical education teacher at Wachter Middle School, in Bismarck, N.D. "It releases dopamine, and there are reams of research showing how moving your body produces calm and well-being."

Peterson also tracks a lot of research about the student mental health crisis. It first spiked in 2012, she says, with the rise of social media, and then the pandemic exacerbated the situation. Instead of exercising and getting outside to play, kids began spending more time alone with their devices.

"If kids are sedentary and isolated, it's not surprising that mental health suffers," she says.

Peterson aims to help her students achieve their personal best, build self-confidence, and



Sheila Peterson

"Stepping has changed me as a person, inside and out. I'm stronger and much more confident. I see myself very differently now than I used to."

—Angie Ramirez-Alvarez, Lady Raiders Step Squad captain, Greenbelt, Md.

embrace a life-long commitment to healthy movement. She wants students to begin to see themselves differently.

"My goal as a PE teacher is not to encourage anyone to be a college athlete or even to be good at sports," she says. "Instead, I want them to understand what their body is telling them and how movement will feel."

She wants students to learn that they all have the inner strength and resilience necessary to build physical strength.

She introduces them to a wide variety of activities—some they'll love, some they'll hate. But the idea is to help them find something they enjoy doing and that makes them feel successful, she explains.

"It's not about being the best, it's about feeling good," Peterson adds. If a student makes a mistake, she encourages them to keep trying. When they achieve a new skill, she tells them to stop and celebrate and be proud in that moment.

In her class, there are a lot of smiles and laughter. "See how much better you feel after class? How many times did you laugh today?" she asks them.

The real payoff, Peterson adds, is when students decide to go out for sports they learned about in PE, or when Peterson sees a student out in the community on a walk with family or riding a bike.

"The reward is when students create a relationship with being active because it makes them feel good in body and mind," she says. "I see that in kids. I see that joy."

"The reward is when students create a relationship with being active because it makes them feel good in body and mind. I see that in kids. I see that joy."

—Sheila Peterson, North Dakota PE teacher



Angie Ramirez-Alvarez, made up for Halloween Homecoming, is captain of the Lady Raiders.

PE class can be a safe place

PE has evolved from the days when a gym teacher wearing shorts and tube socks constantly blew a whistle and forced students to climb a rope hanging from the ceiling.

"It's now more inclusive and infused with SEL and body positivity," says Michigan middle school PE teacher Emilee Pike.

Creating an environment where everyone feels safe enough to try the physical activities is her top priority.

"There is something very gendered about PE that many students find intimidating, so I foster inclusivity and awareness about gender and gender expression."

Students who are LGBTQ+ are a growing area of concern among PE teachers, Pike says, because they feel they're at risk.

"They come in with a history of distrust. Creating a sense of safety makes all the difference," says Pike, who has taken continuing education courses on embracing diversity in PE.

"The anxiety levels in middle school students are high, but if they feel safe enough to participate, you can actually see the stress leave



their bodies," Pike says. "Their shoulders go down. The worry is erased from their faces."

She knows, too, that middle school is fraught with new social dynamics and peer comparisons. Adolescence in general is a time of forming and questioning identities, and Pike doesn't want to add to the anxiety with locker room and shower concerns.

"I don't make them go to the locker room if they don't want to, and I definitely don't force anyone to shower," she says.

Pike teaches in a rural farming community, where families don't have a lot of extras. Some



kids don't change into gym clothes because they don't own any. Others have only one pair of shoes—often, those are cowboy boots.

"Students can wear whatever they choose in class, as long as they can participate safely."

There are kids who don't want to shower, but some who do because they have no access to water at home. For those students, Pike and the school counselors will find times for them to shower whenever they are most comfortable.

"Getting the students to reap the benefits of exercise is the most important thing," she says.

Pike received district funding to provide heart monitors for her students, so she can get a better understanding of their health and fitness. The monitors also allow students to see when they reach their target heart rate and what that feels like.

"They push themselves to get into their zone for at least 20 to 30 minutes, which has benefits that last all day—it increases test scores, and they perform better in class," she says. "With technology, inclusivity, and SEL, we're taking gym class to places it's never been." ❄️

"I want to reach the kid who dislikes PE the most and get that kid to like to move," Peterson says.

LEARN MORE

Learn more about the benefits of movement and take a look inside the Lady Raiders step program at nea.org/GetUpandMove.

3 Election Wins That Matter for Public Education

By Amanda Litvinov

VOTERS SENT AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE IN NOVEMBER: THEY TRUST EDUCATORS AND CARE ABOUT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This month, educators will see a new Congress sworn in and a new presidential administration take shape in Washington. Conditions for public education and labor unions will be challenging. But voters delivered some important wins in election 2024 that hold promise for educators, students, and families who rely on public education. Here are three bright spots:

FOR MORE

Interested in running for office? NEA can help you! Learn more at nea.org/SeeEducatorsRun.

1. Educators ran for office—and won!

Across the nation, educators—many of them NEA members—were elected to seats at the local, state, and federal levels. These winners went into their races well-prepared after attending **NEA's See Educators Run** candidate training program:

MICHELLE VELASQUEZ BEAN California

CAREER: Educator of 24 years, currently an English professor at Rio Hondo College, in Whittier, Calif.

ELECTED TO: La Mirada City Council

MOTIVATION TO RUN: "My family taught me the importance of public service," says Bean, whose father was a police officer turned teacher, and then a superintendent. When a City Council seat came open, Bean was encouraged to run. As an educator committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, she knew she would

face pushback in her conservative community. Despite the expected mudslinging, Bean persevered and won.

It was worth it, says Bean. "My students deserve to have someone on the council who represents them," she says.

DID YOU KNOW? Bean is the first woman of color to serve on La Mirada City Council.



Michelle Velasquez Bean

NATALIE ZIMMERMAN Maryland

CAREER: Elementary school teacher in Montgomery County, Maryland, since 2019. Served as a building representative at Wheaton Woods Elementary School.



Natalie Zimmerman

ELECTED TO: Montgomery County Board of Education

MOTIVATION TO RUN: "So often, our school board members haven't actually spent time in the classroom," Zimmerman says. There was not a single educator on the board in her county when she decided to run.

"The people closest to teaching and learning should be making the decisions about the teaching and learning," she says. "We need educators to run, because educators are the experts at teaching children."

DID YOU KNOW? Zimmerman studied political science and was excited to run for office herself!

JOHN MANNION New York

CAREER: Biology and chemistry teacher in New York for 30 years. President of the West Genesee Teachers' Association for eight years. Has served in the New York State Senate since 2020.

ELECTED TO: U.S. House of Representatives, District 22. In an exciting race, Mannion ousted the incumbent and flipped the district for the first time in a decade.

MOTIVATION TO RUN: Mannion wants to work across the aisle to ensure that the priorities of public school educators, parents, and students are represented at the highest levels of government.

As he told the audience at a political forum hosted by NYSUT (New York State United Teachers), he has prioritized bipartisanship during



John Mannion

250,000 NEA members volunteered in the 2024 election cycle—a record-high number. They took action through their union, sending postcards, making calls, and canvassing for candidates and issues that matter for our students and for public education.

his four years in the state Senate, and intends to do the same on Capitol Hill. "I didn't leave teaching—a job that I love—to become part of the toxic, divisive political structure," Mannion says.

DID YOU KNOW? John Mannion's wife, Jennifer, an elementary reading teacher, also has been an NEA member for 30 years.

2. Voters rejected vouchers and high-stakes testing.

Ballot measures in **Nebraska, Kentucky,** and **Colorado** asked voters a fundamental question: Do you want taxpayer dollars diverted from public schools and sent to private schools?

The majority answered with a resounding "no," delivering a decisive defeat to vouchers. This issue united Republican and Democratic voters in rural, urban, and suburban communities alike.

These victories extend a winning streak that every public education advocate should celebrate: When school vouchers have been put on the ballot, they have lost every time.

The **Massachusetts** Teachers Association scored another victory. Members helped pass a measure to eliminate their state's archaic high-stakes graduation test, which denies diplomas to nearly 700 students each year, many of whom are English learners and students with disabilities.

3. Pro-public education legislators won key races.

In the U.S. Senate, incumbents Tammy Baldwin from **Wisconsin**—a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee—and Jacky Rosen of **Nevada** were reelected.

They will be joined by U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin from **Michigan**, a vocal proponent of laws that help prevent gun violence and keep schools safe, including the safe storage of firearms, universal background checks, red flag laws, and an assault weapons ban.

In **Arizona**, U.S. Rep. Ruben Gallego—who introduced legislation to expand universal full-day kindergarten—defeated Kari Lake, who has pushed for mandated cameras in classrooms and massive cuts to education spending.

In the U.S. House, incumbent Rep. Jahana Hayes of **Connecticut**—

the 2016 National Teacher of the Year—won reelection. Rep. Greg Landsman of **Ohio**, another former public school teacher, also was reelected.

Educators in **North Carolina** had much to celebrate when candidates who earned the recommendation of the North Carolina Association of Educators cruised to victory. In the race for governor, state Attorney General Josh Stein defeated controversial Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson.

Former Guilford County Schools Superintendent Maurice "Mo" Green was elected state superintendent of public instruction after defeating Michele Morrow, who is known for perpetuating ludicrous conspiracy theories. 🗳️



The Colorado Education Association helped defeat a voucher measure.

The Teacher's Dilemma:

Should I Stay or Should I Go



History teacher Nicholas Ferroni often ponders leaving the profession.

MY LOVE FOR THE PROFESSION AND THE STUDENTS KEEPS ME IN THE CLASSROOM

By Nicholas Ferroni, New Jersey Education Association

After finishing my 21st year of teaching, in May, I seriously considered leaving the profession. It had been a stressful, overwhelming, and uncertain year, but this wasn't the first, second, or even the 20th time I thought about a career change. I'm sure I'm not alone.

Ultimately, I decided to return because of my reality: I love teaching. I love being around my students. I love contributing to student success and happiness. But finding that love isn't always easy.

In recent years, I have grown to hate everything that comes with being a teacher—the low pay, the lack of support and resources, and the organized attacks on educators and education.

I often see a quote on social media that embodies what many educators contemplate each school year: "If I stay in teaching, it's because of the kids. If I leave teaching, it's because of the adults."

Why we must speak up

I worry about the profession's future and often think about how we can keep newer teachers—especially when they can make more money elsewhere, working fewer hours with less stress.

This is where honesty comes into play. I tell incoming teachers that I must have considered quitting at least once a week during my first two years. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The reality of teaching was not even close to how it was portrayed in academic publications or in

the educational videos we watched in college.

I think back to my first year. Like many educators, I went through different phases of emotion as the year went on: anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, and reflection. And these phases are still relevant to me, even all these years later.

I hit my stride as an educator in my fourth and fifth years, finding my strengths and weaknesses and utilizing strategies that worked best for my students. But that didn't feel like enough. I was now living the life of the tired teacher who hated hearing people attack public schools with the same old comment: "You knew what you were getting into, so stop complaining."

This is where I implore all of you to speak up. I



"The educators I meet ... have dedicated their lives to the success and happiness of other people's children."

—Nicholas Ferroni (above)

never thought being a teacher meant I needed to have a voice outside of my classroom, but I was wrong.

We all need to be advocates. We all must fight back against negative narratives. Tell people, "If you think talking about the obstacles we face while educating children is 'complaining,' I assume you have no real understanding of how much educators and schools do and what is expected of everyone who works in a school."

I've learned so much over the years—most of all, that everyone wants all children to receive the best education and best school experience possible. That's what I tell anyone who will listen.

As educators, we must use our voices to spread the right messages about our schools

and profession, because some politicians and pundits will try to tell a different story.

Speak up for those who may not be brave enough to attend a school board meeting. Tell those making the decisions what's needed for your students. Answer the call of your union for testimony on relevant legislation. And share your stories with elected leaders.

This may not be the job we thought we signed up for, but this is the place we're in now, and we must rise to the occasion. Staying in the profession means we need to communicate about our realities.

If I can tell parents and guardians one thing, it's that they should trust the people spending most of the day with their child—the people who are educating, nurturing, and caring for their child—and

not the people who are trying to lobby for themselves or for the issue du jour.

Rekindling your professional happiness

Most teachers I know have an inspiring story of why they chose this profession. Like most educators, I was fortunate enough to have teachers who truly cared about and inspired me.

As I write from the classroom I've worked in for more than two decades, at the same school where I was a student, I realize I've spent 25 years—more than half my life—in the same building.

The idea feels both inspiring and depressing, but mostly inspiring. The best part? My mom knows where to find me and even sends me care packages at school.

The Teacher's Dilemma:

Should I Stay, or Should I Go?



I mention my mother because I know that so many teachers work in the communities they're from, and even teach in the schools they once attended.

When you think about leaving, remember that one of the best things about our profession is investing in the cities and towns that invested in us. It's one of the biggest reasons I keep coming back year after year. I truly want my community to have the best schools possible.

In my hometown of Union, N.J., I was fortunate to have amazing educators throughout my life.

I am drawn back to the classroom each year when I think about my pre-K teacher, Mrs. Martino, who was able to reach and inspire every one of her young students.

Then, in high school, Mr. "Weez" and Mr. Caliguire—two of the most engaging, entertaining, and mildly insane teachers I ever had—nurtured my love of history, humanities, and learning from the past. Last but not least, there was my coach and mentor, Mr. Monaco, who trained me throughout high school for baseball and football. More important, he helped shape me into the man I would become.

I became a teacher because I was inspired by all of my educators, but that is also the reason I have battled with the decision to leave. Giving so much takes a toll.

The drive to stay

The educators I meet are passionate, compassionate, intelligent, and selfless individuals who have dedicated their lives to the success and happiness of other people's children.

Teachers and support staff give so much to their students, schools, and communities that there often isn't much room left for themselves or their families.

"I became a teacher because I was inspired by all of my educators, but that is also the reason I have battled with the decision to leave. Giving so much takes a toll."

—Nicholas Ferroni



How bad is it?

Teachers are quitting at historically high levels, with research showing the lack of pay and burnout as top factors.

Nearly a quarter

of teachers said they intended to leave their jobs by the end of the 2023 – 2024 school year, and 17 percent said they intended to leave the profession.

SOURCE: RAND, "2024 STATE OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER"

271,000

education jobs were open in 2024, on average—the fourth-highest average in history and more than double pre-pandemic averages.

SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, "JOB OPENINGS AND LABOR TURNOVER SURVEY," 2024

60%

of teachers say they are experiencing burnout. Some 59 percent say they experience frequent job-related stress.

SOURCE: RAND, "2024 STATE OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER"

64%

of public schools reported that the biggest barrier to hiring teachers was too few qualified candidates, and 62 percent reported that a lack of applicants made vacancies difficult to fill. The most difficult teaching positions to fill were in special education and bilingual education.

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, "SCHOOL PULSE PANEL," 2024

Nearly half

of teachers cited student behavior as the top source of job-related stress. About one-third of teachers said low salaries and extra administrative work were top reasons for job-related stress.

SOURCE: RAND, "2024 STATE OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER"

As with most teachers, my day doesn't end at 3 p.m.; if it did, I wouldn't be an effective educator. Like most teachers, I find it is easier to buy or crowdfund the supplies I need than to wait for my district to provide them. And like most teachers, I work a second and even a third job because I can't survive on my teaching salary.

Most people call teaching one of the most important careers someone can pursue, yet can we really call it a "career" if we have to work other jobs to continue in the profession?

Personally, I've lost sleep over whether to stay in the classroom or pursue more lucrative opportunities. But I

just can't seem to get myself to leave.

I've dedicated so much of my life to advocating for, supporting, and trying to help teachers that I am not sure what effect it would have if someone like me—someone who loves teaching—throws in the towel. And I'm not even the best teacher in this country, in New Jersey, or even in my school.

I know I need to use my platform as an educator to help change the narrative, to make others see the value of the profession, and to help build the schools our students deserve.

So many educators stay in the profession for the

students, but they may not be enough to retain teachers for the long haul. We, as a society, must drastically improve so many of the factors that are forcing educators to leave their dream jobs. And that starts with respecting the profession and paying school staff what they deserve.

Teaching is our calling, but it doesn't have to be our vow of poverty. Remember that when you talk to anyone who thinks you have the summer off, and share your story about why you continue to come back, year after year. Our voices are our outlet to enact the change we need for our students. 🙌

Ferroni helps eleventh and twelfth graders with a history project at Union High School, in New Jersey. When he thinks about quitting, the students draw him back to the classroom.

Nicholas Ferroni lives in Union, N.J., and is a nationally recognized high school history teacher and social activist. Follow him on Instagram @nicholasferroni and on TikTok @mrferroni.

LANDMARK Victory!

A WIN FORTY YEARS IN THE MAKING: NEA SECURES FULL RETIREMENT BENEFITS FOR EDUCATORS

By Amanda Litvinov

In an astonishing accomplishment, NEA and NEA-Retired members have helped restore Social Security benefits for millions of educators.

For more than 40 years, public employees in many states have been subject to punitive and discriminatory measures that reduce their Social Security benefits.

Called the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP), these rules have robbed



“Our years of advocacy have finally fixed this, not only for current retirees, but for future generations of educators.”

—NEA-Retired President Anita Gibson

firefighters, postal workers, police officers, and educators of the retirement income they have earned since 1977 and 1983 respectively.

But in December—after decades of unflinching advocacy by NEA and allies—Congress voted to fully repeal these damaging provisions.

“Together, working through our union, we ended a terrible injustice,” says Susan Strader, a retired technology teacher from Connecticut.

Real-life impact

When Strader retired in June 2024, she knew her financial situation wasn’t as secure as she deserved after 36 years in the workforce.

She has zero regrets about her life choices. She spent 12 years working full-time in corporate America and another 12 years raising children.

While working as a consultant, she earned a master’s degree and teaching

certification, and then spent a rewarding 13 years as a teacher in Connecticut’s Preston Public Schools.

But because she taught in Connecticut, Strader was subject to GPO and WEP. The same was true for millions of educators in 15 states and other public employees in a total of 26 states.

“When people ask, ‘If you knew earlier that your retirement would be affected like this, would you make different choices?’ I can honestly answer no,” Strader says. “But it is still devastating to see how serving as a public employee negatively affected my finances in retirement.”

Many educators did not know they would be stripped of benefits until they were at the tail end of their careers.

NEA-Retired President Anita Gibson has heard heartbreaking stories from members who felt blindsided, discovering that the benefits they had earned, or those of a



spouse, would be decimated by GPO and WEP.

“Some retiring educators thought they had planned and saved and done the right things to have retirement security, only to have to keep working into their 70s or move in with family when they can’t afford to stay in their homes,” Gibson says.

“That’s why we have been relentless on this issue,” she adds, noting the hard work of NEA and NEA-Retired members.

NEA has lobbied federal lawmakers on the issue since the 1990s. In that time, members have traveled to Washington, D.C., met with representatives back home, made calls, sent emails and postcards, and explained the issue to lawmakers, colleagues, and friends.

What are GPO and WEP?

For far too long, many elected leaders were not well-informed about how these unfair provisions hurt millions

Retiree Susan Strader dons the Connecticut Education Association’s GPO/WEP protest T-shirt.

of public employees across the nation. Fortunately, educators stepped in with the facts:

- **More than 2.8 million public sector employees** in 26 states were impacted by GPO and WEP. Educators were affected in 15 of those states (See map), because they pay into their state pension system, but not into Social Security.
- **WEP assumed that none of these public employees earn Social Security benefits**—which failed to take into account that many educators hold second jobs and summer gigs that require them to pay Social Security taxes.
- The provision was often devastating to career-changers like Strader, who did not receive the full benefit of the years they did pay into Social Security.
- Also, she did not spend her entire career as a public employee, so Strader earned

just 16.9 percent of a full teacher pension, which takes over 35 years to secure in Connecticut.

- **GPO reduced spousal or survivor benefits.** More than 70 percent of those affected by GPO lost their entire spousal or survivor benefit. Some widowed educators received that survivor’s benefit while they were still working. But the minute they retired and started receiving pension payments, they no longer received the benefit that their loved one earned.

Bringing home a win

The best way to help lawmakers understand the problems with GPO and WEP has been to share our stories. “Without question, the work that our members have

done on this issue and the willingness of NEA-Retired members to share their stories led to this victory,” says Marc Egan, director of NEA’s government relations department.

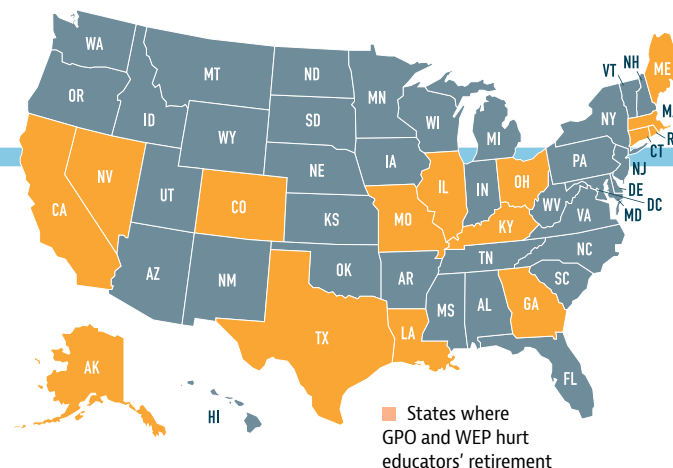
NEA members kept a spotlight on this critical issue, and amped up their activism in the last few years.

Since the start of 2023, NEA members had hundreds of face-to-face conversations with lawmakers and rallied on Capitol Hill. In 2024 alone, members made hundreds of thousands of calls to encourage their members of Congress to support the Social Security Fairness Act.

This historic repeal of GPO and WEP will benefit the profession indefinitely, says Anita Gibson: “Our years of advocacy have finally fixed this, not only for our current retirees, but for future generations of educators.”

Where GPO and WEP hurt educators

Educators were affected if they worked in the 15 states highlighted on the map.



But there are educators and former educators in all 50 states who have worked in GPO/WEP states and were affected by these unfair provisions, even after they moved to non-GPO/WEP states.

83% of those penalized by GPO were women.

9 in 10 educators who worked in an affected state and whose spouses earned Social Security lost benefits because of GPO.

How does this win help you?

To share your story, scan this QR code or go to nea.org/MyGPOWEPStory.



Three Steps to Financial Wellness

Falling short of your retirement savings goals or having trouble paying the bills? You are not alone. Many people are financially out of balance. Financial wellness means finding a balance between living for today and preparing and planning for tomorrow.

1. Protect what you have with insurance.

"Life, disability, and long-term care are vital components of a comprehensive financial strategy," says financial planner Nick Ventura, president and CEO at Ewing, N.J.-based Ventura Wealth Management. "Having these elements in place will offset the risks of catastrophic events."

2. Plan for life after you're gone.

Most people don't want to contemplate their mortality, but putting off estate planning is ill-advised. In addition to arranging for an authenticated will and a trust, you should designate beneficiaries for your retirement accounts.

3. Prepare for your future with a supplemental retirement savings plan.

This type of plan can help educators bridge the gap between a pension and social security. Benefit from our resources to help you prepare for the retirement lifestyle you want and deserve.

NEA Member Benefits can help.

Get started with benefits for insurance, retirement, and more at neamb.com/Overview.



Educators, let's elect the leaders our students deserve.

PAC!

GIVE. VOTE. WIN!

Your contribution to the NEA PAC helps elect pro-education candidates up and down the ballot. Scan to get started.



Contributions to the NEA Fund are not deductible as charitable contributions. Contributions to the NEA Fund are voluntary and will be used for political purposes. Making a contribution is neither a condition of employment nor membership in NEA, and members have the right to refuse to contribute without reprisal. A member may contribute more or less than the suggested amount, or may contribute nothing at all, without affecting membership status, rights, or benefits in NEA or any of its affiliates. Federal law requires NEA to use its best efforts to collect and report the name, address, occupation, and employer for each individual whose contributions aggregate in excess of \$200 in a calendar year.



Virtual Civil Rights History Tours for Your Classroom



The International Civil Rights Center and Museum offers educators an invaluable resource for teaching social justice and civil rights history. Located in the historic F.W. Woolworth's Building, in Greensboro, N.C.—site of the famous 1960 lunch counter sit-ins—the museum now offers virtual tours for classrooms nationwide. These immersive online experiences bring history to life, engaging students with the powerful stories and artifacts that shaped the Civil Rights Movement. Perfect for sparking critical discussions and deepening students' understanding of activism and equality, virtual tours can help your students connect past struggles to present-day lessons.

Learn more at sitiinmovement.org.

Find Tools for Your Practice

- Looking for professional learning opportunities and resources to bolster your lessons?
- Seeking legal guidance on educator rights?
- Searching for good advice from fellow educators?

Check out NEA's online resource library, where you can search by keyword, issue, resource type, and more to find the latest and best professional resources from NEA.

Visit nea.org/Resource-Library.



Check out *NEA Today's* new digital experience! Scan the QR code or go to nea.org/NEATodayJanuary25.





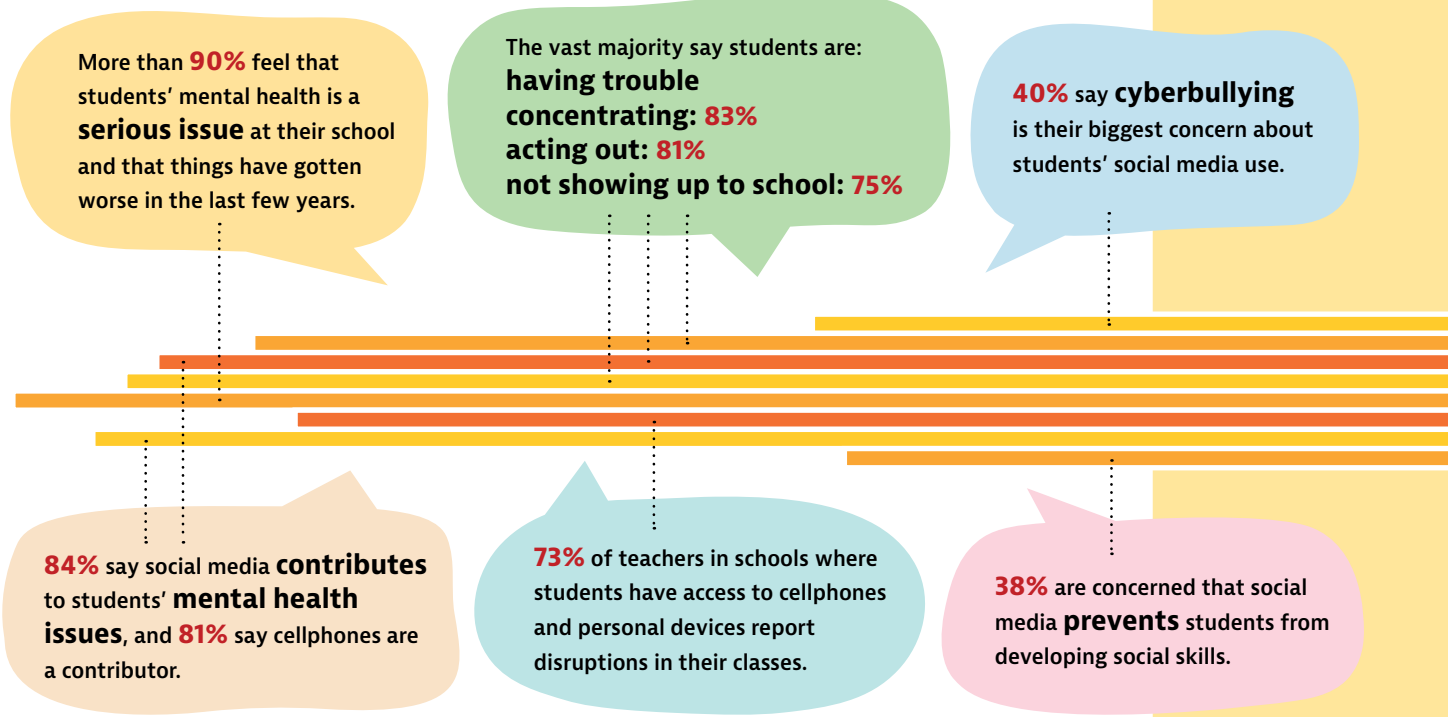
TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Post this in your break room and start a conversation.

NEA SURVEY:

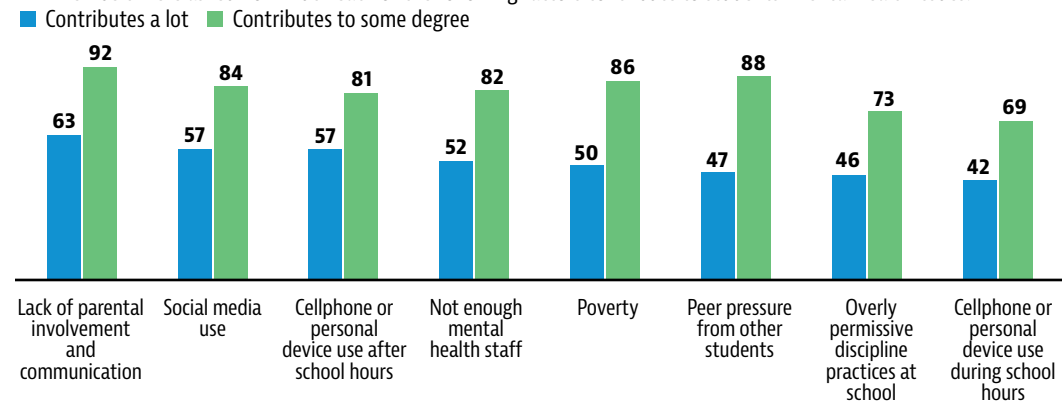
Educators Speak Out on Social Media, Cellphones, and Mental Health

NEA surveyed 2,889 members working in K–12 schools about the impact of cellphones and social media on their students. The spring 2024 survey identified four main areas of concern: student mental health, student safety and behavior, social skills, and the overall learning environment. Here’s what these NEA members had to say:



Mental Health Factors

NEA members were asked how much each of the following factors contribute to students’ mental health issues.



For the complete survey results, visit nea.org/impact. For more resources, go to NEA.org/Healthy-Schools.

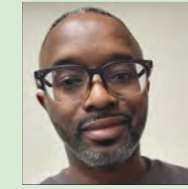
To find out how educators are taking a stand against cellphones in classrooms, turn to Page 28.



Join Us!

Looking for a new challenge?

The NEA Organizing Fellowship Academy (NOFA) is a yearlong program that trains you to grow your union and lift the voices of your union siblings, helping you transition to union staff work.



“Being a fellow absolutely changed the trajectory of my life. I was a teacher for 18 years. If it wasn’t for this experience, I’d still be teaching. Two parts I’d say were extremely valuable. One, the day-in and day-out with your mentor. And two, the out-of-state organizing training. You could be going to a strike in Massachusetts or a building blitz in Georgia. I worked on Sen. Raphael Warnock’s campaign, phone banking, knocking on doors, having one-on-one conversations. It was a great experience!”

—Jason Fahie, NOFA class of 2024, Maryland State Education Association

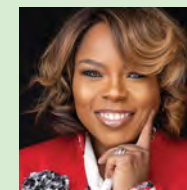


“Everything was so relevant! We worked directly with members, directly with affiliates. We worked on the Portland [Ore.] strike, which was beyond amazing. To see the level of preparation, the level of organization, and the level of community support, and to be part of something so monumental. It was life-changing. I would recommend this program to anyone. I’m excited for the future! I’m excited for my new career.”

—Tara Richardson, class of 2024, Missouri NEA

“In 2021, when my baby graduated from high school, I said I’m graduating too! I actually applied to be an administrator. ... Then one of my interviewers called me back and said, ‘You had a great interview, but you have to get out of that teacher mindset.’ They want to see an anti-teacher mindset! Then my local president sends me this email [about NOFA]. I was clicking to apply as soon I read it! The opportunity I had to visit other places, to do this practice that didn’t feel like practice. ... It shifted my mindset from teacher, and everything else I put behind my name, to organizer and advocate.”

—Alana Ward, NOFA class of 2021, The South Carolina Education Association



“When I saw the NOFA advertisement in *NEA Today*, I showed it to my local president and she said, ‘This is perfect for you! For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been organizing and mobilizing!’ During my fellowship, we went to Florida, to Louisiana, to North Carolina, and I saw the world outside of New Jersey—and the need to protect basic rights. When I say NOFA changed my life, it absolutely changed my life.”

—Marella McMillon-Holmes, NOFA class of 2023, NEA Center for Racial and Social Justice

“NOFA gave me great skills for organizing, for building power and membership. As a [UniServ director], I’m not only dealing with contracts and grievances and all that, I’m organizing members around issues, having one-on-one conversations, and identifying what’s good, what’s bad, what’s ugly. I learned those explicit skills from NOFA.”

—Geylor Walston, NOFA class of 2021, Michigan Education Association



LEARN MORE

Applications open in February!

Scan this QR code or go online to nea.org/NOFA to learn more!





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**Travelers 2023 Community Report (travelers.com/community-relations/2023-community-report)

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