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OUR MISSION

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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The Road Ahead

Fighting for Progress, Freedom, and Democracy



PAMELA WOLFE

By Randi Weingarten

These are unprecedented times. First and foremost, I want to thank President Biden. He’s been a great president, a great public servant, and an incredible patriot. We owe him a debt of gratitude.

Of course I’m starting with a primary source. I don’t think they’ve banned Charles Dickens—yet. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.”¹ Those words were written more than 165 years ago, but today feels very Dickensian.

Today, our union has never been stronger, and a revival of labor activism is sweeping the nation.

Wages are up, inflation has cooled, the Biden-Harris administration has created more jobs than any other in history,² and America’s economy is the strongest in the world³—powered by America’s workers.

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her commendations include being named to Washingtonian’s 2023 Most Influential People in Washington and City & State New York’s 2021 New York City Labor Power 100.

Yet...

Fear, anxiety, and despair have taken hold across our country, driven by disinformation, shifting demographics, loneliness, and a pervasive feeling that the American dream is slipping further and further out of reach.

Our students and our patients are coming to us with greater and greater needs. Academic freedom and the right to peacefully protest have come under attack. From floods to famines to fires, climate catastrophes are worsening. Hate crimes, particularly anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish hate, are climbing. And gun violence still haunts us.

Let’s be clear: political violence is never justified; not on January 6 and not against political candidates.

And while the calls to condemn political violence were encouraging, billionaires and demagogues are still capitalizing on fear to stoke division, defund public education and public services, decimate healthcare, and dismantle our democracy—all to cement their power. And the US Supreme Court’s extremist majority is aiding and abetting them, rewriting the Constitution in terrifying ways.

Operatives like Christopher Rufo, who work on behalf of billionaires like Betsy DeVos, openly admit their scheme—to create distrust in public education and in their political enemies so they can enact their extremist agenda.⁴

PHOTOS BY THE AFT, UNLESS NOTED

These aren't the first unscrupulous operatives we've faced. We've been outspent, been bet against, and had our union's obituary written more times than we can count.

Michelle Rhee tried to sweep us away. Scott Walker tried to legislate us out of existence. Billionaires backed the *Janus* case to try to bankrupt us. A red wave was supposed to crest in 2022 and wash us away. Mike Pompeo tried to vilify us, first claiming that America's school teachers teach "filth" and then calling me the most dangerous person in the world⁵—more dangerous than Vladimir Putin. Why? Because I am your elected leader.

But we're still here. In fact, we're thriving. I guess that old saying is true—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And, in our case, bigger. The AFT had 1.4 million members when I became president in 2008. Since then, we've been through two recessions, a pandemic, and all the crap I just described. Despite everything that has been thrown at us, since our last convention, the AFT has added 185 new units and more than 80,000 new members. And today, the AFT is 1.8 million members strong!

Who are the newest members of the AFT? Four airport ground crew workers in Bangor, Maine—and 450 teaching assistants at Brown University. Nine licensed practical nurses at PeaceHealth in Oregon, and 910 diagnostic imaging techs in Michigan. Bus drivers in Farmington, Illinois, and faculty and staff at universities in Kansas and Hawaii. Healthcare workers at Planned Parenthood in Wisconsin. Librarians in Ohio, doctors in Maryland, charter school educators in Massachusetts, paraprofessionals in Minnesota. And thousands more who just want a better life, including—after a 50-year fight—the 27,000 educators and school staff in Fairfax County, Virginia.

Why do they join the AFT? Because the AFT believes in improving people's lives. Because the AFT believes in our communities and our country. And because the AFT believes in you.

This growth is essential. America's middle class has risen and fallen as union membership has risen and fallen.⁶ That's why we—indeed, the entire AFL-CIO—are working to grow.

Our unions help us win better wages and benefits. Our unions give us real voice at work. It's how the United Federation of Teachers negotiated groundbreaking paid parental leave and lower class sizes. It's how Cleveland got their new policy prohibiting students

from using cell phones during the school day. United Teachers Los Angeles won sustainable community schools. And the Chicago Teachers Union is negotiating for healthy, safe, green schools.

It's about the value of belonging.

You're never on your own in our union, especially during life's hardest moments, like when we lost two members of our union family from Farmingdale, New York. Band director Gina Pellettiere and retired teacher Beatrice Ferrari were chaperoning a band trip when their bus crashed, killing them and injuring several students.⁷ Chaperoning, coaching, advising clubs—our members perform so many unsung labors of love. Their memories are a blessing. Thank you, Cordelia Anthony, the president of our Farmingdale local.

Our union has never been stronger, and a revival of labor activism is sweeping the nation.

Amid the surging culture wars, the AFT made a promise: to defend any member, like Amy Donofrio, who gets in trouble for teaching honest history⁸ or doing what it takes to meet the needs of our students or our patients. So many of our members feel alone and bullied, so many are walking on eggshells every day. In May, we won an important case when a New Hampshire law designed to stoke fear about teaching history and discussing gender, race, and identity was ruled unconstitutional.⁹ Two of the plaintiffs are with us today: Ryan Richman and John Dube. Thank you.



Read, Watch, and Share!

This article is based on Randi Weingarten's speech at the AFT's convention on July 22, 2024. Along with celebrating our union's growth and laying out the stakes this November, she highlights our mission of offering hope, unity, and real solutions for a better life for all. As America is struggling with fear and division, Weingarten inspires us to "imagine a country where hate has no harbor and freedom rings."

—EDITORS

PAMELA WOLFE

Then there's Karen Marder, a teacher at Hillcrest High School in Queens, New York. Days after the October 7 Hamas massacre, Karen posted a photo of herself on Facebook holding a sign reading, "I stand with Israel." Shortly afterward, there was a riot at Karen's school targeting her and calling for her to be fired.¹⁰

Karen had a choice to transfer to another school. But she returned to Hillcrest, and with a Palestinian friend and fellow teacher, she met with students. Karen used the experience to model how to counter hate, combat intolerance, debunk misinformation, and discuss challenging topics. This is what teachers do. Thank you, Karen, for being here.

We believe a better life for all is possible. And we act on that belief through our Real Solutions campaigns. Fighting for our communities. Fighting for each other. Fighting for our values, for the kind of country and the kind of world we want.

During COVID-19, we celebrated healthcare workers as heroes, yet many healthcare corporations betrayed those workers, failing to protect the safety and health of our nurses, technicians, doctors, and other health professionals.

We believe a better life for all is possible. And we act on that belief through our Real Solutions campaigns.



We didn't just get angry; we acted. Through our Code Red campaign, we're fighting to combat burnout of and violence against healthcare workers and to improve patient care. And we are winning. We got new safe staffing laws in Oregon, Connecticut, and Washington and new contracts in New York and New Jersey. We're targeting private equity conglomerates that buy up hospitals and bleed them dry without regard for patients or healthcare providers.¹¹

Schools and colleges would not function without paraprofessionals and support staff. They fix it, clean it, drive it, teach it, cook it, type it—but too often they are denied a living wage, affordable healthcare, safe working conditions, paid family leave, or meaningful professional development. While some locals have made progress through bargaining, we need to nationalize this fight. So we're calling for a Bill of Rights for support staff in schools and colleges, and we're working with members of Congress to pass it.

Speaking of raises, teachers need them too.

And so do public employees. They protect our communities and environment, and they make government services more effective. But an understaffing crisis is stretching public employees to the breaking point and endangering lives. In New York state, dire staff shortages have affected crucial services like the child abuse hotline. Corrections officers in Kansas have had to work mandatory double shifts for months on end. In Colorado, the shortage of nursing staff in state facilities has resulted in patients with mental health conditions being housed in prisons. So, using the new report from AFT Public Employees,¹² we are launching a campaign this week to combat these shortages.

Speaking of colleagues who need our help, let's talk higher education. We're fighting for investment and for the freedom to teach, and we're fighting against precarity and endless attacks. Our new higher ed campaign is about access, academic freedom, and affordability for all students and ending the adjunctification that higher ed faculty face. Expression—including expression

one disagrees with—must be protected for a democracy to thrive. The Hamas-Israel conflict has tested this. But we can and must fight hate, ensure people on campus are safe, and protect nonviolent speech.

That's what our members from Rutgers University, Northwestern University, and the University of California did. When their college presidents testified before Congress, they were there to make sure the presidents acknowledged their responsibility to protect the right to peacefully protest and the rights of students and faculty to be safe.

We're fighting back against the addictive and predatory practices of social media companies, demanding that they protect children, not prey on them.¹³



have organized hundreds of community book giveaways across the country. And this May we hit an amazing milestone—donating our 10 millionth book.¹⁹

Experiential learning should be standard in our schools—hands-on learning, debates, robotics, science fairs, service learning, student-led projects, and career and technical education. As the Biden-Harris administration has remade the economy, the AFT and our affiliates have created transformative pathways to secure those new good jobs, right out of high school, including in healthcare²⁰ and advanced manufacturing.²¹

Fighting for our communities. Fighting for each other. Fighting for our values, for the kind of country and world we want.

And we are focusing on artificial intelligence. AI can be a powerful tool, but there must be strong guardrails like those the AFT recently laid out.¹⁴ We are also imagining how to harness AI's potential, with both Share My Lesson's AI Educator Brain and AFT Innovation Fund grants.

The fights for real solutions don't end there. For over a decade, we have fought for the federal government to keep its promise to teachers, nurses, and other public service workers for student debt relief.

Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos refused. Ninety-nine percent of public service workers who tried to get debt relief were rejected.¹⁵ That is why the AFT sued DeVos¹⁶ and the student loan giant Navient¹⁷ for conspiring against borrowers.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have kept that promise. In three years, 946,000 public service workers have had \$69 billion in loans forgiven.¹⁸ Our members have saved an average of \$60,000.

I hear from AFT members all the time, many of whom have participated in AFT student debt clinics, that they can now buy a home, start a family, send their own kids to college, and retire with dignity.

But the student loan system remains dangerously vulnerable to the whims of predatory student loan companies—first Navient, now MOHELA, the latest to line its pockets while refusing borrowers the relief they're owed. So this morning, the AFT went to court, filing a consumer protection lawsuit against MOHELA. We won't stop until every borrower gets the forgiveness they deserve.

Public schools are essential to our children's future and to our democracy. Every public school should be a place where families want to send their children, educators want to work, and all our students thrive. That North Star guides our K-12 campaign, Real Solutions for Kids and Communities.

We have a vision of what schools can be. It starts with helping our kids love reading. That is why we invest in tools to help teachers be fluent in all aspects of the teaching of reading, and it's why we invest in books.

More than a decade ago, the AFT and First Book joined forces to give books to children who might otherwise not have their own. As others have banned books, more than 700 AFT locals

Experiential learning is a sea change in public education—and the federal accountability system needs to change with it. No single test can measure what kids need to learn and be able to do to succeed in life. Projects, portfolios, and presentations tell us so much more. And they resonate with students. So it is well past time to end high-stakes testing as the basis of federal education law.

In a world in which teachers are expected to do it all and many families feel they are on their own, we need to expand community schools to meet these needs, to make school the oasis in a very broken world—with wraparound services, health services, and afterschool enrichment. It's time to make these schools the norm, not the exception.

None of this happens without adequate funding, and without the amazing educators we have the honor of representing. But now school privatization is putting that funding, and even the survival of public education in America, at risk.

The school voucher idea first took root in the 1950s, after the *Brown v. Board* decision, when politicians in many Southern states introduced voucher proposals so white families could evade school integration.²²

By 1990, vouchers became a fixation of the religious right. Since 2010, the American Federation for Children, Betsy DeVos's group, has spent \$250 million to push "school choice" and now boasts that that spending has led to "\$25+ billion in government funding" being diverted from public schools to private alternatives.²³

Proponents of vouchers used to argue that they were a way for low-income and minority families to transfer out of low-performing schools. But research shows that vouchers, on average, negatively affect achievement.²⁴ And today, vouchers subsidize



Our nation must make a decision of enormous, lasting consequence.

wealthy families who already send their kids to private and religious schools. Privatizers fund those giveaways by defunding and destabilizing public schools.

Look at the fight here in Texas. Under Zeph Capo's leadership, Texas AFT fueled a coalition of parents, pastors, and rural Republican and urban Democratic legislators. They've defeated vouchers not once, not twice, but five times.

But did Texas Governor Greg Abbott accept the will of the people? No, he declared war not just on public education, but on anyone who supported public education, including spending millions in primaries to defeat the Republicans who stood up for kids in public schools.²⁵

And for all of you who live in states like California, Illinois, and New York who think "it can't happen here," these billionaires and extremists have their sights set on you too. That's why I'm so glad for the pro-public education campaigns our state federations in Montana and New York are leading.

Why do these extremists want to destroy public education?

They fear what we do—the teaching of reason, of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, of power, of privilege cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.

They oppose democracy itself. The extremists want to cement their power and prevent others from having it. So they're going after educational opportunity. They're going after economic opportunity. They're going after equal opportunity. They're going after the legitimacy of elections.

In case you think I'm exaggerating, the enemies of democracy have helpfully written down exactly what they intend to do. It's called Project 2025. It's a 900-page extremist wish list, coordinated by the Heritage Foundation, that they intend to implement in the first 180 days if Donald Trump wins.²⁶

Here's a taste of what they'd do: Cut Social Security and Medicare. Let employers stop paying overtime. Strip healthcare protections for people with preexisting conditions. Allow the government to

monitor pregnancies and prosecute people if they miscarry. Replace thousands of federal workers with ideologues, dismantle civil rights protections, end efforts to combat climate change, cut taxes for the wealthy, and weaponize the National Labor Relations Board against workers.

Their plans for public education are equally draconian.²⁷ Title I would go—swelling class sizes and eliminating paraprofessionals. Educators and public librarians could have to register as sex offenders if they disseminate anything the Heritage Foundation considers pornographic. And their holy grail—limitless funding for private and religious schools, leading to the end of the separation of church and state and of public education as we know it.

It's a path to autocracy.

These extremists see it as a zero-sum game. To seize power, they must subvert ours. So they remake the judiciary, roll back freedoms, reduce taxes on the wealthy, rig democracy, wreck public education, and restrict unions—because we the people stand in their way.

The president of the Heritage Foundation publicly warned that "we are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be."²⁸ An explicit threat of violence. This is the stuff of demagogues and dictators, not democracies.

Tragically, our nation's highest court has become a dangerous tool in this regard. The last two years, the extremist, activist majority on the Supreme Court has rewritten the Constitution, thrown out long-settled precedents, scrapped environmental protections, eliminated the deference given to science and expertise, granted corporations new powers over us, and stripped individual rights, including women's freedom to make one of life's most personal and significant decisions.²⁹

And now, the extremist majority on the court has granted presidents near-total immunity and almost limitless powers, creating a rule of one, not a rule of law.³⁰

They have laid the legal foundation for American autocracy.

Allow me to dwell on this for a moment. There is no presidential immunity clause in the Constitution. It's pretty much the point of the founding of our country—the rejection of imperial rule. Yet

the extremist majority on the court fabricated out of whole cloth a power of kings expressly not granted by the founders.

This is the moment we are in. And the moment when our nation must make a decision of enormous, lasting consequence. Who will hold the office of president, the office that the Supreme Court now says is above the law?

The Contrast Between the Administrations

To state the obvious, these are unprecedented times. Joe Biden has been incredibly effective at moving the country forward. He is a great president. But he is passing the baton and we respect his decision. Because of the changed circumstances, the AFT executive council met last night. We will be asking you to consider an endorsement of Kamala Harris for president of the United States.

Vice President Harris has fought alongside Joe Biden to deliver historic accomplishments and create a better life for all Americans. She has a record of fighting for us—fighting to lower the costs we pay, for reproductive rights, for worker empowerment, and to keep communities safe from gun violence. As President Biden said in his endorsement of Kamala Harris, she has his full support to be the Democratic nominee for president.

Much is changing, but we know one thing already: Donald Trump is still Donald Trump. This will be a choice between two values systems—and only one lifts up freedom, democracy, pluralism, and shared prosperity. And it's a choice between two records.

Let's compare those records. Take the economy: Trump passed trillions in tax breaks for corporations and the richest Americans, driving up the national debt by \$7 trillion during his administration.³¹ Three million Americans lost their jobs over the course of his presidency.³² Herbert Hoover had the worst record of job loss in modern history—until Donald Trump.

Trump left his successor a country in crisis and chaos, with soaring inflation and an economy in freefall. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris turned it around. They stabilized schools, saved pensions for hundreds of thousands of retired union workers, and remade the economy. They invested in our country's future—in our roads, our bridges, our ports, our electrical grid, our manufacturing sector, and, yes, our schools—more than any administration in my lifetime. They passed the child tax credit, which cut child poverty in half.³³ They got the Inflation Reduction Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal, and the CHIPS and Science Act, and they helped veterans sickened by burn pits.

Who will hold the office of president, the office that the Supreme Court now says is above the law?

From insulin prices to junk fees to student debt relief, this administration is combating corporate greed. Medicare can now negotiate lower prescription drug prices for seniors, and the cost of insulin is capped at \$35 per month.³⁴

Instead of slipping into recession—which was widely predicted—Joe Biden and Kamala Harris led our country through the COVID-19 crisis to the strongest economic recovery in our lifetimes: 15 million new jobs.³⁵ Inflation down from 9 percent to 3 percent.³⁶

Donald Trump promised to revitalize America's "left-behind counties" almost as often as he promised Infrastructure Week. It took the Biden-Harris administration to catalyze their comeback. In the last three years, these distressed areas have added jobs and new businesses at the fastest pace in decades.³⁷

Yes, Americans are still struggling with higher prices and more must be done—on childcare, housing, gas, and groceries—but who do we really believe will take on the corporations that are gouging consumers on just about everything while raking in record profits on the backs of American families?

Our planet is boiling. But Donald Trump offered oil company executives a deal—he'd scrap climate laws if they donated \$1 billion to his campaign.³⁸ The Biden-Harris administration has taken more action to combat climate change than any in history.³⁹

Trump takes credit for overturning the constitutional right to make reproductive decisions.⁴⁰ Kamala Harris is leading the fight to reinstate *Roe v. Wade*.⁴¹

Trump bragged to members of the National Rifle Association that he "did nothing" to curb guns during his presidency.⁴² Biden and Harris advanced the most significant gun safety legislation in decades.⁴³



SUZANNAH HOOVER

Trump's education agenda is "Betsy DeVos 2.0," stripping civil rights and diverting funding from public schools to vouchers. The Biden-Harris administration has made record investments in public education, including investing in teachers and school staff, community schools, college, and career and technical education.⁴⁴

Trump stacked the National Labor Relations Board with anti-worker, anti-union members. Biden is the first president to walk a picket line, and the Biden-Harris administration vigorously defends workers' right to organize and bargain collectively.

Trump sides with dictators and strongmen. He has callously called for Israel to "finish what they started" in Gaza.⁴⁵ Biden has rebuilt our international coalitions and has worked tirelessly for peace and for a ceasefire to stop this war.

What are Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris's visions for the country?

Imagine a country where hate has no harbor and freedom rings.

Donald Trump wants to help himself and his friends—expand his tax cuts for the wealthy, deport millions of immigrants, and roll back Biden-Harris initiatives starting with clean energy.

Kamala Harris wants to improve people's lives. Expand the Affordable Care Act and lower drug prices, make childcare and housing more affordable, raise wages and the corporate tax rate, and make our country better for everyone.

Indeed, Mark Zandi, the chief economist of Moody's, says, "Biden's policies are better for the economy. They lead to more growth and less inflation."⁴⁶ Moody's projects that Trump's plan would trigger a recession by mid-2025.⁴⁷

Donald Trump stokes conflict. I pray this near-death experience changed him, but the Republican National Convention demonstrated the opposite. As president, he wanted to use his official powers to have Black Lives Matter protesters shot.⁴⁸ He said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should be executed.⁴⁹ He sought to overturn the results of the election he lost.⁵⁰ He promises "retribution"⁵¹ if he is returned to the White House and a "blood-bath"⁵² if he is not. And the Supreme Court has given him a blank check to do all of this.⁵³

And then there's Trump's lying: Dozens of lies in the debate.⁵⁴ More than 30,000 lies during his presidency.⁵⁵ From calling unflattering reports about him "fake news" to the "big lie" that the 2020



presidential election was stolen from him. But despite his frequent lies, we have no choice but to believe him when he says he'll be a "dictator" on day one.⁵⁶ Trump is not a blowhard mouthing off. He is a cunning master manipulator.

Does anyone in this room doubt, given a choice between what's good for him or what's good for working families, which Donald Trump would choose? Or whether he would use the nearly unlimited power the Supreme Court has granted him in dangerous ways?

If your answer is the same as mine, this election is the most important not only in our lifetimes but in our children's and grandchildren's lifetimes.

It's going to be tough. The presidential election, the Senate elections, the House elections. Every day matters.

Yes, we must vote, but we must do more. In this world of "alternative facts" and disinformation, your voice and your activism are essential.

You are trusted, you are beloved—because you make a difference in the lives of others. Talk to your coworkers. Talk to your neighbors. Knock on doors. Write postcards. Put out the lawn sign and slap on the bumper sticker.

No one can do everything, but we can all do something. We can't risk regretting that we didn't do more.

A Better Future

There's a new musical on Broadway called *Suffs*. It's about the movement to win women's right to vote. The lyrics from one of the songs called "Keep Marching" have been stuck in my head:

Progress is possible, not guaranteed
It will only be made if we keep marching....
The future demands that we fight for it now
It will only be ours if we keep marching.⁵⁷

What will that future be? The best of times? The worst of times? It is still in our power to shape it.

Progress is possible.

Cast fear and despair aside for a moment and imagine what progress looks like.

Imagine a country where a living wage is the norm, where families can afford decent housing, childcare, a vacation every once in a while, and people can retire with dignity.

Imagine a country where all kids can be kids and have childhoods full of joy, learning, and adventure. Where their bellies are full of nutritious food, they feel safe, and we prioritize their well-being.

Imagine a country where every school is a school where educators want to teach, parents want to send their kids, and kids are excited to learn.

Imagine a country where healthcare is a right, hospitals focus on patients over profits, and nurses, doctors, and technicians are treated like the heroes they are. And so are bus drivers, teachers, and public employees.

Imagine a country where technology and AI are used for progress, not for disinformation or to replace good jobs.

Imagine a country where hate has no harbor and freedom rings—the freedom to vote, to live, to breathe; the freedom for families to make reproductive choices; the freedom to read; the freedom to teach; and the freedom to join a union.

We are at a historic juncture. Our nation has made great progress because we organized and fought and marched and voted. The November elections will determine which path we take as a nation. Progress is indeed possible, but so is the eradication of the rights and freedoms we hold dear.

Historians like Timothy Snyder and Heather Cox Richardson, who study threats to democracy and how fascists come to power, conclude that it is seldom a dramatic event or attack that lets fascism in the door. The violence comes later, after they are voted in.⁵⁸

Voting is still our best defense against tyranny and fascism. And it's our best offense to create that better future we dream of and march for.

Progress is possible, not guaranteed.

Voting is our best defense against tyranny and fascism. And it's our best offense to create a better future.

When the history books are written about this moment, let them record that we the people united, mobilized, and voted down this existential threat to democracy and freedom. That we continued the march for progress. That we laid the foundation for a better future. And that we sought to create a more perfect union.

Progress is possible, ... keep marching. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/weingarten.



SUZANNAH HOOVER

Putting the Power of Love to Work

School Asbestos More Extensive Than Expected

By STEVEN LEE MYER

The emergency inspection New York City public schools has found at least some exposure in every school checked, indicating the scandal over the testing program is even more costly than officials initially expected, according to the city.

Asbestos in the Schools: A Chaotic First Day Back

Tears, Rumor and Anger Where Doors Are Closed

THE NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL

The New York Times

The School Asbestos Scandal

NEW YORK TIMES ARCHIVE/AFT

Since her fight to remove asbestos from New York City's schools, Evelyn DeJesus has spread the power of love to create change.

By Evelyn DeJesus

As a mother, grandmother, educator, and union leader, I'm thrilled to contribute to this special issue of *American Educator* on a subject that is not just close to my heart—it's at the center of my entire being.

To me, activism is the way we put the power of love to work in the world. I know that may sound a little corny to some of you; let me try to explain why I believe this so strongly. Without putting love upfront in the driver's seat, so to speak, our activism will always feel a little fragile, not built for the long-term project of bringing real justice to all—and especially to the downtrodden.

Five words define my life as an activist: *family, community, fight, faith, and love.*

As a *Puertorriqueña* born on the Lower East Side of New York City, I began life with what were two big strikes against me in that era—I am female, and I am a person of color. Maybe three strikes, when I think about it—I was also born poor.

Not that we didn't have enough to eat when I was growing up, but we didn't have much. What we did have was family and a

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community that looked out for its children. I never really knew that we were low income. I knew what we had, not what we didn't. And I knew I had people surrounding me who didn't look like me but cared about me.

Whenever I came home from school, or anywhere, and walked through those gates at the entrance to our tenement building, I was being observed by a huge network of *tías, abuelas*, and neighbors, all of whom were tracking me as I made my way home. If anything had happened to me on the way, my mother would have known about it within seconds. Through my daily experience, I was absorbing lessons about the power of community—about the power of so-called ordinary people to take care of each other.

Still, as I grew up, those early strikes led to some rough times. I got married too young and ended up a domestic violence survivor. I adored my two little girls, but I struggled as a single mom. Even worse, my younger daughter kept getting sick, and we couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Despite visit after visit to the doctor and to the ER, she wasn't getting any better. We began to worry that she might be reacting to something at school. And sure enough, we soon unearthed a parent's nightmare: asbestos.

That discovery changed my life. I found other concerned parents and started pushing for inspections of all public school buildings in New York City. Turns out, there was asbestos that could harm students and staff everywhere.

To protect our kids, we were going to have to do battle against one of the biggest bureaucracies in the biggest city in the country:



the New York City Board of Education. That's when becoming a fierce advocate—a fighter—took a central place in my life.

I'd learned to fight, literally—and to stand up for myself and others—as a kid, but now a whole bunch of us had to work together to push the board to inspect every single school in the system. Because of our fight, we created a Parents Environmental Steering Committee with city hall. By the time we were done, we had shut down the entire school system for two full weeks after the planned beginning of the school year. That required an enormous sacrifice by families throughout the city. As a single mom, it was a struggle for me—but the board left us no choice. We couldn't send our children into buildings we knew were toxic. It was a huge task, but we made it happen—together.

I learned a lot from that struggle. I learned that the only way we could challenge a huge institution was by creating a community. By sticking together and nurturing a community of activists. And by having faith: faith that as parents, we had the right and duty to stand up for the health of our children. We created and cultivated faith in each other.

Thirty years later, I now can say that what began as a private concern—the health of my daughter—ended up as a community cemented together by a rock-solid faith in ourselves and in each other. And by love. Love for our kids. Love for each other.

In this issue of *American Educator*, you're going to read stories of AFT members' activism from all over the country. From grassroots work on local elections to bargaining for the common good, your fellow members are demonstrating the inspirational, multifaceted reality of union activism. It couldn't come at a better time.

Emboldened by the former US president, extremists are seeking to sow anger, fear, and division. They're banning books and narrowing curricula so that it's harder to create a safe and welcoming classroom environment for all. Attacking people who come to this country seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Pretending to support working families while actually supporting cuts in government benefits and services. Scorning people who look, pray, or love in ways that extremists don't like.

In the labor movement, we believe in building a big, strong, well-anchored tent that can hold all of us—not tiny little cubicles where we are too afraid to talk to people who look, believe, love, or talk differently than we do. You cannot build a big tent out of anger, fear, and division. You can only build it out of faith in and love for each other, knowing that our shared humanity matters far more than any differences. My vision is that the American tent needs to be real for everyone so no one is ever treated as a second-class citizen again. This is not a value we pay lip service to—this is for real, and it comes from loving each other.

Activism at its core is exactly that—coming together to build a better life for all.

I want to share the stories of three amazing AFT members, each of whom has found their own path to putting love into action. I hope you are as impressed by them as I have been.

Together We Rise Citizenship Clinics

I met Iran Alicea, president of the Hillsborough School Employees Federation (HSEF), when his local hosted a Together We Rise Citizenship Clinic* in Tampa, Florida. Created by the AFT and

brought to life by AFT affiliates and their community partners, these clinics provide free legal assistance, and sometimes financial support for citizenship application fees, to some of the nine million lawful permanent residents eligible for naturalization in the United States.¹

Iran's members include folks from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Mexico who want to have a voice in our democracy (just like they do in our economy). He became interested in helping his members with citizenship after assisting Victor Moreno, HSEF's vice president for custodial operations, with his citizenship paperwork. "By going through the process, Victor opened our eyes," Iran said. "We asked ourselves, 'How can we do this on a larger scale?'"

Activism at its core is coming together to build a better life for all.



Mercedes Caceres, center, after her naturalization ceremony with Iran Alicea, left, and Victor Moreno, right.

When Iran learned about Together We Rise, he knew it was perfect for his local. "Of the first 50 who attended our clinic," Iran said, "all of them could speak to an attorney and make sure their paperwork was in order—the majority have become US citizens. This is a big deal for us, because finally, these people who have been working here for years, contributing to the economy, have a say in running their communities." As citizens, they can build a much stronger community.

"Clinics are real activism for the Hispanic community—more than 100 people have gone through the process. Word is getting around, since the school district is the county's largest employer. When new employees learn they could become citizens, they gravitate more to the union," said Iran. "Not only that," he added, "we help them fill out voter registration cards, and they help the union by voting in local elections. There's real desire in the Hispanic community to become citizens—the clinics help us get over the biggest barriers: affordability and bureaucracy."

The local only works with school district employees. But if someone else shows up, union folks take them to Mi Familia

*To learn more about these clinics, see go.aft.org/gre.

Vota (My Family Votes; MFV), their local community partner. One member's mother has a small cleaning company; they directed her to MFV, and now she's a citizen.

Victor and Iran accompany members to their naturalization ceremonies. "Sometimes we're the only ones, because everyone else is working," Iran said. "We take pictures." And the ceremonies? "Very emotional—the excitement is catching."

When I asked where his activism came from, he didn't hesitate: "From my parents. My 91-year-old mom lives here in Tampa and cooks every single day, not for herself but for the neighborhood. She tells my sister, 'Take this next door or to that neighbor.' People just love her cooking. It's not political activism, but watching her care for her community, that's where it starts for me."

Iran has long been a union member, "first an aircraft mechanic, then a machinist, a cop, and a detective." When he moved to Tampa, he started with the school district and naturally joined the union. "As I see it," he reflected, "I'm not going to take any of this with me. I'm bilingual, I can help people. That's my goal: to assist as many people as I can, to leave behind what I can't take with me."

"I'm just a pathway," he went on. "My reward is watching someone succeed. It's always been that way for me—all I live for. If I can help make this person a little bit better, a little more successful, that's what I look for. It's not about me; it's about my people becoming citizens. Money can't buy what I try to give."

A Passion for Gun Safety

Sylvia Tanguma is a longtime elementary school teacher and the president of McAllen AFT in the Rio Grande Valley. I got to know her at a citizenship clinic in Houston two years ago. In deep-red Texas, Sylvia has taken on one of the hardest, most depressing issues in America today: gun violence.

I wanted to know what made Sylvia an activist. She thought for a minute. "I get angry at the injustices I see—and I love my students." School shootings played a big part as they transformed from rare to occasional to almost frequent. "When I saw that they were targeting elementary schools, I'd think, when are they going to walk into my classroom?" She describes her students as "25 innocent kids who have no malice in their little heads and brains," and she is determined to stop shooters from "doing whatever they want."

Wondering how shooters got guns in the first place, she learned that a Texas 18-year-old who can't buy a bottle of beer *can* buy an AR-15.²

Uvalde was Sylvia's worst nightmare come true. And politicians sat on their hands. "They would rather be in the good graces of the NRA than stand up for the safety of schoolchildren who cannot defend themselves," she argued. I heard the love of her students in her voice, her worry for them, and her righteous anger.

"It falls on us as teachers and school personnel to take care of the kids! That's the duty of the people we've elected. We don't have a bulletproof back room where we can take kids and be safe."

McAllen AFT has teamed up with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. They attend rallies with other teachers and hold demonstrations downtown. "So many people in the valley are pro-gun that we've had to get more active," Sylvia said. Her

goal is to establish a minimum purchasing age of 21 and background checks so that assault rifles are not so readily available.

Incredibly, the National Rifle Association held its 2022 convention in Houston just days after the Uvalde massacre. AFT President Randi Weingarten, along with community organizations and local and national gun safety groups—including Sylvia's—held a protest rally and press conference to highlight the connection between assault weapons availability and school shootings.³

When Governor Greg Abbott came to McAllen last year, Sylvia organized a peaceful protest with Moms Demand Action and AFT members. They know they face long odds. "We're trying to agitate. Our local state representatives have said, if we continue being active and advocating, down the line, something will be passed. It's a long road, but we're not giving up."



Sylvia Tanguma, second from left, at a rally for protecting kids and public schools.

COURTESY OF McALLEN AFT

Without love, activists burn out. With love, we strengthen ourselves and each other for the long haul.

The work is hard. "Staying strong is overwhelming at times," Sylvia said. "My husband is very supportive. He knows I'm passionate about this." During our recent conversation, she showed me what living with potential violence was really like. "We had an incident today where one of my students told a coach that another fifth-grader had a gun. That activated everybody—until it turned out to just be a rumor, thank God. But I was standing there, looking at my door, thinking, 'If someone comes through that door, where am I going to put the kids?' The glass door is locked, but someone with an assault rifle can just shoot down the door. They could get in the school in seconds. It's horrifying to know it could happen to you and your students at any time."

Teaching Taíno Culture

I met Aurymar Román Irizarry at a fantastic conference in Puerto Rico in August 2023 called Reencuentro Taíno (Reencountering

Taíno). I grew up on the stories my grandmother told me about the Taíno, but I'm sorry to say I thought they were just that—stories told by our elders. Before the 16th century, the Taíno were the primary people of the Caribbean, with a rich spiritual life, beautiful ceramics and music, strong matrilineal governance structures, and sophisticated systems of agriculture, hunting, and gathering.

The conference showed me that, contrary to widely held beliefs in the 20th century, Taíno culture did not die out after Columbus arrived. Thanks to scholars and activists, linguists and archeologists, artisans and musicians, and dancers and teachers, the amazingly resilient Taíno culture is being rediscovered, nourished, and even taught in some Puerto Rican public schools.⁴

When I reached out to Aurymar months later, I wanted to know how she got involved in teaching about Taíno culture.

She began teaching history in 2019 to 11- to 15-year-olds; soon, she started supplementing the textbooks because they had nothing about Taíno history or culture. "I looked around online," she said, "and found a group of people with knowledge of Taíno language, culture, and traditions. I asked a lot of questions, and as I learned, I began changing my curriculum and seeing what I could bring to my students in ways that would be fun and engaging. First, I brought in musical instruments: a drum called a *mayohuacán*, made out of a tree trunk; a seashell trumpet called a *fotuto*; and *maracas* made out of figs. I've learned to play these instruments, and so have my students, who get excited when they see them; they play when we practice Taíno songs."

In class, she makes a Taíno tortilla made of yucca and teaches students to extract ink from the *jagua* fruit, which is a Taíno practice. She's also made a little dictionary—she calls it *ABC Taíno*—for her students, which they use with memory games to help them learn vocabulary. "I've found that books can give you the story, but you need experience to have really significant learning," she explained. "That's why I bring so much stuff into the classroom."

I asked what parents thought about her teaching methods. "Parents learn with the students," she answered. "Recently, I introduced a Taíno song, and the kids got so excited that they sang it to their families. Their families were thrilled to learn from their own kids what they hadn't been able to learn themselves. I guess it's a movement we are growing here in Puerto Rico, trying to realize this part of our heritage, recognizing that all of us in Puerto Rico have some Taíno blood in us."

Aurymar's love for her community and heritage shines through in her activism. As she explained, "Teaching these Taíno culture

and language traditions is activism because this is knowledge that was basically hidden from the people. It takes activism to bring back what has been hidden, what deserves to be shared and recognized."

I mentioned teaching the history of women, African Americans, Latinos, and others on the mainland, where activists have spent decades striving to make history lessons genuinely inclusive and accurate. And now extremists are trying to return to narrow history lessons that ignore the contributions and sacrifices of so many people. Aurymar agreed—and added this: "Here's something I say a lot. I can be an activist in the streets, and I've done that. But for me, real activism is giving young people the power of knowledge by teaching honest history—and that happens inside the classroom. That's where you plant the seed and nourish it and watch it grow and flourish."

Now that you've read their stories, you'll understand why I found these activists so inspiring and why I wanted to lift them up in this issue of *American Educator*. They are all different from me, but I think you will notice some common threads in each of their stories and connections to my own.

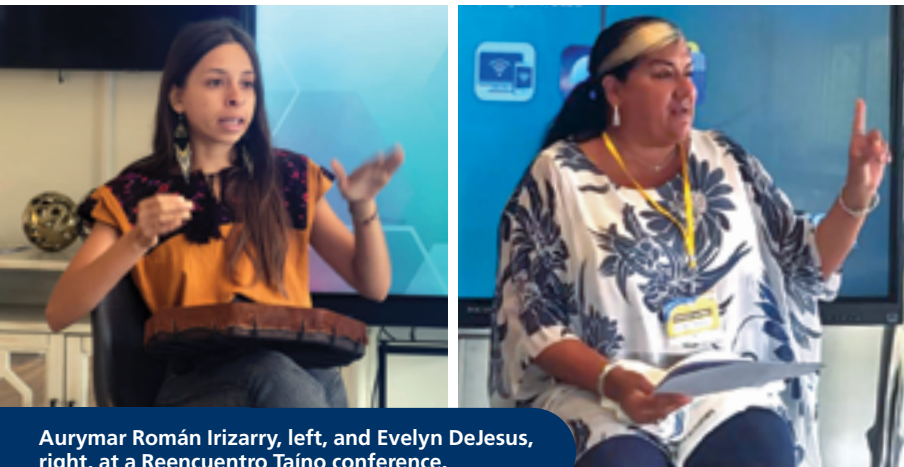
Not everyone thinks as much about the fight as I did as a young woman and still do. But Sylvia, struggling against what must sometimes seem like an immovable mountain, is kept going by her righteous anger that politicians would be willing to sacrifice innocent children on the altar of their vision of gun rights. She remains passionate and persistent, and she's not giving up. Aurymar looks back on her more "in the streets" activist days and now believes the best activism takes place in the classroom by helping youth reconnect with their heritage, while Iran remains steadfast in supporting hundreds of his members on their path to citizenship, even though he knows that there are nearly 900,000 Floridians eligible for naturalization.

All three depend on a community of like-minded people to sustain their own activism. Iran draws inspiration from his elderly mother, who he still sees literally nourishing a community. He makes sure that he and Victor attend naturalization ceremonies to strengthen the community of new citizens in his local. Sylvia depends on her local and Moms Demand Action to give her strength for their collective journey. Aurymar relies on the folks who are reviving and teaching Taíno cultural traditions for new knowledge, and she is motivated by her students' growth.

All three of these activists are driven by causes larger than themselves and are willing to give long hours to their struggles. And all of them are extraordinary examples of love in action, my real definition of activism. Without love, activists burn out. Without love, our willingness to fight can turn cruel, even violent. With love, however, we strengthen ourselves and each other for the long haul. That's what we need now, more than ever—the ability to choose hope over despair, unity over division, and love over hate.

I hope you find their stories, and this issue, as inspiring as I do. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/dejesus.



Aurymar Román Irizarry, left, and Evelyn Dejesus, right, at a Reencuentro Taíno conference.

COURTESY OF EVELYN DEJESUS

“Every Step Has Value”

Four Union Leaders Turned Government Officials Share Lessons Learned



COURTESY OF JULIE BLAHA; COURTESY OF MONTSERRAT GARIBAY;
COURTESY OF JAN HOCHADEL; COURTESY OF BRANDON JOHNSON

Of all the forms of activism, one of the most challenging—especially in our contentious times—is to serve as an elected or appointed official. Being in the public eye and helping people find common ground are never easy, so we wanted to know what inspired and sustains AFT leaders who have taken on higher offices. To find out, we spoke with Julie Blaha, Montserrat Garibay, Jan Hochadel, and Brandon Johnson.

Julie Blaha was elected state auditor of Minnesota in 2018. Her previous positions include middle school math teacher, president of Anoka-Hennepin Education Minnesota, and secretary-treasurer of the Minnesota AFL-CIO. Montserrat Garibay is the assistant deputy secretary and director of the US Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition. National Board–certified, she was a bilingual prekindergarten teacher, the vice presi-

dent for certified employees with Education Austin, and the secretary-treasurer of the Texas AFL-CIO. Jan Hochadel has been the president of AFT Connecticut since 2015 and became a Connecticut state senator in 2022. After working as an engineer, she taught physics and science at technical high schools and served as the president of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers. Brandon Johnson was elected mayor of Chicago in 2023. He began his career as a public school teacher at Jenner Academy in Cabrini-Green and then at Westinghouse College Prep on the West Side, which inspired him to become an organizer with the Chicago Teachers Union in 2011 and take on a career in electoral politics as a Cook County commissioner in 2018.

–EDITORS

EDITORS: How did you initially become active in your community?

BRANDON JOHNSON: I am the son of a pastor, a union worker, and one of 10 siblings; public service has always been a part of me because it is part of the foundation upon which I was raised. Service is inextricable from my faith, and when my parents decided to start their own church, the activation of community service was a requirement. That work of service and being responsible for one another was deeply embedded throughout my entire family.

As a public school teacher in Cabrini-Green—described as a tale of two cities where, on one side, you see the promise and opportunity of downtown Chicago, and on the other, the destructive remains of disinvestment—I experienced firsthand the long-term impact of school closures, unemployment, and gun violence on my students and our communities, and I saw the lack of people in positions of power fighting to change these harsh realities. This is what inspired me to become an organizer in the Chicago Teachers Union. As an organizer, it took the collective power of our diverse community to create the spaces we wanted to see. Together, we defended neighborhood schools from privatization, reduced high-stakes standardized testing, and expanded access to state funding so that students would get the education they deserve in well-resourced classrooms that focus on each student’s potential.

JULIE BLAHA: I had a few formative experiences as an adolescent that pointed me toward activism. I grew up in rural Burns Township, Minnesota (now called Nowthen). When I was 11, my mother decided we needed our roads paved, so she got herself appointed to the Road and Bridge Committee. She was the first woman to serve in an appointed or elected position in Burns Township, and she got our roads paved. Then, because it was no longer so dusty, my friend from down the street could ride her bike even though she had asthma. And Mr. Lane, everybody’s grandpa, was back on his porch with his oxygen tank. I saw how important being involved in local government is.

When I was 14, a neighbor went to the Democratic National Convention. After I asked her what it was like, she got me a job with the state Democratic party (the DFL in Minnesota) conducting telephone surveys. I thought that was so glamorous. I’m really glad I started with one of the hardest jobs in politics—and I didn’t realize how hard it was.

One more formative experience as a teen was attending my precinct caucuses for extra credit in social studies. The caucus chair said, “We need vice chairs,” then he just stared at my mom and me. That’s when I first learned the power of the ask. Don’t ever say no for somebody else; go ask.

Once I became a teacher, I saw just how important politics is. Every single thing in your classroom is touched by some elected leader—every pencil, every pet rabbit is determined by the decisions of elected leaders.

My first year of teaching, a friend was the union elections chair. She asked me to help count ballots. As we counted, we also talked about the day-to-day work of the union, which drew me in. I took over the elections chair position, then became the government operations chair and started coordinating our work with the Minnesota AFL-CIO. Building those connections was crucial; I learned so much about organizing from other unions that I brought back to my local.

I really got deeply involved in my local and the state labor movement when I became the political director of my local. I learned how to talk to legislators. More importantly, I learned how to get other members to talk to legislators. Educators will stand up for their students, but they usually don’t want to be involved in politics. I had to show them that politics was the way to get their great ideas into action. Teachers will do anything to help their students be successful. Well, this is one of those anythings: go to the legislature and ask for what your students need.

JAN HOCHADEL: I wish I’d had experiences like those growing up; for me, activism began when I became an educator. At the beginning of my career I was an engineer, then I became a high school science teacher at J.M. Wright Technical High School in Stamford, Connecticut. Very early on, maybe my second year, somebody asked me to be a building representative for the State Vocational Federation of Teachers (SVFT). I’ll be honest: I had no idea what that even meant. But I said, “Eh, OK, I’ll try it.”

“When I joined my union, I learned the importance of solidarity. I learned that to create change, we need to work together.”

—Montserrat Garibay

The SVFT represents educators in technical high schools across the state. Unfortunately, my school was about an hour from the union headquarters, so I had to learn how to be a building rep over the phone. Several years later, the mayor of Stamford decided to close my school. That made me angry, but what made me furious was that my union president wasn’t fighting it because relatively few students were enrolled. But I was thinking about the students in front of me, wondering what would happen to them—and to my colleagues.

A few of us decided to fight. We became friends with the state legislature’s speaker of the House, who helped us hold a rally. We emailed, called, and wrote to legislators, and we got media attention. That’s when I started to understand the power of numbers.



At the end of the day, our school was closed. Some people lost their jobs. I was transferred to another school. That summer, my union's vice president retired, and I ran for her position. My platform pledge was that I would never let another school close under my watch.

I was elected in August 2009. In November, the governor made budgetary cuts across the board, including cutting our licensed practical nurse program for adults. As promised, we fought back. And after we showed the state legislature what the true cost of cutting this program would be, they reinstated it. Even better, we won legislation declaring that no technical school could be closed without legislative approval. That was hard fought. Even though it was our introduction to the legislative process, we were the driving force behind it. We learned from other union leaders in the state, then we taught our members how to testify and to contact their legislators by email and phone.

So that was the start of my activism. I guess it's not uncommon: something makes you angry, so you get involved. You are motivated to make your voice heard and make a change. Some of our best activists come out of really difficult situations. I've thought about that as a union leader. When I'm confronted by an angry member, I see a powerful activist. I ask them, "What do you want to do? How much are you willing to put yourself out there?" And then we work together so they have the confidence and the knowledge to be successful.



MONTSERRAT GARIBAY: I joined Education Austin, which is affiliated with the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA), on my first day of work during orientation. In college, I was an active member of my community and advocated for undocumented students and families, and I would see Education Austin members at many of the community meetings. When I became a member, the then-president of the union, Louis Malfaro, came to my campus and asked me to have a one-on-one meeting during lunch. We spoke for 30 minutes about my personal story and the issues that were affecting our school district. He then invited me to attend the monthly union meetings. Eventually, I became the steward of my campus. I would welcome teachers, put the monthly newsletter in the teachers' boxes, sign up new members, and attend monthly meetings and the lobby days at the capitol. I

enjoyed learning how decisions were made at the district level and loved the fact that we were fed dinner and lunch while meeting other teachers.

As a pre-K bilingual teacher, I became the chair of my union's Pre-K Committee. When the state cut funding for full-day pre-K programs, our committee focused on advocacy. For months, we worked in collaboration with other teachers, parents, professors, early childhood organizations, and community members to advocate for a high-quality, full-day pre-K program. Parents, teachers, and advocates met with school board members and the superintendent to share the importance and positive impact of the program. After many months of organizing, the school district voted to fund the full-day pre-K program even though the state had cut the funding. That experience transformed my way of thinking and taught me the importance of organizing to achieve better outcomes for my community.

EDITORS: What are some of the challenges you faced and the lessons you learned as union leaders?

JAN: Once I became president of SVFT, we started focusing on the structure of our schools, making sure there were reps in every building and regular union meetings. It was important to me that we were training the reps to do the work, with SVFT there to help as needed. Through my involvement with the AFT's national staff and with AFT locals in other states, I learned about the organizing model of engaging members and cultivating leadership throughout the union.

Then, when the *Friedrichs* lawsuit threatened to take away the fees that ensure everyone who benefits from union work pays their fair share, I thought we needed to prepare workers across Connecticut. But the state federation president did not agree—and that's why I ran against her. Within six months of becoming the president of AFT Connecticut in May 2015, I was working with AFT staff to mobilize and organize locals throughout the state. So when the US Supreme Court decided *Janus* in 2018, taking away fair-share fees, we were prepared.

When I took over AFT Connecticut, it was a staff-run federation. One of the first things I did was make two huge banners that hung outside my office; they asked, "What have you done for the members today?" and "What have you done for the movement today?" In staff meetings, I encouraged people to answer those questions at the end of every day. For some people, this shift in our priorities wasn't a good fit. I never fired anyone, but about a third of the staff turned over during my first couple of years. They were accustomed to the service model of unionism, which solves problems for members but doesn't center on member activism. I have long been dedicated to the organizing model, which is about helping members find their voice and fighting together for what they value. For the union, transitioning from the service model to the organizing model is really about going from somebody else making decisions for you to making your own decisions.

One thing people don't tell you is you don't have to do everything yourself. Surround yourself with people who have the same morals and values—that doesn't mean they always agree with you. Finding people who will say no to you, who will challenge you, but who share your goals is one of the wisest things that union leaders can do.

JULIE: I became the union president in 2010 and served for four years. It was a tumultuous time. Tragically, several LGBTQIA+ students had committed suicide, and the district was sued for not creating a safe and welcoming environment. In addition, both the US Department of Justice and the US Department of Education were investigating conditions in the district. At the same time, our state funding formula forced us to seek local levies, so we needed to maintain strong community support. The school board tried to ignore the LGBTQIA+ bullying and pretend they were isolated incidents. The whole situation was deeply toxic, but of course our local was committed to supporting our students and their families. Having a larger labor movement to support my local was huge. The Minnesota AFL-CIO, Education Minnesota, and the national AFT provided on-the-ground support throughout this crisis.



So one lesson is that you are not alone—especially if you ask for help. One thing I wish I had known earlier is how important it is for us to ask each other to do things. When you ask someone to take on a new role or run for an office, the worst thing that might happen is that they say no and are deeply honored by your ask. So, worst-case scenario, you make somebody's day and have to go find somebody else. There's huge power in that. You can start with simple asks—like when I was asked to help count ballots.

Another lesson is that every step has value. The first time I ran for president of my local union, I lost. That was really helpful because I learned how to try something and lose, and then try again and win. But even without winning, in the act of running you gain so much power to do good. In every election, win or lose, I made connections, picked up skills, and got my message out. Years ago, I also ran for president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO. I didn't win that either, but the loss helped me when I ran—successfully—for secretary-treasurer.

It took a lot of the pressure off when I realized that running is not simply about getting votes. It's about building your community, sharing a message that people need to hear, and giving people hope. You are doing something good for the world at every step, and there's such joy in that—it gets you through tough times.

That's true for the whole team, not just the candidate. When you're involved, you're part of something bigger and helping people even when you don't know it. Maybe a woman at the grocery store sees your pin for a pro-choice candidate, and now she knows that somebody else understands her and respects her freedom over her own body. Maybe a student needs to see your social media post supporting trans kids because they are thinking about how they're going to come out. These are things that you're doing for your whole community.

The best thing I learned in union activism is that everything forward is forward. Every step has value; every step builds power. Don't get hung up on the endgame; you're doing good through the whole process.

EDITORS: How do you think of activism, especially union activism?

MONTERRAT: Activism is essential in our lives. Everyone can practice activism in their communities, schools, workplaces, or where they are. I strongly believe in the power of people working together for a common goal.

During my first years as a union member, I learned about the importance of civic participation, networking, and building relationships. At the time, I was a permanent resident and was fascinated by how elected officials are elected. I attended union meetings to learn about the candidates, volunteered in many campaigns, and often recruited other members to volunteer for campaigns. When I became a citizen, I was delighted to cast my first vote.

“The organizing model of unionism ... is about helping members find their voice and fighting together for what they value.”

—Jan Hochadel

After I had been the steward of my campus for a number of years, I was asked to run to be the vice president for certified employees of Education Austin. I ran against a member who had held the position for many years. Being bilingual helped me to connect with teacher assistants, custodians, cafeteria workers, and clerks. I would visit different campuses after school and hold union meetings—I enjoyed meeting members and learning the issues that they were facing. When I was elected vice president in June 2012, I went back to thank the union members who voted for me, and we became very close. They appreciated that I was accessible and started working on the issues they were dealing with, especially the Spanish-speaking members. I was very proud that we passed a policy to have directives also written in Spanish for the classified staff so they could understand why they were directed to follow certain protocols. We also passed a district policy to allow employees to have the day off if they were attending their citizenship ceremony.

I saw firsthand how the lives of our members were getting better because of the work that we did as a union. When I became

vice president of Education Austin, I wrote several grant applications to the AFT and the NEA to host citizenship clinics. Over five years, we hosted more than 10 citizenship clinics and helped several hundred union members—such as custodians, bus drivers, and teachers—and community members become citizens. That was a grassroots effort that transformed the lives of many union members.

BRANDON: I believe in what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1965 when he addressed the Illinois AFL-CIO convention and talked about the potential combined strength of the labor movement and the civil rights movement.* Allow me to share a long quote:

It is not a coincidence that the Labor Movement and the Civil Rights Movement have the same essential origins. Each is a movement that grew out of burning needs of an oppressed poor for security and equality. Each was denied justice by the dominant forces of society and had to win a place in the sun by its own intense struggle and indescribable self-sacrifice.

The labor and civil rights movements reshaped our nation and showed the potent power of our combined strength. We all are here because of the work of giants who came before us, without whom this day would not be possible. As history has shown us, when we come together, we show up with the belief of what unites us and how our differences are what make us who we are. There is no limit to what we can achieve when we do it together. I have committed most of my professional career to fighting for the labor movement, and I have committed my entire life to fighting for Black liberation. I see the two struggles as interconnected, and I will always consider myself to have a foot in both movements.



One of the ways I am continuing to move the needle forward in this work is by focusing on mental health. My brother Leon was my hero and is my motivation. A husband and father, he struggled with mental illness and died addicted and unhoused because he couldn't find the care he needed. Through our Treatment Not

*To read Dr. King's full remarks, see go.aft.org/e36.

Trauma ordinance, we're reopening community-based clinics and dedicating 80 additional mental health positions to alleviate the pressure on our first responders. These teams are part of our public health department because mental health crises deserve trauma-informed responses. Our ultimate goal is to provide mental health services without barriers. Whenever, wherever, and however individuals and families need these services, the city of Chicago should show up for them.

EDITORS: What spurred you to take on a higher office?

JULIE: In 2018, we knew that our longtime state auditor was running for governor, and so I was helping recruit someone to run for state auditor. Then one day, Anna Brelje, Education Minnesota's political action coordinator, turned to me and said, "We should be recruiting you."

She started gathering support and raising money for my campaign before I committed to running. I knew my union had resources to help people win because I'd been one of those volunteers who helped other people win. Being asked by my union to run was powerful. But what really propelled me to run was seeing what then-President Trump was doing to labor, people of color, women, new Americans, and even students.

In Minnesota, the state auditor oversees over \$60 billion of government activity through examinations, including audits and investigations, and legal compliance checks. We offer local officials direct support—including budgeting tools, trainings, and one-on-one coaching—because we want local governments to be successful. A lot of financial data are reported to us; we put it together in context to help local governments make decisions based on facts.

You can do this auditor job a couple of ways. You can be a "gotcha" auditor, which is how many auditors have functioned. But that's not how educators think. I'm invested in the success of all of us. As the state's watchdog, I'm a golden Labrador. I am loyal and caring, but I have a bite if I need it. I am dedicated to your success, and I'm going to protect the people of the state of Minnesota.

Much like when I was a union leader, I find joy in supporting people's ideas. Elected officials have problems they want to solve, and the office of the auditor shares their ideas across the state. Crucially—just as in education—we also help with implementation. As a union leader, I spent most of my time focusing on implementation because that was where the action was. In this position, what keeps me going is knowing just how deeply important it is to our students that our state and local governments work well.

BRANDON: After several years as an organizer, I looked at pushing into the political space to be more responsive to the people I made myself accountable to—the individuals and families I was and am still fighting for. My commitment to them and dedication to service spurred me on every step of the way, and I have never lost sight of that.

In 2018, when I was elected commissioner of the 1st District of Cook County, I led the effort to pass the Just Housing Ordinance, which prohibited housing discrimination against formerly incarcerated people. By the time it took effect at the end of 2019, I was proud to see political action improve people's lives. It guided my work as a commissioner to continue finding ways the government

could work for the people, which led to my collaboration with my colleagues to address issues within our criminal justice system that contributed to racial profiling, secure legal representation for immigrants facing deportation, and advance recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I convened a state-wide Save Our Seniors response to the crisis in under-resourced nursing homes. Then, to support and act on the values embedded in the civil uprisings of the summer of 2020, I organized the Cook County Board of Commissioners to commit to a Budget for Black Lives, which brought new investments in healthcare, public transportation, internet access, and affordable housing. But I knew the work didn't stop there. There were still so many inequities impacting our communities, from overpolicing to the lack of youth engagement, that spurred me to run for mayor in 2022.

As mayor, I'm proud to report that we are working to change these realities by investing in people. One of the best investments we can make into the future of our city is empowering our young people. Our administration has mobilized across all platforms, utilizing our city departments, sister agencies, unions, community organizations, businesses, and more to provide thousands of young people with paid work experience during the summer. When we talk about investing in youth employment, we are really talking about investing in public safety, workforce development, poverty alleviation, economic growth, and so much more.

The power of community working together to uphold equity, justice, and fairness through service brings out the very best in all of us. I have seen its snowball effect across this city, and I know it is the engine toward our future of a better, stronger, safer Chicago.

JAN: Like Julie, I was pushed and pulled into running. I've long been friends with Danté Bartolomeo, who is now the commissioner of labor in Connecticut. She used to hold the state Senate seat that I now have (which covers Meriden and parts of Cheshire, Middletown, and Middlefield) and was a great advocate for the technical schools. Unfortunately, she lost her 2016 Senate election to a Republican. In 2022, I was helping Danté and Meriden's Democratic Town Committee chair find someone to run. After a teacher we were enthusiastic about decided against it, they asked me to run. I was hesitant, but Danté convinced me that I'd still be helping my members. I knew Danté and the job she did as a state senator well, so that made this seem doable.

At times, I worry that I'm not able to do both my jobs well, but ultimately both positions have the same goal: ensuring working people are protected and have the benefits they need. Being a state senator is a continuation of unionism focused on getting all community members to be activists and meeting people wherever they are for the betterment of everyone. The more people we have involved, the better off everyone is.

MONTSERRAT: My own experience and personal story spurred me to do more. As an undocumented immigrant who came to the United States as a very young child not speaking a word of English, I learned the importance of giving back. Throughout my life, I had many people who helped me learn English, find my first job, and apply for college; people also loaned me money to buy my first car, gave me words of encouragement, and mentored me. I was lucky to have a strong support system. As I grew older, I felt a

sense to give back. And, when I joined my union, I learned the importance of solidarity. I learned that to create change, we need to work together.

When I was in college, my mentor teacher, who taught in the same district, told me that if I was going to be teaching in the Austin Independent School District, I needed to join Education Austin. As a good student, that is exactly what I did as soon as I got hired. Organized labor can get



“What really propelled me to run was seeing what then-President Trump was doing to labor, people of color, women, new Americans, and even students.”

—Julie Blaha

better results for everyone. Our union was able to get better salaries, professional development programs for educators and paraprofessionals, stronger public schools, more community schools, and stronger policies for programs such as National Board Certification, bilingual education, and arts for students, among other things.

A year later, I learned to organize more deeply in my school when I filed my first grievance. I taught in a pre-K Demonstration School, and we had over 20 bilingual classrooms with more than 26 students per class, while the regular classes each had only 12 students. Our school needed to hire more bilingual teachers, but the principal refused because it meant losing regular classes. I remember attending one of the monthly union meetings where we learned that the district had passed classroom ratios for students in pre-K. The district put a limit of 20 students per class to ensure that students were getting a quality education. I took the district policy to the principal, and she said that there was nothing she could do. So, I reached out to the union and shared what was taking place in our school; my union representative mentioned that we could file a grievance to get more bilingual teachers. She explained the process, including that we needed to get teachers to sign the grievance in less than 10 working days and that we would present the grievance in a hearing with human resources. I started organizing and meeting with teachers after school. We

got my colleagues to sign the grievance with over 75 percent of the school staff, and we won! Our school was given more bilingual teachers, our class size was lowered to 20 students, and as a result, our students were able to receive a better education. Mobilizing and winning gave me hope that we could change more things in our schools. I realized the importance of knowing policies and that having a union helped us create better working conditions.

My current position is assistant deputy secretary and director for the Office of English Language Acquisition at the US Department of Education. Building relationships and collaborating have



“The power of community working together to uphold equity, justice, and fairness through service brings out the very best in all of us.”

—Brandon Johnson

been key in this role, and I use the skills I learned when I was organizing every single day. Since my first day, I have reached out to the different career staff and political appointees, and I have introduced myself and scheduled meetings to learn about their jobs and how we can collaborate. And for the past three years, I have kept building relationships and working in collaboration to raise the bar.

EDITORS: What do you wish you had known earlier in your career?

JAN: At each step of my career—when I first became a building rep, then SVFT president, and state federation president—I felt

like I had to do it all by myself. But each time I saw how important it is to get other people involved. These aren’t jobs in which you can make mistakes—people can get hurt. But when you do get it right and you see those wins, it propels you to want to do more. Set yourself up for success by *not* doing it all. Involve others. Help them grow and find their voice. You’ll have more successes, and the union will be stronger.

This is a lesson I learned while teaching—I just didn’t realize how directly it applies until recently. When I was learning to teach, I threw lots of information at students, hoping some of it would stick. With experience, I saw that the students learn so much more when they teach each other. That’s my real lesson: give everybody else the tools to help all of us succeed.

JULIE: I agree. As I said before, you are not alone—especially if you ask others to help. I’ll add that we need more educators in government. Being an educator gives you all kinds of skills to run for office and be effective in office. We keep things organized. We can deal with unusual behavior. We roll with changes. And we deeply understand one of the most important things government does: public education. For educators, real community building is baked into our mindset, and I think government needs more of that.

MONTERRAT: Starting out, I would have wanted to know more about how to be even more engaged. I remember that my first year of teaching was overwhelming with meetings, professional development, parent conferences, grades, etc. It wasn’t until my third year—after winning the class-size grievance in my second year—that I got more involved. During my third year, I felt more comfortable in my role and was starting to provide professional development for new teachers—and I learned that there were other issues that were affecting our schools. For instance, the district wanted to reduce the number of arts and music classes and custodians in the schools because of budget cuts. I also started to meet more educators at different campuses because I started to attend the monthly union meetings. My third year is when I became the steward at my campus and the chair of the Pre-K Committee.

BRANDON: I was very intentional about considering my run for mayor and tried to cover every base on what my family and I could expect. It would have been nice to get a heads up on the adjustment from wearing hoodies and driving around in an old Jeep to wearing suits and being driven by security detail. I decided to run for mayor because I wanted to make a difference in my community. I saw what we were lacking, what we needed, and most importantly, what we could do to change this reality through public service. My advice is to look within your community at how injustice impacts you and allow your lived experience to motivate you to change it. I’m not saying it will be easy.

The seismic shift from where I was just a handful of years ago to now and the impact of being one of the only mayors elected without ties to the political establishment or machine are things no amount of explaining or researching prepares you for. But I am here, and a number of movements—civil rights, public education, social justice, labor, faith—are here with me. So, let’s get to work. □



Lessons in Building Power

How Michigan's Labor Movement Restored Workers' Rights

In 2012, Michigan's Republican governor and Republican-controlled legislature passed a raft of anti-union laws. But the labor movement fought back—and won. To find out how, we spoke with three AFT leaders: David Hecker, Terrence Martin Sr., and Eric Rader.

David Hecker, a member of the AFT since 1977, was the president of AFT Michigan from 2001 to 2023 and an AFT vice president until July 2024. He has served as a co-chair of the AFT Organizing Committee and on the boards of several nonprofits in Michigan. Terrence Martin Sr., who was the president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers from 2018 to 2023, is the president of AFT Michigan and an

AFT vice president. He attended and taught in Detroit public schools and remains an outspoken advocate for social, educational, and economic justice in the city. Eric Rader, a political science professor, is the president of the Henry Ford Community College Federation of Teachers, which represents full-time teaching faculty, counselors, librarians, and other academic staff at Henry Ford College in Dearborn. He's also an AFT Michigan vice president, a member of the AFT Higher Education Program and Policy Council, and a co-chair of the AFT Organizing Committee.

—EDITORS



EDITORS: After more than a decade under anti-union laws, Michigan's labor movement achieved major legislative victories in 2023. Please share some highlights.

DAVID HECKER: In 2011, the Republican Party had a majority in the state legislature and a conservative governor, Rick Snyder. Together, in 2012, they turned Michigan into a so-called right-to-work state.

Among other issues, they also took away payroll dues deduction for K-12 educators; stripped our right to bargain on a wide range of teacher issues, including placement, evaluations, discipline, and discharge; and declared that graduate research assistants were not covered by labor law. In 2023, we won all that back and more, including overturning right-to-work in the private sector. The public sector, of course, is governed by the US Supreme Court's *Janus* decision.*



“We build power by mobilizing members around issues, by working with community allies... by having a vision for our union.”

—David Hecker

TERRENCE MARTIN SR.: Winning back some job security for our members was huge. We also won back the right to negotiate wages for teachers in Detroit. Fifteen years ago, the Detroit Public Schools was taken over by the state (for the second time). Two emergency managers focused on cost cutting, school closures, and divestment. They seemed determined to starve the neighborhood public schools and open charters. Conditions in the schools became so bad that our enrollment dropped by half and debt ballooned to \$335 million.†

ERIC RADER: Community colleges never lost payroll deduction, but we did lose deductions for our political action fund. My local uses its political action fund for state and local races. Restoring this payroll deduction was important for us because we used to have 90 percent of our members contributing. Now we're at about 70 percent, so we're working to build back up. Most of our 2023 legislative victories restored the right to bargain for things we used to have—not the things themselves. I'm going to be negotiating with the college to put payroll deduction for our political action fund back into our contracts.

*To learn more about *Janus*, see go.aft.org/ogv.

†For details on the state takeovers, see go.aft.org/rsk.

There was also a restriction in 2012 that affected K-12 and higher education: if your contract expired, steps in your salary schedule did not automatically go into effect, and you had to pay for any additional healthcare insurance premiums. Now, your steps continue even if you haven't reached an agreement on a new contract, and you don't have to pay additional money for your healthcare coverage. You can also get retroactive pay. That's a big one for all of us.

TERRENCE: One more big win was a renewed belief in the labor movement. When we were battling the state to try to get these things returned, it wasn't just us; it was Michigan's labor movement that galvanized change by banding together. Now we have a renewed sense of the strength of the labor movement. We can point to specific things that we were able to win together, which prompted people to want to be a part of a union.

EDITORS: Now the million-dollar question: How did you get from devastating losses in 2012 to amazing victories in 2023?

DAVID: There are two answers, one grounded in how we build power, the other in what we do with our power. Fundamentally, our power comes from our members. Power is what matters. For example, unions don't win strong contracts at the bargaining table. We win by increasing our leverage—our power—through union member and community member activism. The same is true for legislative victories. We build power by mobilizing members around issues, by working with community allies. We build power by having a vision for our union and for what we must and can accomplish.

TERRENCE: That has definitely proven true in Detroit. At the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), since the takeover our vision has been that our school district is worth saving and that every child in the city of Detroit deserves a quality public school in their neighborhood. We discussed our vision with members and community leaders, asking “Will you join us in securing that for our children?” That's how we built power. We created a coalition of people who believed in the same thing, and eventually we had enough support that elected officials shared our vision too.

It's not as easy as it sounds. Some people won't believe in you. But our intentions were pure, and the average Detroit citizen came to understand and believe us—in part because what the emergency managers did was so unbelievable. Because of their divestment, class sizes ballooned, many classes had long-term subs, and some classes had no adult supervision at all. The conditions turned many highly conservative people into public school supporters.

Families and community folks still believe in teachers. They go to teachers for advice. The DFT's message was believable in part because it was coming from the people who have dedicated their lives to the students of the city of Detroit and who knew firsthand what was happening.

Another crucial lesson I've learned is that building power takes time. Too often, we hear about a victorious strike or a new law passed, but we don't hear about the struggle in the months and years leading up to those moments. There are dark days when you're arguing with people who are supposed to be on your side. You question your strategies. The journey can be just as important as where you land.

ERIC: I agree. In 2011 and 2012, I was chairing my local’s Political Action Committee (PAC). We had a lot of people who were interested in joining the committee because they didn’t know what else to do. In 2012, we knew the votes in the state legislature were against us, but we still turned out—with the whole Michigan labor movement—in huge numbers at the state capitol to protest.

People were down because they knew how much we had won over the years and what the legislature had stripped away. They were discouraged and not sure how to fight back. In the aftermath, we knew we were not in good shape politically at the local or state levels. In response, my local bargained for a community service requirement. We wanted our members to get involved in service organizations so that people would know us and see us as the face of the college in the community.

That was a long-term strategy for building support. There are many more conservative community members who don’t automatically support labor. By doing community service work side by side, they got to know us as good people teaching their kids. We may still disagree on some issues, but many started to see that there’s value in us having the right to bargain our contracts. Patience has been critical. We spent 12 years patiently organizing, patiently engaging with the community, patiently getting out the vote, and patiently lobbying.

TERRENCE: The DFT needed to engage members like your local did, but first we had some basic restructuring to do. For years, the DFT was a service-oriented local; we focused on bread-and-butter issues. We were a closed shop, and we won great contracts. That changed with the state takeover. The emergency managers closed schools and fired staff, so we had to organize. We hired two rank-and-file members, released full time, to be organizing fellows in the DFT. They had been activists within our local, volunteering their own time to build the union. With the organizing fellows and our new mindset, we didn’t just take the issues we saw every day to the bargaining table—we took them to the street.

Along with our colleagues at AFT Michigan, we also created a community table that grew into the Michigan Education Justice Coalition. Many nonprofits and community members joined together to fight the emergency managers’ divestment and attempts to charterize the district.

Our members started seeing themselves not just as teachers but as important pieces of the school community, and they saw a way to make things better.

DAVID: Over about 25 years, AFT Michigan made a concerted effort to become an organizing union. Not just organizing externally, but operating under the organizing model, which means involving and mobilizing

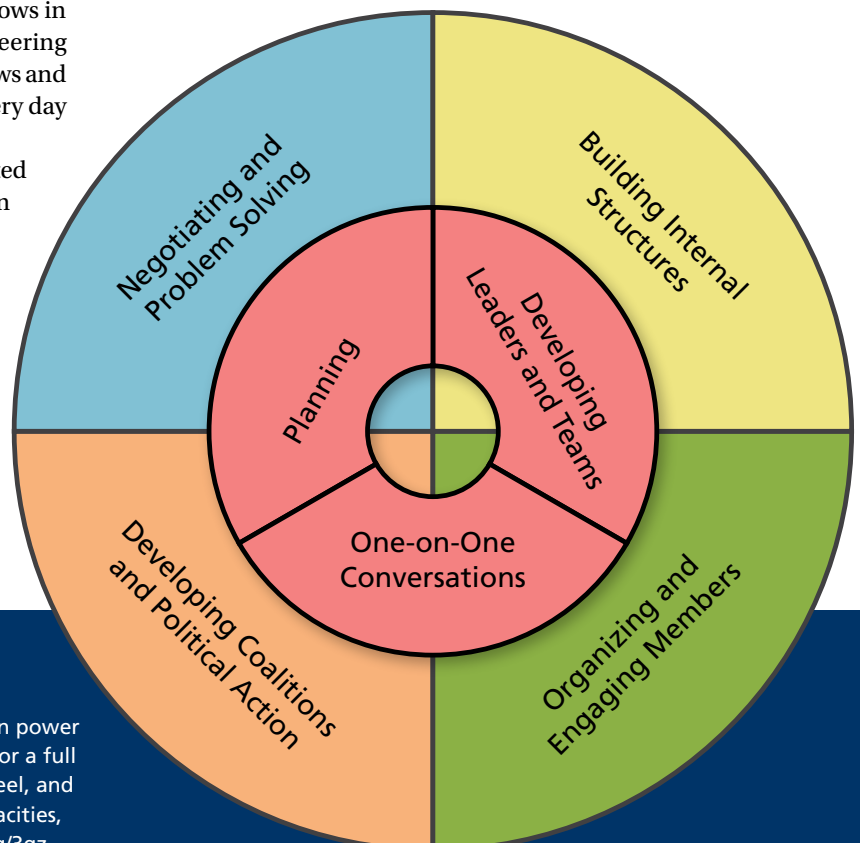
members. We worked to move the entire state federation in that direction, and now Terrence is continuing that work.

At AFT Michigan, one key strategy has been hiring staff members who think like organizers. The essential questions for all staff are, “How do I do my work in a way that involves our members, that builds the union, makes the union stronger, in every aspect of what we do? How do we have a union where members are involved in all we do: coming to bargaining, meeting with legislators, being involved politically, and forming partnerships with community organizations?”

To build a strong union, there’s always a role for the service model. If there is a crisis that must be addressed immediately, and the union leader can step in and put out the fire, they should. But the default should be the organizing model. Even when addressing an individual need, like filing a grievance, you organize around it by having everyone at the workplace rally or sign a petition in support of their colleague.

The organizing model asks, “How do we empower our members to do the work that needs to be done?” Sometimes that’s a lot more time-consuming than solving the problem yourself as a union leader—but by involving others, you solve the problem and build the union.

Several years ago, we codified what a local union should be doing, how to do it, and how to assess their progress in the power wheel shown below. From the state affiliate perspective, the ideal situation isn’t that our staff is doing everything for local unions. The ideal situation is that we’re empowering locals. That takes time, so we slowly move from heavily supporting new leaders to just checking in with experienced ones and assisting when needed.



AFT Michigan’s Power Wheel

AFT Michigan developed this visual representation of union power to help highlight the most critical work of strong unions. For a full description of the skills and activities embedded in the wheel, and related tools for assessing and enhancing your union’s capacities, see AFT Michigan’s “Union Building Workbook”: go.aft.org/3gz.

To mobilize members into action, union leaders must ensure our members see the connections between the work we ask them to do and how they benefit from the outcomes. When we ask members to donate to our political action funds, knock on doors for endorsed candidates, and volunteer to get out the vote, we must show the difference they can make. People are busy, and we are asking for their time. Our members work hard for their paychecks, and we are asking them to part with some of it for our PAC. When we make an ask of our members, we must put ourselves in their shoes to best be able to determine how we approach them to take action.



“We spent 12 years patiently organizing, patiently engaging with the community, patiently getting out the vote, and patiently lobbying.”

—Eric Rader

ERIC: A lot of people come into our local not wanting anything to do with politics, especially these days. But the people in Lansing (our capital) decide how much funding our college receives and how much we’re going to pay for healthcare. When we send out communications about political campaigns, we focus on issues that are most relevant to the professional work of our members. We talk about funding for our college and other practical bread-and-butter issues. Our focus is on our livelihoods and being able to do our jobs as professionals. We talk about shared governance at the college and our role in deciding policies. And we connect that to being involved in policymaking in Lansing—we don’t want policies pushed down on us.

Even members who are not Democrats are willing to give to our political action fund and help get out the vote by phone banking or going door to door because they know we’re supporting pro-public education candidates. Importantly, our political action fund has a category where people can restrict their contributions to certain races. Some members only want their funds to support

races for our board of trustees or the local millage that provides much of our school’s funding. We honor that.

TERRENCE: I agree. But I’ll also add that sometimes there are members who really should be eager to volunteer and donate. In 2024, the people who should be speaking up in favor of the Biden-Harris administration are those who have gotten thousands and thousands of dollars forgiven in student loans. Frankly, those are the folks we’re leaning on when it comes to political action fund donations to get out the vote for Kamala Harris.

EDITORS: You’ve shared a lot about how you built power. What did you do with it?

ERIC: After several years of building community support and labor-friendly coalitions, unions and progressive groups saw an opportunity to fix our gerrymandered state legislature in 2018. Michigan is a purple state, but progressives routinely lost state legislative races because of how the district maps were drawn.

In 2018, we, along with many other progressive groups, pushed a ballot initiative called Voters Not Politicians to shift control of redistricting from the legislature to an independent commission. Our goal was to have districts that actually represent the population. That proved popular. When we went door to door to educate people about the initiative, most people agreed it was a great idea.

After the ballot initiative passed, our work was just beginning. Once the independent commission was formed, it held hearings across the state. AFT Michigan was involved, and I testified for the Dearborn area, along with submitting a proposed map for redistricting. Using data from the 2020 census and information from the hearings, the commission drew more representative boundaries for the districts.

DAVID: There are three main reasons we were successful in the 2022 elections: First, the work we had done building the organizing model, getting more and more members engaged with political action. Second, in 2018, Michigan voters passed two election-related ballot initiatives. One provided for nonpartisan reapportionment, as Eric described. AFT Michigan contributed both money and local union volunteers. Another ballot question in 2018 that we were heavily involved with focused on increasing access to voting. Called Promote the Vote, it provided for early voting, no-reason absentee voting, and straight party voting. If we hadn’t succeeded in increasing voter access and securing nonpartisan redistricting in 2018, we wouldn’t have taken the House and the Senate in 2022. The third reason we were successful was the issue of reproductive rights. Not only did this issue impact candidate races, but in Michigan codifying choice in the state constitution was on the ballot in 2022—and passed.

Then, in preparation for the 2023 legislative session, the president of the Michigan AFL-CIO had all of the AFL-CIO’s member unions vote on a Solidarity Pact that listed the top priorities of the various unions. We pledged that we would all stay in the fight until everybody got what they deserved; a union would not walk away from the legislative arena once it won on its specific issues. We all pledged to stay and fight for each other. And while the Michigan Education Association (MEA) is not in the AFL-CIO, we all worked hand-in-hand.

While unions have always worked together, in my 40 years in the Michigan labor movement and more years in the Wisconsin labor movement, I had never experienced an actual vote on such a Solidarity Pact—a vote that indicated we all understood that the only way to have a strong labor movement was for all of labor to win. We basically said, “No one’s leaving until all of our issues are addressed.”

ERIC: That solidarity meant a lot—and we tried to replicate it at the local level. The Michigan AFL-CIO organized several lobby days for us in 2023. K-12 teachers and staff were still in school during our lobby days in May, while our regular academic year had ended. Though the focus of last year’s lobby days was primarily on K-12 issues, I encouraged our members to get involved because we’re all in it together.

Still, in my local it was a little harder to get people involved in 2023. Since we won the 2022 election, many members felt like their work was done. But helping elect people who understand your issues and share your priorities is only one step in the process. We still have to go to Lansing to remind them why basic things like funding for public education and restoring the right to bargain issues are important.

Now, as we gear up for another election, we’re able to point to all we won in 2022 and 2023—and to remind members that this is a swing state. We can lose it all again if we don’t continue to fight.

TERRENCE: It had been hard to get DFT members involved since the first state takeover 25 years ago. Detroit had been mistreated for so long, and we had lost so much. It was hard to believe that AFT Michigan and the Michigan AFL-CIO were putting us in a position to win.

So we not only lifted up the strategies but also tried to change hearts and minds. Members needed to believe that we could make change by knocking on doors, talking to community members, and gathering signatures for these ballot initiatives. One message we have for people in states like Wisconsin and Florida is “Have hope.” One of the hardest things to do is to get folks who have suffered loss to believe again. We were able to do that here.

DAVID: I think the number one time you really see a labor movement come together is during the political season because, with few exceptions, we all want the same people elected. The Michigan AFL-CIO brings unions together and sets up neighborhood walks and phone banks. AFT Michigan has worked with the AFL-CIO and the MEA doing this work.

ERIC: It’s a huge relief that I don’t have to organize get-out-the-vote activities, rallies, lobby days, or other actions for state or national elections; I just have to find volunteers to participate in what the state affiliates have organized.

However, my local does run campaigns for our local elections and ballot initiatives, such as school board races and efforts to renew our property tax millage funding. Our college’s board of trustees is also the school board for Dearborn; they have a combined role, which is very unique. So we work very closely with the Dearborn Federation of Teachers, the Henry Ford Community College Adjunct Faculty Organization, and the Dearborn Federation of School Employees—all of which are AFT locals. We also collaborate with the non-AFT unions at Henry Ford and in our district.

Because we have this common board, we partner on screening candidates. The locals’ presidents and political coordinators serve on a screening committee that has a set of questions for candidates on issues that are important to our members, like their position on organized labor, the right to strike, and funding for education. Our goal is to make a common endorsement. That hasn’t always happened, but it’s still helpful to be listening to them together and getting the same answers.

We also pool our resources. My predecessor, John McDonald, led us in negotiating strong contracts over several decades. At the same time, he stressed the importance of contributing to our political action fund to allow us to lead campaigns in our area and join with our state federation in statewide races. We had to fight for it, but it still comes with a responsibility to work with our sibling unions. Some of the local unions don’t have the financial resources we have, but their members pledge volunteer hours.

“We didn’t just take the issues we saw every day to the bargaining table—we took them to the street.”

—Terrence Martin Sr.

TERRENCE: The importance of this mutual support can’t be overstated. One of the keys to success is having synergy between locals and their state federation. If not for the support that I got from AFT Michigan, the DFT would not have won the district back from the state takeover. And if not for that synergy statewide, we would not have won the Michigan House and Senate.

You’re not always going to agree on every strategy. But after you’ve had an opportunity to voice your perspective, you fall in line with the decision. That unity is what leads to the victories we’ve seen in recent years.

DAVID: I agree with Terrence, but I’ll also say it the other way. What is the state federation? It’s the locals. If the locals were not on board with the state federation’s programs, the state federation would not be able to accomplish anything.

TERRENCE: I remember in years past wishing that one day my local would get to a point where the AFT would want to do a story on our successes. It’s a testament to our collaboration and perseverance that we’re finally seeing that day, and I hope others can learn from what we’ve done. □



Unshackling Our Members from Student Debt



By Richard Haase

The Half Hollow Hills Teachers' Association (HHHTA), my local union, turned 50 this year. In that half century of representing thousands of members, and with the support of a strong union movement in New York, we have negotiated for the rights and wages that recognize the professional work our members do every day. Like any other local, of course, what we've been able to deliver in any given contract was a function of bargaining context: Did we have strong support in the community? How were our relationships with leaders at all levels of the district? What did settlements in the area look like? And, of course, what was the economic reality when we were at the table?

Even after 13 years of negotiating through contracts, evaluation plans, and

a pandemic, I'm still amazed by what a struggle it is to add or remove something from the contract and how the difference between "crushing it" and just clearing the 50 percent mark to ratify can come down to small, seemingly symbolic wins and losses. Even in the best of times, contracts can live or die on relatively thin margins, like the difference between a 3 percent raise and a 3.5 percent raise.

For several years, we weren't in the best of times. In 2011, New York state passed a law capping property taxes, which put a ceiling on one of our schools' two main funding streams. That ceiling forced districts to pivot how they built their budgets, which in turn impacted negotiations. In the years that followed, contract settlements included lots of financial givebacks and freezes. When there were gains, they were nothing like members had been accustomed to, so we faced razor-thin margins for ratification. In the early 2010s, a union leader fighting for a good contract could get dragged from the table kicking and screaming over the difference

between adding 0.5 percent or 0.6 percent to a salary schedule.

Thanks to fierce advocacy at the state and local levels, our unions worked through some of those hardest initial years and settled into a new normal. That meant engaging in statewide advocacy for school funding and getting better at thinking outside the box about how to continue to deliver value for our members and make their lives better. In our local, we used one-on-one conversations, surveys, registration data, social media participation, and email response and click rates to examine our members' interests, priorities, and common needs. Although we saw a variety of needs, one jumped out: hundreds of our 800 teacher members—including me—were still carrying overwhelming student debt.

We had committed to helping our members tackle their student debt years before. A team of union leaders had explored that work, beginning with a trip to New Jersey, where the AFT was hosting a student debt clinic. Our first endeavor into solving the

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PHOTOS BY PAMELA WOLFE

student debt crisis in the HHHTA, however, turned out to be what some today would call a great, big “nothingburger.” Thanks to all the loopholes, inconsistencies, and failed promises in the federal government and student loan servicing worlds, not one member was able to achieve any form of forgiveness. Disappointed, we moved on to projects that were more promising for helping our members.

Fortunately, while the issue of organizing around student debt relief sat inert on our union’s wish list, the AFT was taking legal action on behalf of public employees who had been misled and cast aside by a failed Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. In July 2019, the AFT filed suit against then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the US Department of Education. Two years later, on October 12, 2021, the US Department of Education and the AFT settled *Weingarten v. DeVos*, creating a window of opportunity to tackle massive amounts of debt carried by public service employees—including our members.

Following the settlement, the AFT held a telephone town hall and shared the great news about the extended waiver period that was being opened to allow potentially hundreds of thousands of employees who were otherwise ineligible to now qualify for public service loan forgiveness. Our executive board and building representatives were excited but also skeptical. The only thing more frustrating for our members than still paying student loans after decades of work, we agreed, would be to think that those loans were going to be forgiven and be denied again.

To avoid subjecting our members to that frustration, our local put together a pilot group. At a representative council meeting that fall, we solicited volunteers from a group of roughly 60 elected union leaders. Five of us would go through the process of applying for forgiveness, and based on our results, we’d decide whether to launch a union-wide campaign. The AFT had partnered with Summer, a company that helps steer borrowers through the processes of consolidating and applying for forgiveness. We shared the news and our

pilot plan with members, then submitted our applications by November.

We waited through Thanksgiving. We waited through New Year’s. We checked our mailboxes, inboxes, junk mail folders, and student loan dashboards daily. Nothing happened... until it did. In early February, one after the other, we started receiving emails and letters indicating that our balances had been reduced to zero. The five of us who participated in the pilot had a total of roughly \$164,000 in student loans forgiven.

Maximizing Our Impact

We immediately sprang into action, again sharing the news with members and developing a plan to ensure we maximized our reach. We agreed to an important organizing principle when we started. While it might be acceptable or expected to “miss” a member with any other given campaign—like missing a phone banking opportunity, for instance—it was not acceptable to miss a member in this effort. Failing to follow up—repeatedly, if necessary—could literally cost a member tens of thousands of dollars. In a time when contracts were decided by mere tenths of a percent, we also agreed that there may never be another single campaign in which we could have a greater financial impact for our members than this one.

We had from February 2022 until the waiver window closed in October 2022 to reach everyone, and we needed a comprehensive approach. It wasn’t enough just to reach members with the good news through a flyer and emails or to have building reps knock on classroom doors and check names off a roster to confirm each member they talked to about the opportunity—although we did all of those things. We had to lead and support each member through the process. So in addition to launching an aggressive ground game, we leveraged digital tools in our local to track and facilitate our work.

We leveraged our member database, online survey tools, web forms, text messaging, and dynamic emailing to keep hundreds of people moving toward debt relief. At the beginning, we administered a web-based survey to identify members who carried student debt. The credibility our union leaders have with members and the personal success stories we shared—not to mention the prospect of saving thousands of dollars—contributed to a high participation rate in the survey. That digital survey fed responses directly into our member

database, where we were able to track progress and facilitate communication.

As members worked through their applications, they were in constant communication with our building representatives, executive board, and participants in the pilot. We talked them through their applications and kept updated records of the process in our systems. Based on members’ status in the application journey, we scheduled automated, customized reminders. At one point, members reported login difficulties with Summer; with the AFT’s support, we were able to upload and share unique login links with every member, allowing them faster access to the Summer system.



Sharing the Journey

Many factors contributed to this successful campaign, including the AFT’s tenacity and victory in the lawsuit; the constant support of AFT staff; the strong relationships within our local, which helped members feel comfortable talking about financial issues; and the digital infrastructure we had in place. But one of the most galvanizing and mobilizing forces we experienced in our work was our union’s sense of being on a shared journey.

When we began our campaign, we set a goal to have \$1 million in student debt forgiven for our members by the end of 2022. Based on the number of responses and the average balances we saw, that number felt both ambitious and attainable. Every time a member achieved forgiveness, they’d email us or stop us in the hall to let us know. We’d update our system and use our digital tools to let members know that we “fed the pig”—our emailed campaign updates included piggy bank clip art with the total amount saved written across its belly. It was fun to watch the number grow. In each message, the updated total was presented alongside a note from our executive board about how many more members had just received the good news and any updates or clarifying guidance coming our way.



The AFT Fights Back on Student Debt

For over a decade, the AFT has been at the forefront of helping our members access federal student debt relief, advocating for improvements to existing debt relief programs, and fighting to expand access so that desperately needed relief reaches more people.* Our efforts have

- improved Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and income-driven repayment,
- held student loan servicers accountable for poor servicing,
- led to hundreds of our members receiving, on average, \$61,500 of student debt forgiveness,
- helped amplify the success stories and challenges of our members on the national stage, and
- enabled our members to plan for their futures with greater financial stability and support their families without the overwhelming burden of student loans.

Lawsuits filed by the AFT against Navient and former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos were key to forcing the US Department of Education to make changes to the PSLF program that, prior to 2021, only granted loan forgiveness to 2 percent of applicants. The settlements of these lawsuits contributed to the PSLF waiver and the income-driven repayment account adjustment, helping people who previously had been denied loan forgiveness because of bad information and negligent servicing the opportunity to have their loans forgiven. Because of these changes and other improvements, more than 4.7 million people have now received over \$168 billion in debt cancellation, including over 945,000 who have had more than \$69 billion forgiven through PSLF.

*For details, see *AFT's Fight for Student Debt Forgiveness*, available at go.aft.org/84p.

The AFT also pushed the US Department of Education to improve access to PSLF for contingent faculty in higher education by changing how it determines if employees work full time. Before these changes were implemented in 2023, higher education employers had wide latitude in how to count the hours of part-time instructors, often only counting hours in the classroom toward the hours needed for PSLF, depriving part-time faculty of the chance for debt relief. Starting in July 2023, the department implemented a contact-hour multiplier that requires colleges and universities to multiply course contact hours by a minimum of 3.35 to determine the total hours worked by part-time instructors. This means that any instructor teaching the equivalent of three three-credit courses now qualifies as full-time for PSLF. It also marks the first time that there has been a national standard for how to count the hours worked by part-time faculty.

The AFT has worked with state legislatures to put in place consumer protections like the Student Loan Borrowers Bill of Rights, which have provided avenues for borrowers to hold loan servicers accountable for poor servicing and bad information. We have continued advocating for further improvements with both state and federal governments, including broad-based debt cancellation and holding servicers like MOHELA accountable for poor servicing that is costing borrowers thousands of dollars and denying them promised debt forgiveness.

—Mariame Toure, assistant director in the AFT's Research, Strategic Initiatives, and Economic Security Department



The shared journey, we think, gave members a sense of real hope in something they otherwise might have been too skeptical to pursue, and it motivated others to act as well. It became impossible to sit on the sidelines when the teacher across the hall came in Tuesday morning beaming over getting \$20,000 forgiven, and success stories popped up throughout all our schools. When we stopped counting in late 2023, we had helped our members have over \$2 million in student debt forgiven.

Collectively, we know that if it weren't for the HHHTA and the advocacy and support we have at all levels of the AFT, none of this would have happened. We believe that the single mom who was paying \$1,000 a month in student loans won't ever forget that, nor will the handful of our members who had six-figure balances forgiven or those taking on debt to send their children to school while they were still paying down their own educations.

Recently, we had the opportunity to share the impact of PSLF on our hard-working teachers and school-related professionals with the US Department of Education, and I used our experiences to help negotiate new debt relief regulations for the Biden-Harris administration. Working alongside coalition partners, we hope to carve a path to forgiveness for more Americans so they too can cast off the shackles of their debt sentence.

Unionism is about using our collective strengths and abilities to fight for members to have better lives. To do that, it's important for leaders to go the extra mile in finding out what members need. Sometimes that process will generate small campaigns that have big impact. Sometimes they kick off a yearslong crusade. In either case, we all win. Aside from the great pride that comes from delivering a victory for our friends and colleagues, every campaign we mobilize makes us stronger. □

Debt Relief for AFT Members

Members can take advantage of our Student Debt Clinic program, either through our bimonthly webinar series or by hosting an in-person clinic at their local. (For more information, visit aft.org/pslf.) Since 2016, more than 26,000 members have registered for over 1,000 AFT debt clinics. Members also have free access to Summer, a student loan tool, through AFT+ Member Benefits. Summer helps members understand and apply for income-driven repayment plans and PSLF, as well as helps them explore other available options for debt relief. (Go to aft.org/members-only and log in.)

Building Community, Building a Movement

Two Gun Violence Survivors Share Strategies for a Safer, Healthier Future



COURTESY OF ABBEY CLEMENTS



AFT

Gun violence is rampant across the United States, impacting schools and communities every day. Many educators are desperate to keep their students safe but are not sure what to do. We spoke with two survivors of school shootings, Abbey Clements and Mei-Ling Ho-Shing, to learn about their activism and, just as important, how they care for themselves while doing this incredibly difficult work. Abbey Clements, an elementary educator with over 30 years of experience, is a co-founder and the executive director of Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence. Mei-Ling Ho-Shing is a community organizer with Chainless Change who is helping develop new ways to increase community safety, support, and collaboration. We are grateful to them for sharing their experiences and showing all of us how to join the movement to end gun violence.

—EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us about your personal experiences with gun violence and how they led to your activism.

MEI-LING HO-SHING: I was catapulted into advocacy and activism in 2018, when I was a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. It was Valentine's Day, two days before my 17th birthday. I was in math class, and a friend was showing me a snow globe with gold sparkles and a Buddha inside that he had bought for a girl he was trying to impress. That's the

moment when I heard two shots ring out. I stood up and asked my teacher if she'd heard it. She reminded me that it was quiet time, and then we heard rapid fire.

We had been expecting a mass shooting drill, so that's what many students thought at first. We tried to follow the protocol we'd been taught. We shut off the lights and went into the corner. I will never forget my teacher's bravery. As we were hearing screams and gunshots, she was covering us with her arms as if she were a bird in a nest, making sure that we were quiet and safe. As a teacher, she didn't ask for this. It's not in her job description. But when she was faced with death, she was willing to put herself in front of a bullet for us.

Once the shooting stopped, we started hearing police sirens. The SWAT team broke down the door and held us at gunpoint, telling us to keep our hands up and everything would be OK. For me, a Black youth who knew of so many Black people murdered by law enforcement officers, this was another level of trauma. Many of my Black classmates at Stoneman Douglas (11 percent of the student body at that time) have expressed the same feeling.

After we were evacuated, I had to walk a long way to get to a place where my grandparents could pick me up. As another Black student and I walked through the predominantly white, affluent neighborhood near the school, we got a lot of unfriendly looks, but eventually a Black family asked if we needed a ride. I know we're not supposed to get in a car with strangers, but to be honest



COURTESY OF ABBEY CLEMENTS

“Helping students find their passion, supporting them, and standing by them can limit harm and anger.”

—Mei-Ling Ho-Shing

that was the first moment that we felt safe in many hours. They dropped us off with another friend, and later my family was able to come get me.

It’s important to me to talk about my perspective as a Black student because so many of the students from Stoneman Douglas who have shared their stories don’t have that perspective. The shooting affected Black students differently—especially because of our fear of guns and distrust of police, the difficulty of finding help at our most vulnerable time, and the challenges of getting mental health care because of stigma within Black communities. This became a main focus of my advocacy, taking an intersectional approach to gun violence and its effects on Black students.

ABBIE CLEMENTS: I’ve long been a voter aware of social issues, and I attended several protests in college and as a young adult. But what really pushed me into activism was experiencing the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012. My second-grade students and I huddled together terrified, listening to the endless gunshots. When you’re in that situation, your brain doesn’t really allow you to go into panic mode—you’re just right there in the moment. I didn’t know where the sounds were coming from or how many people were shooting. I just remember trying to muffle the noise for my second-graders, hoping to protect them from the trauma of it all.

My daughter, who was 16 at the time, had to go into lockdown in her physics class, and for a while she didn’t know if I was OK. That experience turned her into an activist overnight. She started going to meetings, and then she got involved nationally; before we knew it, she was invited to speak all over. She was so poised and passionate. For me, it took a little longer to be ready to speak

out. In the aftermath of the tragedy, I had such a complex set of emotions: intense survivor’s guilt and grief, trying to figure out how to hold my family together when I felt like I was falling apart, and anger at the situation and the lives that were taken. But within a few months, I realized that my anger had turned into a different kind of fury—for change. I knew that I had to get involved.

EDITORS: What did getting involved look like for you then, and how has it shifted over the years?

ABBIE: In the summer of 2013, I went to a small, informal Moms Demand Action meeting in someone’s home—and for the first time, I told my story. A traumatic experience like that is visceral; as I spoke I was almost miming my actions, remembering how the kids told me to move the file cabinet, going to get the keys so I could open the door and lock it from the outside.

Everyone in the meeting cried. Some were also survivors from Sandy Hook, and some were mothers from the next town over who couldn’t imagine how they were going to send their kids back to school after the summer. Even months later, Connecticut was in shock. The whole world was impacted by what happened. But these people were there because they were committed to doing everything they could to try to make change.

Once I went to that meeting, I never turned back. I knew we needed to find creative ways to organize and break through with the narrative that we deserve to be safe at school, at the grocery store, at a yoga studio, on a stoop, in a park, at church. So that’s what I did, and it’s what I have continued to do for the last 11 years. I would teach and then I’d go to meetings at night or help organize emerging groups of activists. I went to events, spoke at vigils and protests, held signs—anything that would help get people’s attention on this issue. There are no words to express how important it has been for me to be involved in this work and to forge new relationships in this positive way.

After the Oxford High School shooting in Michigan happened on November 30, 2021, two AFT member activist friends of mine—Sarah Lerner, a teacher at Mei-Ling’s school who also survived the 2018 tragedy there, and Sari Beth Rosenberg, a New York City high school teacher—were in a group text voicing outrage that yet another school shooting happened, that we rarely, if ever, hear from the teachers impacted by them, and asking why isn’t there a gun violence prevention organization focused on organizing teachers? We decided to launch Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence that day.

Two and a half years later, we’re nearly 15,000 strong! We’re educators from across the country, including teachers, school staff, volunteers, retired folks, and supporters and allies. We’re the bridge connecting gun violence prevention and education spaces. We speak at conferences, collaborate with many organizations, and work with our local and national unions to empower teachers to speak up on this issue. We’re especially grateful for and proud of our collaborative work with the AFT.

We know we’re following in the footsteps of many activists before us, especially young people, who have pointed out that everyday shootings don’t get the same kind of news coverage as mass shootings. What happened in Newtown opened our eyes to that. Media attention and support services flowed in. But 45 minutes down the road in Hartford, gun violence happens on a near-daily basis, and most people never hear these stories. It was

true in 2012, and it's still true today. Who follows up with those kids in six months? A year later, who's asking families what they need? We need to do better for those kids and their communities.

Thankfully, this is a focus of the White House's Office of Gun Violence Prevention, which was established in September 2023. One of its priorities is caring for people who have been impacted by gun violence and making sure their communities have adequate resources. It's especially important for us to vote for candidates who will ensure that the office continues to have adequate funding and opportunities to be effective.

MEI-LING: In 2018, when I started speaking out, we as a society were focused on mass shootings, even though they were only 1 percent of gun violence. Many thousands of lives are lost each year to domestic abuse, everyday gun violence in urban communities, and suicide. If we want to solve the problem, we have to talk about it all.

So I shared my mic and my platform with other Black students from South Florida and, eventually, the nation. I began by reaching out to Dr. Rosalind Osgood, the only Black school board member in my county. She validated my experience and supported me 100 percent in speaking up. She taught me how to make a press release for our first event and guided us through it, and the whole community showed up for us.

I began talking with more and more students about what gun violence means for our community, how to seek mental health care, and what real public safety looks like, which is looking out for each other in a healthy and holistic way. I remember speaking at a high school in Chicago, and I could tell those students didn't want to hear from someone who experienced a mass shooting at a primarily white school because it was so different from their experience. So I asked how many people in the room had lost someone to gun violence or experienced gun violence themselves, and every single student raised a hand. I shifted the conversation to focus on their own experiences and their own pain, and on understanding that inflicting that same pain onto others creates an endless cycle of violence that harms our communities.

I held a lot of workshops like that at schools and in communities. I also worked with the AFT on the Student Gun Violence Summit in 2018, which was the epitome of intersectionality and what students coming together looks like, and I did a lot of public speaking as well as participating in marches and protests.

At the same time, at 17 and 18 years old, I was attending vigils and funerals at least once a month, including one for a coach I had met at that Chicago high school. This work is rarely hope—it's grief. It can be beautiful to grieve together and do what I call "freedom dreaming," which is imagining the ideal situation of liberation, life, and public safety. But for me, the grief took over. My therapist was concerned about how often I was working, but I was so angry—about how many students lose their lives to gun violence, about how little attention they get compared to the coverage of Stoneman Douglas. That's what was fueling my advocacy, but after a while it began to consume me. So I took a break. I went to college out of state, at Alabama A&M University, just to be in a place where people didn't know me and I could choose when to tell my story. I took some time to just be a student and find some normalcy in enjoying being young.

Now, the focus of my work has shifted a little bit. I work as a community organizer at a nonprofit named Chainless Change based in

South Florida. We are a recovery community organization that is created by and for people with arrest records who want to rebuild their lives and make meaningful contributions to their community while fighting the systems that cause harm in the first place.

My definitions of safety, justice, and accountability have changed a lot because of the Stoneman Douglas shooting. For example, my experience being held at gunpoint by the officers followed protocol, but it was harmful. We as advocates and community members need to imagine a better way.

As for the gunman himself, locking him away for life isn't justice—it doesn't stop harm from happening, and it doesn't make the trauma go away or give me closure. I'm hoping to create more community programs and find funding for alternatives that can prevent harm and lead to true rehabilitation. There were multiple calls to the police, and even calls to the FBI, prior to the shooting, but no one heeded these red flags. Imagine if there had been social workers and mental health professionals to address his prior situations—the outcome might have been completely different.

“Ask [candidates] where they stand on issues of arming teachers, overpolicing schools, and safe gun storage.”

—Abbey Clements

When people are convicted of crimes, we put them in prison and then permanently mark their records so they have few opportunities for employment or housing when they're released. Imagine if we had community programs that offered support and resources. Imagine students having opportunities to learn a trade in school and educators helping kids learn to regulate their emotions. All of these things can reduce gun violence and mass incarceration. These are the types of community-based changes I'm advocating for. I know I don't have all the answers, but advocates are some of the most creative people in the world, and I believe we can figure it out together.

EDITORS: It must be extremely difficult to engage in work that is so closely related to your own traumatic experiences. What do you do for self-care? What would you recommend to others?

MEI-LING: A big part of my self-care has been giving myself time to be a kid. I stopped acting my age after the shooting because I was so focused on the movement. I had to learn to talk to myself differently: “Mei-Ling, I know that this work needs to be done, but did you eat today? Did you hang out with friends today?” I purposefully spent my college years enjoying my youth. And that's not to invalidate my work—it's to honor my inner child and the childhood that was taken from me in 2018.

Another really important form of self-care is being persistent in therapy, including changing therapists to make sure I found someone who is trauma informed. All of that time running on anger was focusing outward, but I need to focus inward too. I also spend time with my family, and I make sure that I surround myself with people who understand my struggle and my triggers and who can practice collective care with me. I find peace in community, and I know I'm my best self when I'm with people who love me and are looking out for my best interests and my mental health.



ABBEY: It's really hard to say no to an action or invitation, but I'm working on this! Sometimes it's just not the right time or maybe it's not quite mission-aligned; sometimes there's no particular reason, but you have a burning feeling that you should decline to protect yourself. Sometimes I think we're afraid to say no to something because we think we won't get invited

to do anything else. But not every opportunity or form of activism is right for every person, and that's OK. Activists need to protect our time and well-being if we want to sustain our energy for the long term.

One of the hardest things for me to do is step away when I'm feeling overwhelmed. When there's news of a shooting, I want to find out everything. I have to learn to put the phone down and remind myself that it's OK to wait for a couple of hours or even until the morning, when there may be more perspective and more reliable information. It helps to do something else with that time—snuggle with my dog, listen to music, go for a walk. These things help me get a little quiet space. When I come back, I can take a breath and process it.

I also gain a lot from connecting with others in those moments. I have my go-to people who I know won't be upset if I curse or shout. Teachers Unify started from one of those very conversations.

EDITORS: Many people want to do something about gun violence, but some may still be learning about it, while others are ready to give it everything they've got. Where can they get started?

ABBEY: Some of the most important work starts at home. An estimated 4.6 million children live in homes with unsecured firearms. You can talk with members of your family and your friends about securing their firearms and storing ammunition separately. If your child is going to a friend's house, text or call that parent to check that any guns are locked up. That's taking care of your family and also spreading the word about common-sense steps everyone can take. Before elections, when local candidates call or text asking for money, ask them where they stand on issues of arming teachers, overpolicing schools, and safe gun storage. Those are important questions.

If you're looking to get involved in the broader movement, start by visiting gun violence prevention organizations' websites. Here's ours: teachersunify.org. Sign up for their newsletters to learn more about what they're doing. Go to a meeting or two with a friend to see if it feels like a good fit. A lot of groups have virtual meetings, so you don't even have to leave your home at night.

There's a role for everyone in this work, for people at every comfort level. Activism doesn't always have to be the big, dramatic thing. Maybe you can call or email your legislators in the privacy of your own home. Or maybe you want to help make signs for a rally or write thank-you notes to speakers afterward. If you've been impacted by gun violence, you might not want to talk about your personal experience in front of a crowd, but you might be willing to write about it to be shared anonymously. Maybe you could go to the farmers' market with a clipboard and sign people up for an advocacy organization's newsletter or talk about its work. Talking about this issue is activism. We don't have to harbor worry and fear on our own. The more we talk, the more we empower one another. There are lots of ways people can get involved, and voting on this issue is one of the most powerful ways we can express ourselves!

MEI-LING: Teachers, parents, and community members can play a big role in supporting students who have experienced gun violence. Please don't treat a gun death like any other death in the family. Treat it with sensitivity, and do what you can to prioritize that student's mental health. It's too easy for the anger and pain of experiencing gun violence to become animosity and a desire for revenge. Anything you can do to help students find other ways to express those feelings can make a big difference.

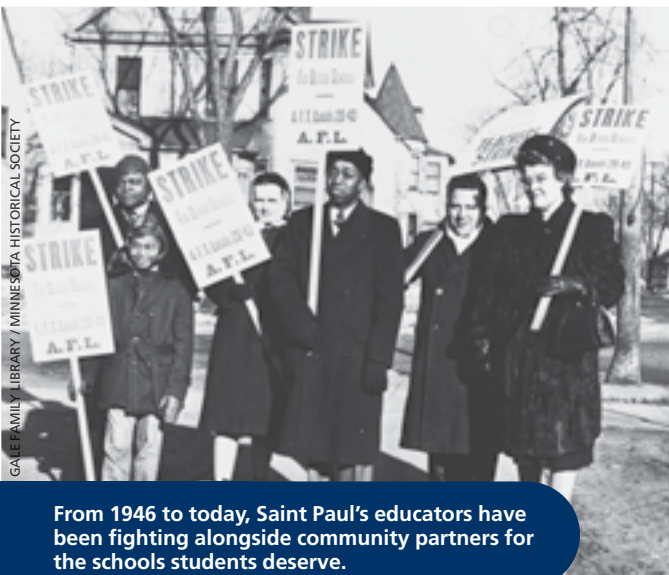
It's also important to keep school shooting protocols in schools. It's terrible that this is the world we live in right now, but knowing what to do in those moments can save teachers' and students' lives. That said, many schools should rethink their drills. Students can learn what to do without being terrified. Equally important, let's shut down the idea of teachers having guns at school. That's the opposite of safety. So is the militarization of schools and the criminalization of students. After the shooting, our school felt like a prison. There were metal detectors and police on every floor; it felt like we were constantly being wanded. It didn't feel safe—it just made students anxious.

In terms of building community as a form of prevention, you can push for more accessible mental health resources, guidance counselors, and afterschool programs. Teachers, ideally with support from local businesses, can sponsor student activities and clubs. Helping students find their passion, supporting them, and standing by them can limit harm and anger. We can also teach kids that there's more to life than college and trades. Marjory Stoneman Douglas instituted a day of service after the shooting, and it was so powerful to know we were coming to school to help and contribute in some way, to be a community with each other versus competing academically.

Our shared responsibility as teachers and students is not to criminalize each other. That leads to separation and distrust. We need to be one in community, to check in on our mental health because everyone is going through a lot. You never know who's getting bullied or whose self-esteem is dangerously low. That's ultimately how you reduce harm—you promote love. □

Banding Together for the Common Good

How Educators in Saint Paul Learned to Fight for Themselves, Their Community, and a Better Life for All



From 1946 to today, Saint Paul's educators have been fighting alongside community partners for the schools students deserve.

In this two-part essay, former and current Saint Paul, Minnesota, union leaders—Mary Cathryn Ricker and Leah VanDassor—share their local's journey from transactional engagement with the community to robust partnerships. Unions know that educators want what students need, but they don't always know how to win what students need. After nearly 20 years of developing deep ties to the community, Saint Paul offers strategies that can be applied across the country. —EDITORS

Reconnecting with the Community

By Mary Cathryn Ricker

In 2005, when I became president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, I became a student of my local's history as one way of looking for ideas about what we could become. I uncovered one of Minnesota's, and the country's, most historic unions. Founded in 1918, just two years after the first AFT local (the Chicago Teachers Union), Local 28—then the Saint

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Paul Federation of Women Teachers—became the first teachers union in the country to strike in November of 1946. (Local 43, the men's union, voted to join them.) In Minnesota, we were the first to negotiate planning time for elementary school teachers in the early 1970s and the first to recognize National Board certification in our contract in the early 1990s. In reading about this work and in talking to some of the people responsible for this progress—including a member of that 1946 strike—a common theme emerged: this progress was a result of, not a coincidence of, community relationships and community progress.

This work echoed the words of our former US Senator Paul Wellstone, that “we all do better when we all do better.”¹ As our local moved from the substantial gains made in the 20th century into the 21st century, however, the work alongside our community atrophied. By 2005, we had become a union with a transactional relationship with our community. The progressive, collaborative work was muted, and community groups mostly knew us as the checkbook they could rely on to buy a table at their fundraiser, support their food shelves (or pantries), or donate to their school supply drives (which was ironic since our teachers and paraprofessionals were also buying supplies with their own money). Our relationship with our area's elected officials had also become transactional. When we screened candidates for endorsement every election cycle, each would declare their love for teachers, point out the teachers in their family, and commit to supporting public education in return for our endorsement and a campaign contribution.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY CATHRYN RICKER AND LEAH VANDASSOR, UNLESS NOTED



While transactional unionism may still successfully create the conditions to negotiate improvements in pay and benefits, it's not what unions are built for. Unions exist to strengthen entire communities, starting with the workplace and radiating solidarity out and across the community so that health, safety, economic security, and the pursuit of happiness are strengthened for all.

The lessons we needed to move forward were both in our history and alongside us in our community. That first teachers' strike in the country? Local 28 fought "For Better Schools." The teachers' demands included moving classes out of the schools' boiler rooms and funding shoes for students who came to school without any—hardly the narrow focus on wages, benefits, and working conditions that the union singularly prioritized decades later.* By the time I became president, Local 28 had been narrowly focused on traditional bargaining for almost two decades, as if we couldn't do both: negotiate what was good for students *and* fair to teachers, as AFT President Randi Weingarten says.

“Unions exist ... so that health, safety, economic security, and the pursuit of happiness are strengthened for all.”

—Mary Cathryn Ricker

Our community was also offering us lessons on reestablishing better relationships. In 2009, a local union, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 26, brought to its negotiating table a demand to use green cleaning products, for example. This demand was good for workers and for the community, and it helped us rethink what could be bargained. At the same time, a growing progressive community group, TakeAction Minnesota, was dramatically redesigning its process for endorsing elected officials, starting with the governor's race.² Its reNew Minnesota campaign in 2010 brought Minnesotans together by training everyday activists in how to hold community meetings. Those activists then convened conversations in small house meetings, in coffee shops, and during large community gatherings to determine the values the people wanted centered in governing. The notes from these conversa-

tions were compiled into a narrative for a better Minnesota and presented to candidates and the public. In a large, statewide community meeting to which all of the participants were invited, this comprehensive narrative was unveiled, discussed, and adopted by the attendees. Most importantly, we all then committed to volunteering in the 2010 election, focused on our vision.

As president of Local 28, I was active in this work, and I invited members of the union to become active, attend community conversations, and get involved in the narrative development process. This statewide process created a shared commitment to making progress in all these areas—not merely passing along a traditional endorsement. But my local didn't jump right into this big, interconnected work. We started small. I made it a priority to meet for coffee with community leaders and attend their functions. After promising first steps, I invited community-based organizations to our membership meetings so we could all get to know each other and, eventually, decide how to act on our shared values and goals.

At the same time, we prioritized inviting members of community organizations and unions who had children in the public schools to our membership meetings so we could get to know each other better. Our foundation was the very direct, incredibly important relationship we had with each other: meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of their children in a safe and welcoming environment. For example, members of the Saint Paul Trades and Labor Assembly and members of SEIU Local 26 shared their hopes and dreams for their children in Saint Paul Public Schools. And members of the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (CTUL), which is made up of workers who clean big-box retail chains, came to one meeting and invited us to join them in their incredible Black Friday strike in 2013. This solidarity opened up communication directly between members of CTUL and members of Local 28 about how to improve people's lives together, like improving all students' learning conditions and all workers' working conditions.

Shortly after I became president, our union began to look into the issues that impacted our members and the community at large. For example, the cost of health insurance was impacting Local 28 members, and school families and community partners said they struggled to access affordable, high-quality healthcare. We used traditional communication, like our newsletter, to call for members to share their stories with me via email; we also put healthcare stories on the membership meeting agenda, where members could share examples of inadequate healthcare in school or through our insurance system. This resulted in a greater solidarity resolution that committed our local to fight for better healthcare for our members and for educators across the state, and for healthcare access for our students and their families. Acting on this resolution, our local successfully advocated at the state capitol for the Children's Health Security Act in 2007, which expanded healthcare access for 50,000 uninsured children in Minnesota.

While victories like this were heartening, it became clear that we needed to include our work at the bargaining table in our growing commitment to the good of the community. In 2009, we opened our negotiations for public viewing for the first time. Negotiations with public employees are subject to Minnesota's open meetings law, but no one had ever asked to attend our negotiations—so we invited people. We put key details like time and place on our website, and we made sure to invite our community partners and fellow unions. By 2011, we had made it our

*To learn more about this strike, see "'Strike for Better Schools'" in the Summer 1999 issue of *American Educator*. go.aft.org/4fd.

version of “must-see TV.” We scheduled our negotiations every Thursday, with a 30-minute preview of the agenda beforehand and a 30-minute debrief with the audience afterward. We’d ask what they heard, what they learned, and what their reactions were to the discussion. We’d also take a pulse check of their interest in the contract language we were negotiating from time to time so we could get a sense of whether or not they were committed to our proposals. In 2011, we began developing a contract action team as well. Team members attended negotiation sessions for educators and community members who were not available and brought their questions and ideas to our bargaining team.

These dynamic community engagement opportunities led to a groundswell of ideas. By 2012, it was clear to me that we had a substantial opportunity. What if, before we picked a negotiating team or set a date to negotiate, we asked the community what should be in our contract? While 2012 was the height of the “bad teacher/bad union” narrative³—where education “reformers” were blaming experienced teachers and our unions for the many problems public schools faced, funding lawsuits against union protections, and organizing alternative groups for teachers to join—I was confident in our community and our work. So, in November 2012, we launched a five-month community engagement process in which a longtime community leader facilitated community meetings, with Local 28 members attending to listen. We invited community partners and the public through our social media and traditional communications, purposefully publicizing and holding these meetings in community centers and accessible event spaces across the city. In each meeting, community members were asked three questions:

- What are the schools our students deserve?
- Who are the teachers our students deserve?
- What is the profession those teachers deserve?

Over those months, priorities began to emerge. Our community wanted more librarians, art and music opportunities, counselors, and social workers for all our students in all our schools. They wanted culturally relevant teaching and professional development for our teachers. And they wanted smaller class sizes throughout the school system.[†]

In April of 2013, the community leader who had led this process took these priorities to our union’s executive board and reviewed them one by one. At the end of the presentation, our executive board adopted these community-generated proposals and then directed the negotiations team we had chosen to negotiate these shared community-union priorities. Negotiations began in May. Each proposal got its own presentation, with union members and community members sitting side by side at the negotiating table presenting each proposal to the district negotiating team.

To maintain community engagement throughout our arduous contract campaign, we had many strategies: open bargaining, petitions, door-knocking, snowbank signs (like lawn signs but displayed in the height of a typical Minnesota winter), a dis-

trictwide walk-in during a snowstorm, and rallies before school board meetings. After 10 months of negotiations and a marathon 24-hour negotiation session (again, in a snowstorm), we emerged with progress in each of the areas the community had prioritized for the schools our students deserved.⁴

As a result of this newly revived way to engage our members and our community, new leaders emerged—including Leah VanDassor. In 2013, VanDassor, who had been a longtime building steward, became a contract action team member. Today, she is the president of Local 28. I’ll let her take our local’s story from here.



Deepening Union and Community Bonds

By Leah VanDassor

As the current president of Local 28, I know that my work builds on the strong foundation of those who came before me and depends on maintaining strong relationships with and among union and community members. One benefit of our deepening community ties has been deeper ties within our union. As we have moved forward in our social justice work and aimed to be more inclusive, we’ve focused on inequities across our bargaining units. As a result, in 2018 we decided that all three of our bargaining units—school and community service professionals, educational assistants, and teachers and other licensed staff—would unite to be one, adding power through increased solidarity. To mark this change, we renamed ourselves the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE).

When I joined the contract action team in 2013, more work was needed to expand our class size language, which was in a memorandum of agreement appended to the contract. While we continually made progress (the state of Minnesota requires licensed staff to bargain every two years), the work was far from over. In each of the next four cycles, we made more and more gains as we continued to push for language that reduced the number of students in each

Leah VanDassor is the president of the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE). She taught English at Saint Paul’s Highland Park Middle School for 25 years and has been very active in the union for the past 15 years, serving as a building steward; a member of the contract action team, bargaining team, and executive board; and SPFE’s vice president.

[†]In 2011, we won contract language on class size; as seismic as it was to win, it was actually a modest commitment of ranges for the elementary grades and for four core subject areas in secondary grades. Implementation had been uneven, showing that we needed to negotiate hard caps or averages, expand to additional subject areas, and create a school-based process that involved families and educators for addressing unusual or midyear circumstances.

class. We fought for this instead of more pay for an educator with a larger class because the student experience was paramount. Finally, in our 2021–23 contract (a year after our second-ever strike and the year I became president), the class size language moved into the body of the contract. While moving language into the body of the contract may sound simple, it was as precedent setting as negotiating our first, successful class size language. No other local in Minnesota had class size language as a part of its collective bargaining agreement. After 10 years of negotiating this issue, it has now been added by state statute as an open issue to bargain for all education locals. Families and community members never let up on this essential aspect of the schools our students deserve.

From 2018, when we had our first strike authorization vote in this century, until 2023, when we realized the largest financial and benefits gains for all our members since the early '90s, SPFE continued the robust work to strengthen education for all our students in Saint Paul. Throughout those campaigns, we continued to engage with the community to learn what was still needed. This ongoing work to bring in voices happens through our educators, who have relationships with families and community organizations. Our members are part of our schools and our city. The relationships they foster build out, and within, our schools so that we know we are pursuing what is needed and wanted for our students. To some it seems obvious, but individual conversations at student pickup and during open houses or conferences are incredibly powerful for both families and educators.

“Locals across the state are seeing the benefits of bringing their communities into decisions about teaching and learning.”

—Leah VanDassor

Grounding our work in the community and among our members was solidly in our DNA by 2017, so we started a new group, the Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Race (TIGER) team. It partnered directly with community members and families to demand that major corporations in the state pay their fair share. Before 2023, when the state passed a significant funding increase, education funding from the state had dropped to below 2003 levels.* Still, even with the increase, funding is only up to where it was in 2009.⁵ And many districts, including Saint Paul, are seeing cuts in 2024. Why? Too many of our major local institutions do not pay their fair share of taxes and too much funding is being siphoned off for charter schools. The TIGER team’s agenda includes ensuring that (1) corporations, hospitals, and institutions of higher education (which are considered tax exempt) stop avoiding taxes and pay their fair share to the city and school district; and (2) there is

*For information on adequacy and equity in Minnesota’s school funding, see the Albert Shanker Institute’s analysis at go.aft.org/b5i.

a total overhaul of charter schools. Together with the community, we are slowly making progress, driven by relationship-building with key organizations that share our belief that public education is the bedrock of democracy, by a school board that supports our efforts, and by strong parent support.

Politically, an endorsement from SPFE really means something in Saint Paul. We have been told by many candidates that our screening process is the toughest out there. SPFE requires any candidate seeking an endorsement to spend a day with an educator in one of our schools. From this, candidates hopefully learn more about how an educator’s day goes and how our students show up and succeed in our schools. But our expectations don’t stop at the screening. Our endorsement process is the beginning of a relationship. We expect the candidates we endorse to continue to engage with us as we work toward a school district that can be the gold standard for the rest of the state and beyond.

Our continued engagement with the community has already been shown to be successful, as we now have a school board that was eager to work alongside us as we negotiated our last contract. Moving forward, we are in a relational space to be an actual partner in the search for a new superintendent. Getting to this point took time. SPFE’s work has been twofold: both within our membership and with our community. Within our membership, organizers and member-leaders collaborate to identify new members in each building who show an affinity for political work and to flag other members as strong contract action team members, building reps, or strike captains (if needed). Ideally, each of these union positions can be filled by different members, constantly growing the bench of those equipped to go out and find even more members who want to do more with their union. Within our community, members can help identify family members or organizations to which they belong as potential allies in our work. As those families become more involved, they too encourage others in our shared work.

But again, none of this happens overnight. As Mary Cathryn indicated at the beginning, we started renewing our work with the community in 2005, then extended it by opening up our bargaining in 2009. From there we have continued to build relationships with families and community members by engaging them through listening sessions, support for specific school site issues, and contract proposals like smaller class size and enhanced safety measures that greatly impact their students’ lives. Recently, we’ve worked with our state affiliate, Education Minnesota, to share what we’ve learned about open bargaining with other locals. Now, locals across the state are seeing the benefits of bringing their communities into decisions about teaching and learning.

This path isn’t the same for every local. We know that open bargaining and making proposals beyond the historic areas of collective bargaining of wages, benefits, and traditional working conditions may still be an outlandish idea to some. Nearly 20 years into this work, we know that our educators’ working conditions are also our students’ learning conditions. When we improve conditions for anyone, the rest of us also see gains in our own lives. There is always much still to do. All of it matters. All of it will make a difference. And that is why we continue to band together and bargain in the open for the common good. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/ricker_vandassor.

Go Big

How San Francisco Educators Won a Historic Contract



By Cassandra Curiel and Nathalie Hrizi

At 5:50 a.m. on Friday, October 20, 2023, after a 13-hour bargaining session, the United Educators of San Francisco's 70-member bargaining team reached a historic agreement with the San Francisco Unified School District's management team. With the approval of 86 percent of voting members, we achieved our top priority: meaningful and equitable raises.

Thanks to the power of our 6,000 certificated and classified educators, which includes substitutes, the average raise over the two years of this contract for paraeducators is 39 percent—with a new starting wage of \$30 per hour. The average raise over the two years of this contract for certificated educators is 19 percent—with an on-schedule raise of \$9,000 in year one and a 5 percent raise in year two. Management pushed for a number of concessions along the way, such as adding a workday, cutting prep time, and expanding the number of meeting hours held each month, but our team held them off.

Cassandra Curiel is the president of the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) and a middle school English language arts teacher in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Nathalie Hrizi is the UESF vice-president of substitutes, a National Board-certified classroom teacher, and a teacher librarian in SFUSD dual immersion elementary and middle schools.

United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) members mobilized and organized to force this huge win at the bargaining table. After years of pandemic instability and decades of district mismanagement, San Francisco educators felt collectively frustrated and disrespected. Those feelings were channeled into the contract campaign and helped move management's compensation package from its initial \$35 million offer in the spring to the culminating \$186 million package we signed in the fall.

The new contract stands as an achievement, but the lessons of the campaign were transformative. They guide us now in the early stages of a much longer campaign to build union power and win the schools our students deserve.

From Engagement to Bargaining

Our team bargained for 20 sessions after contract hours on Mondays starting in March 2023, but our campaign actually began in September 2022 from the seeds planted even earlier in 2021. UESF adopted an internal goal to guide our organizing plan: *in order to achieve the schools our students deserve, we will build high member participation and foster solidarity among all educators.* Among the strategic objectives we identified to meet that goal was the need to make significant contract wins. With our contract set to expire in June 2023, we immediately began mapping out strategies to

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNITED EDUCATORS OF SAN FRANCISCO

maximize member involvement in the campaign while building solidarity.

We often work in silos as educators—an isolating experience that too often only serves management. In elementary schools, certificated educators may only know other certificated staff and the classified educators they work with directly. In larger middle schools and high schools, educators are even more isolated from each other by grade levels and departments. To win a strong contract for the entire bargaining unit, we knew we would have to work together to close those divides and unify our members.

We launched a member-created bargaining survey in the fall of 2022. For six weeks in September and October, members accessed the bargaining survey through their sites' elected union representatives, the Union Building Committee. Each site that reached 85 percent member submissions received a toolkit to select a member for the bargaining team. We originally projected that 20 to 30 schools would reach that mark based on previous assessments that showed a low number of elected or active Union Building Committees at our 120-plus worksites. We planned to appoint the remainder of the bargaining team to achieve a representative composite of our bargaining unit, thinking we'd have a team of about 40. However, our projections were happily proven wrong.



Remarkably, 65 schools reached the 85 percent target to qualify to select a bargaining team member. Fifty of those selected someone from their site to join the team, and UESF's executive leadership appointed 20 additional members. On Saturday, November 12, 2022, we met for the first time with the majority of the 70-person bargaining team for an orientation.

We established the team with a handful of critical, seemingly simple principles:

- We practice *bargainizing*—a term we learned from United Teachers Los Angeles that means bargaining and organizing are deeply intertwined.
- We are all from different worksites and different classifications, but we represent and bargain for UESF *as a whole*.
- We have a high degree of internal democracy, using consensus primarily and voting only when needed. Once a decision is made by the team, the whole team defends that decision. We all commit to staying on message.
- We share responsibility. Members all have responsibilities to the team and may step in and step out as needed for work and personal lives.

Every member of the big bargaining team signed a bargaining agreement pledging to uphold these principles after completing the orientation. Then we launched into preparations.

Between November and February, the team went through intensive and intentional training. Of the 70 members who made up the team, only 10 had any experience bargaining with UESF, and most of those had gained that experience in 2022—a mere handful had bargained prior to the pandemic. Everyone joined a contract proposal working group and a responsibilities working group that included notetakers, morale boosters, observers, communicators, logistics coordinators, and contract action team* members.

One of the most impactful training sessions was a practice-bargain. Team members, new and veteran, were assigned roles to bargain against union leader siblings from the San Francisco Labor Council, former UESF president Susan Solomon, and union staff acting as management's bargaining team. Everyone watched as their teammates bargained with "management," and then each team member got a chance in a small group to bargain against a "manager." This exercise built a strong foundation of bargaining knowledge and exposed the team to common management tactics, before ever being in a room with management.

On December 3, 2022, the team hosted a contract campaign kickoff, where the results of the bargaining survey were presented. The bargaining team members led small breakout sessions in which members discussed the survey results and gave input on identifying priorities. A volunteer group of the bargaining team then combined the survey results and the kickoff feedback to generate a platform of five demands that shaped the entire contract struggle: raises, improved working conditions, student supports, fully staffed schools, and protections from poor management decisions. We shared the bargaining platform with all site leaders, then sent them petition boards for their site members to sign, as an early test of our campaign structure. When the demand to bargain was read at a February board of education meeting, we held a rally and presented 3,800 member signatures to the board. That number was a significant milestone because it showed the site structures built through the bargaining survey were thriving and ready for escalating action.

Using the platform demands as a guide, we brainstormed proposal ideas, categorized them, assigned them to working groups, and began drafting proposals. We also analyzed the district finances, going back years for full context and studying the many salary schedules.

Our team discussed the financial research together, debating the many ways to achieve our members' highest priority: raises. After thoroughly processing, the team agreed on an approach we called *meaningful and equitable raises*. We constructed compensation proposals that would be meaningful for all *and* would address the deep inequities we found in the salary schedules.

*UESF's contract action team has historically been the organizing force of our contract campaigns, giving updates to the bargaining team about attendance at actions, progress on petitions, and plans for next actions. With our big bargaining team and move to bargaining, these functions evolved over the 10 months of bargaining and became interwoven with the bargaining team's focus. This eliminated the need for a separate group as we better planned and streamlined our organizing efforts. It's everyone's job to organize in bargaining.

We particularly targeted higher percentage raises for paraeducators and lower-paid teachers, knowing the results would also positively impact working conditions for everyone by mitigating one of the biggest causes of staff turnover.

On Monday, March 13, 2023, as the school day came to a close, a sea of red shirts with yellow lettering spelling out “Fighting for the Schools Our Students Deserve Bargaining Team” filled the district headquarters boardroom. Our team’s dinner and snacks for the night were laid out on two tables adjacent to the entryway, prepped for a long night. At 5:00 p.m., the district’s management team filed behind its set of plastic tables facing our big, 70-member UESF bargaining team. Behind our lead negotiator, affiliate support, and notetakers, every seat of the boardroom was filled by the silent, disciplined team representing every member of UESF. We set the tone from day one, and it was clear that management was intimidated.

Organizing, Leadership, and Solidarity

We structured our team and the plan for our contract campaign with our deep understanding that power at the bargaining table is built through organizing at worksites. Having a big bargaining team empowered new leaders to emerge and connect the table to the sites directly. We also had to focus on the structures at the sites and support the site leaders to fuel the campaign. We chose escalating tactics that would intentionally build the site structures and strengthen the members’ organizing muscles as we moved toward more powerful collective action—from site picture days with UESF T-shirts to the platform petition to site pickets and then larger citywide pickets targeting the district offices. In 2022, we assessed that around 35–40 percent of sites had an elected representative. By the end of the contract campaign, we had an elected representative at 95 percent of sites and leaders identified at 100 percent.

We grounded the contract campaign in organizing in big and small ways. For instance, bargaining team caucuses were primarily organizing spaces for deciding actions and training members. We didn’t caucus to discuss language or proposals without forethought. Systems were put in place to make sure every bargaining team member gave feedback and could approve or disapprove of proposals. This meant the bulk of our caucus time was dedicated to organizing, organizing, organizing.

Discussion, debate, and decision making as a big bargaining team was organized and structured so that participation could be maximized and decisions made while all voices were heard. The practice of debate, decision making, discipline, and shared responsibility contributed to bargaining team members’ development as authentic leaders in the campaign itself. We presented a united front to the membership and the public. There was no union officer or staff member making decisions and then informing the team. The team as a whole entity was responsible for leadership of the process and all decision making.

Our contract campaign was designed to expand internal solidarity to overcome silos and make connections across a diverse unit. Establishing a big bargaining team was an important piece in that effort. Solidarity was key to the contract struggle’s success—and what better place to build solidarity than in the room where the bargaining takes place? There was no way to have foreseen what exactly would be constructed through this process.

At the time we assembled the team, solidarity building was a goal that was given hope by a plan. But throughout the 10 months of bargaining, solidarity became a material factor in the success of the contract campaign. At a team meeting in January 2023, we spent hours discussing our approach to shaping the compensation package. Because we had studied salary schedules, everyone had a sense of the wide range of pay earned by our members: from \$18 an hour to \$120,000 a year. A high school educator noted his shock at the low

wages of many of our paraeducators. A middle school educator remarked that she was particularly impacted by studying the wages of early educators, who work longer daily and more annually than most educators, yet are paid significantly less. An early education paraeducator challenged secondary educators on their demands for further increasing prep time when she worked two early ed jobs to make ends meet and received no prep time. These insights and discussions built a foundation of honesty, trust, and commitment among the team to fight for meaningful and equitable raises for all.

In the early hours of October 20, 2023, that solidarity and commitment was center stage. The district had been forced by the strength of our organizing—by the 3,800 educators who voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike vote—to seriously respond to our compensation proposals. In the middle of that night, they offered us compensation packages very close to our demands. But one key element of the paraeducator package was missing. The district had offered a raise of \$10,000 per certificated educator, but did not meet our demands for paraeducators. In an act of true solidarity, our team put their money where their mouths were and decided to move \$1,000 per certificated educator over to the classified column, ensuring the raises were genuinely meaningful and equitable for all. That moment embodied the solidarity built within the team and throughout the membership during the contract struggle. Those meaningful consequences set in motion powerful shifts in our union organizing that will be felt well beyond the final moments of the bargain itself.

Almost as soon as the contract was signed, our team was unpacking the lessons learned to improve our next contract fight set to take place in spring 2025. Through the 10 months of the bargain, we fully committed our efforts to setting the stage for the long game—a visionary campaign that would propel us into future fights. We know that decades of federal and state underfunding cannot be “won” back through an individual contract fight with one district. Our team bargained so that this win would serve immediate needs while building our capacity to take the next fight to the true source of underfunding. UESF’s big bargaining team crafted this win knowing it is only the beginning of a campaign to build the union power we need to achieve the schools our students deserve for decades to come. □



We Deserve a Seat at the Table



I'm a dropout prevention specialist by trade—or by calling. I've always been supportive of those who look like me and come from a similar background. I am an African American mother who grew up in public housing in the Western Addition of San Francisco. I was raised by a single mother and had three younger siblings. At 16, I started working at a nonprofit called Operation Contact; we provided academic coaching and recreational activities. I was also an advocate for one of my brothers who needed an individualized education program (IEP) but was not identified until age 18. Being able to support families in navigating the different systems is important to me because my family didn't have that. I've also experienced trauma in my life, including the murder of one of my brothers; that binds me to the type of children I work with.

I was part of the UESF executive board back in the early 2000s, but I was also a young mother; I couldn't give my all, so I stepped down. Many years later, once my son was in college, a young person I had supervised asked if I would join a slate and run for office as UESF's sergeant-at-arms. The entire slate was elected. Then, two years ago, our vice president of paraeducators had to step down, and I was voted in by the executive board to replace him.

Back in December 2022, I was asked to do an opener for our bargaining team kickoff. At registration, we were all given whistles, so I came on stage blowing my whistle as loud as possible to an upbeat

tune. Everyone joined in. I forgot about everything I was supposed to say and spoke from my heart.

I started by acknowledging our paraeducators and allowing the certificated members to give them their flowers. I explained that the work we paraeducators do side by side with our certificated members is not reflected in our compensation. I shared that some of our lowest-paid paraeducators were making just above \$18 an hour, which meant they were not able to participate in a lot of activities. They had to work two and sometimes three jobs just to be able to live. And they do not have a pension.

Many certificated members were hearing this information for the first time. Immediately a change happened. The body decided to make paraeducators the priority for this contract campaign.

We paraeducators are finding our voice. We are now elevating ourselves to places we thought we didn't belong. Being able to model that—to remind folks that even though I am the vice president, I'm a paraeducator first and we deserve a seat at the table just like everyone else—pushes me every day.

Being at the bargaining table, and being able to make presentations to management and question management, brought out skills in me that I didn't know I had. I always say I love being a team player, but UESF has made me feel like I am a leader. And I'm starting to believe it. I enjoy this work: analyzing survey results to identify our needs, reviewing contract language

and drafting new language, and costing out various proposals for certificated and classified members.

For someone like me, an average, everyday person who loves children and supporting families, I didn't see a role in this world of the union. I don't have a union background. I came into this work not knowing anything and thinking I could not do it. That is so far from the truth. There is a role for everyone to play, and every role is important.

During our final bargaining session—we had a strike authorized to start in the morning—I came back after one of our caucuses in my red pajamas with a pink hair bonnet. I was signifying that we were not going anywhere. We would be there all night and into the next day if we had to. There's actually a picture of me in my pajamas and bonnet signing the tentative agreement. It was a pretty special moment: every single thing that we brought to the table, we received.

If you're on the fence about becoming more active in your union, I would say just do it. Go to the meetings even if you're just observing. Ask questions. And know that it's very rewarding when you're standing shoulder to shoulder in an action with someone, when you're able to help someone. Whether it's a struggle or a success, we're all in it together.

—**Teanna Tillery**, UESF vice-president for paraeducators and member of UESF's bargaining team

Rise to Your Power

Being on the bargaining team is challenging, but it's transformative. You learn your power as a worker. You may hear, "It's an old system, they're not going to do anything. Nothing's going to change." But the systems will change when members are engaged and know their power. It's not going to be right away. It's going to be little steps at a time—but those steps will be cumulative. Throughout bargaining, we proved management wrong. We got involved, we got our students' families involved, we got our community involved, so management had to listen.

I started my career in banking and management. Once I had my second child, I stopped working, but then he was diagnosed with a speech impairment. That was really hard as a parent—I felt like I missed something. Having him evaluated at two years old and finding services was hard. But seeing how impactful it was for him to get services so early put me on the path to my current role as a speech-language pathologist.

When I started, like any educator, I experienced a huge learning curve. It was tough the first two years due to the high caseload and high needs of the students. The third year, I transferred to the elementary school that I first attended as a child. I emigrated from China at five years old, and in this community, 90 percent of the children also have parents from China. It's so meaningful to be servicing my community. I speak Cantonese and Toisanese Chinese, so that's part of my power.

Several years ago, I was elected as a Union Building Committee representative for the speech-language pathologists. Along

with three other reps, we had many meetings with our supervisor about the pandemic challenges. Given those challenges and also rising racism impacting our community, getting support for our students was even more urgent—and I wanted to do more. I was elected to represent the speech-language pathologists on the bargaining team, focusing on the challenges we have and how we can better support our students.

My goals were to present how extensive the responsibilities are for speech-language pathologists and to use a workload model versus a caseload model to better support our students. Caseload is just counting the numbers of students we have; workload encompasses all the things that we do for our students, including consulting with and training all stakeholders as needed; providing direct services, assessments, and screenings; and making sure that we're not over- or under-evaluating the students. After working with other special educators in writing the proposals to address these goals, it was evident that all special educators would benefit from using the workload model.

As a member of this big bargaining team, it's electrifying to stand together for all the different issues that we have to address. Each site has communities with different needs. It's time-consuming, but being on the bargaining team is worthwhile because of my own experiences as a child and advocating for my son. It's also worthwhile because I know so many of our speech-language pathologists are burned out. Crucially, I'm not doing this alone. When you're in your own classroom or office, you're in a silo. But when you step into bargaining and organiz-

ing, there are other people behind and with you, empowering you and them to push ahead and make changes.

Our approach to bargaining is very inclusive and systematic. At first I wondered how 70 people would be able to agree when we're bargaining, but bringing in people from all of the sites to give their input and agree on what we would fight for was really important. Having gone through the election to become a bargaining team member, then the orientation, I learned a lot about how we came to agree on our team discipline. We each participated in the campaign kickoff, then signed a discipline agreement that set out our principles. Throughout bargaining, we had rallies and other actions, petitions, town halls, and check-ins to see which sites needed more support. Week by week we saw our member engagement increasing—and that's how we won a historic contract.

The one thing I'd say to my fellow union members based on my experience is lean into your power. And if you have a skill or a certain passion, use it. We need everyone to use their power to make change. I'm an introvert, so having hard one-on-one conversations and speaking in front of big groups are nerve-racking for me. But I'm doing it. By being on this bargaining team, I know my power more. I hope each of you will rise to your power and steer it to the change that benefits your students, educators, and families.

—**Tina Leung**, bilingual speech-language pathologist and member of UESF's bargaining team



Fighting for Climate Justice

How the Boston Teachers Union Is Inspiring Change



The Boston Teachers Union (BTU) Climate Justice Committee is a small but powerful group of educators fighting for a just transition to a green economy and striving to help themselves, their students, and their communities reverse the climate emergency. We sat down with four current and former Boston teachers—Mira Brown, Betsy Drinan, Jack Elliott-Higgins, and Irischa Valentin—to learn how they became climate activists and why they find their union to be an effective vehicle for pursuing their passion.

—EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us about your careers and what drew you to fighting for climate justice.

IRISCHA VALENTIN: I am a product of the Boston Public Schools, have been teaching in Boston for 19 years, and am a proud union member. My passion for teaching climate justice is rooted in my close ties to my ancestral lands in Puerto Rico. Experiencing life there with my grandparents stirred up my love for the earth and gardening. Since I was very young, I've been enamored with plants, especially herbs and trees, and with growing plants. Today, I'm a community herbalist in addition to teaching third- and fourth-grade English as a second language and sheltered English immersion.

Most of my students are Spanish speakers, mainly from the Dominican Republic and Central and South America. I say that because so many of those students also have an affinity for nature and a beautiful connection to gardening—and they love our community garden. They're so excited to get their hands in the soil and talk about their gardens back home that they've cared for with their grandparents and parents.

Tending a garden is a very hands-on way to teach children to love the earth, or to build on the connection to the earth that they bring to the classroom. Especially in the elementary grades, teaching them the magic of growing a little seed into a bean plant also shows them the responsibility we have to take care of each other. I encourage self-sustainability, even if their family can only grow a little oregano on their windowsill. It creates a deeper connection to themselves, to each other, to their families, and to the earth.

JACK ELLIOTT-HIGGINS: This is my fourth year teaching. I teach chemistry and biology at Boston Green Academy, which is an in-district charter school for grades 7–12. I went to college for biomedical engineering and computer science. While there, I got involved in a lot of activism and organizing around climate justice and other issues. Eventually, I teased out that I wanted to be a teacher because you can imbue so much passion into your craft around the issues that you care about.

Boston is getting hit by the climate crisis already. Our students notice it, and they want to have the language to talk about it. They want to talk about solutions, including what climate justice looks like. I think we educators don't always have the same idea as students do of what justice looks like, but we can still coalesce and create a committee to start tackling it. That's why I've gotten involved. By starting at the local union level where educators can talk about what we need in terms of infrastructure and curricula, we can make an impact in the city around this really critical issue.

BETSY DRINAN: I retired three years ago, having started teaching in the 1970s. I worked in alternative education initially, then became a Boston public school teacher in the 1990s. I was a founding lead teacher of the BTU School in 2009, and in 2017 I was elected as BTU's secretary-treasurer.

I knew I wanted to devote time to climate justice in my retirement. I was there at the first Earth Day in 1970! The more I learn, the more terrifying this problem is, honestly. Policymakers globally are not keyed into it like they need to be. But my union is—and it's a great power base for this work. The BTU is a respected organization that represents a lot of people.

Teachers and students across the city are thinking about climate justice, and there are many issues we could take the lead on to ensure we have healthy, safe schools. These discussions came to the forefront during COVID-19 because of concerns about our school buildings, particularly their HVAC systems.

MIRA BROWN: I became a public school teacher in my late 40s, teaching middle and high school science, including a semester-long course on climate change that my colleagues and I developed as part of a senior capstone class that applied chemistry, physics, and biology content and science skills to social justice issues. I've

been a climate activist since the 1970s, and my undergraduate degree is in small-scale renewable energy technologies. While working on renewable energy in Nicaragua, I saw how small-scale projects could increase local autonomy and spur social change. When I returned to the United States, I worked for a nonprofit doing youth and community development using recycled bicycles as a source of seed funding for employment generation projects (and to support sustainable transportation!). Eventually, I became a classroom teacher because I believe we need more science education and fact-based decision-making in today's world. Currently I'm a paraprofessional, because as a teacher I never got my workweek down to less than 70 hours. I'm glad to have time now to devote to climate justice work.

EDITORS: What does the BTU Climate Justice Committee do? And why are you focused on climate justice instead of climate change?

JACK: In my experience, climate change is mainly taught as an abstract thing—numbers and trends. Climate justice makes an important distinction by focusing on how climate change is impacting communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities here and abroad. Climate justice seeks not only to stop climate change but also to rectify these inequities.

Instead of approaching it in an abstract way, we can teach climate justice by examining what's happening in Boston. For example, Dorchester, a diverse neighborhood in Boston, has some of the lowest tree cover, hottest summer temperatures, and greatest flooding risk along the shore. That impacts students from Dorchester on a daily basis—and empowers all of our students to become activists for climate justice.

BETSY: One of the first things we've decided to address as a committee is what students in Boston public schools are learning about climate change and its disparate impacts. District staff gave us a thorough presentation of climate content for K-12. Upon reflection, we agreed that it is solid but it could go a lot further and deeper.

JACK: In February and March of 2024, we developed a contract proposal to implement climate justice curriculum across Boston public schools. Our goal is to create a working committee, 75 percent BTU members and 25 percent appointed by the district, to work through what it means to have a climate justice curriculum, how to make it interdisciplinary, and how to implement it across grade levels and across classes. So often, climate lessons are relegated to a science classroom, but climate justice isn't just about science. We're talking about not only climate change but also the ways it impacts people's lives. There are so many ways to integrate it throughout the curriculum. We're hopeful that we can create a model curriculum for the rest of the country to implement.

BETSY: Educators are always getting curriculums thrown at us that are yet another thing to do. Our idea instead is to find those moments in the current curriculum where we can infuse climate issues. It won't be an add-on that no one has time for; it'll be an enhancement to what's already being taught.

MIRA: Inspiration for this contract proposal came from the Somerville Educators Union. They asked for and won a climate curricu-

lum committee in their contract negotiations last year, with union members being paid for the hours they work with the committee. And the superintendent they had at the time has since become our superintendent.

BETSY: We have to help young people feel engaged and develop advocacy skills, so learning about climate is not all doom and gloom. We're not waiting for the curriculum to be revised to do this; the BTU recently funded professional development on climate justice that we opened up to the whole state by working with AFT Massachusetts. The PD was well attended and very favorably received, and it began to help us build our distribution list of people who are interested in these issues.

Another priority for our Climate Justice Committee has been getting a seat at the table for the mayor's Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools. The mayor is deploying electric buses and has appointed a Green New Deal coordinator and a climate chief; recently the city made a commitment that any new public building or any major retrofit in Boston will be built to carbon-neutral specifications. The city is mandated by the state to have a 10-year master facilities plan. Currently, the city has assessments of the building structures and systems (like HVAC), but it has not provided the specifics of how schools will be renovated. We're eager to help make those decisions.

MIRA: Educator voice in the renovations decision-making is important because educators, school staff, and community members have real expertise to offer about what's happening in our buildings and about how to improve them. When I worked in Central America, I saw the benefits of recognizing the other types of expertise in people such as teachers, students, paraprofessionals, custodians, and cafeteria workers who may not have technical expertise in green construction but really know their communities and how their daily activities interact with the spaces around them.

We need to establish a systematic way to get that expertise recognized and included in the green schools planning process—something more inclusive than the usual community meetings that only some people have the time, flexibility, and resources to attend.

As we move forward into a society where we do a much better job of taking care of each other, organizing workers is a really important way to make sure that workers are listened to and that our expertise is acknowledged and used to benefit everybody. I care about workers being well paid, but I also care about using the wisdom of working people in the plans for how we're going to deal with crises in society. And I think that unions need to be playing an increasing role in shaping changes as we face the decades ahead.

I'll share one more detail about how our committee built its contact list and initially recruited some of our current members. I helped form an earlier iteration of the BTU Climate Justice Committee in the 2014-15 school year, and we were recruited by a statewide organization to support legislation divest-





ing the state pension fund from the fossil fuel industry. Through house parties that we hosted in BTU members' backyards with wine and cheese, we found members at 10–15 different schools to take petitions back to their staff rooms and collect signatures in support of the legislation. The bill did not pass, but the contact information from those petitions gave us the beginning of the email list

we use today—and helped us reach some of the members who helped restart the committee two years ago.

EDITORS: There are many environmental groups you could devote time to. Why do you choose to focus on your union's Climate Justice Committee?

BETSY: The Boston Teachers Union and AFT Massachusetts are significant forces. In my retirement, I've learned the local landscape of climate groups—some of them are small. When we put an announcement in BTU's weekly e-bulletin, about 14,000 people receive it. That gives us the potential to have a real impact. And there's a certain gravitas when I go to a meeting and say, "I'm on the BTU Climate Justice Committee."

I also represent the BTU on Climate Jobs Massachusetts, which is a coalition of unions and partners advocating for good green jobs and for a just transition* to a green economy. That's an even bigger, statewide platform. Growing out of the 2022 AFT convention in Boston, I have been working with other AFT climate activists from across the country. We have created the AFT climate and environmental justice caucus, and we work to more firmly center climate justice within the AFT's priorities. One benefit of retirement is having time to give to each of these groups.

JACK: I'm fairly involved all around in the union. I'm a building rep, have been on the Contract Bargaining Committee this year, and have been doing a member organizers program. To me, the Climate Justice Committee is a synthesis of my teaching work and my union work. It provides a valuable opportunity to synthesize those two things, like the activism of being a union organizer and the everyday reality of being a science teacher: What am I teaching and how does it impact my students?

We talk so much as educators, and you hear it from administrators, about the importance of student-centered curricula. To me, this work is one of the best examples of student-centered curricula. This impacts students on a daily basis. It's going to impact them more and more as their lives go on. They care about it, they're interested in it, they want to fix it. Being part of this committee is how I can make a difference for my students and also for myself in terms of what resources I have to teach this content

effectively—not having to develop them on the fly on my own.

I think everybody has to make their own choices around where their efforts are best spent. Teachers are incredibly busy all the time, but to me it makes the most sense and I feel like I'm the most effective within the union because that's where I spend so much of my time as it is. It's where I've developed many relationships, and it's what impacts my job directly.

IRISCHA: I do what I can: recycle, compost, grow my own food (as much as I can in the Northeast), and I teach my family, my students, and my community. I think the climate crisis demands all levels of engagement. Through my union, there is a higher level of advocacy, of amplification, on climate justice.

This is life and death now. Climate justice is very intersectional and is impacting marginalized people. I think of our future generations, and I feel compelled to do all the things I can right now. And so I'm here, giving my time to this committee.

MIRA: I agree with what my colleagues have said, so I'll just add one point. When construction starts to make our schools greener, there's an exciting opportunity for union solidarity. We'll fight for union construction jobs. Over time, fights like that help increase unionization and interest in a just transition in the construction sector.

EDITORS: What do you wish you had known when you were starting down this path?

BETSY: Don't get discouraged. Sometimes you feel like, "I've been pounding at these same things and we're not making progress." Then all of a sudden, something happens. For example, we've been trying for quite a while to figure out how to get our state retirement funds out of fossil fuels. This spring, I learned of a potential lawsuit that might accomplish our goal.

I've learned to just keep learning, reaching out, going to meetings, raising my concerns, and trying to think strategically about how to have the greatest impact. Over time, connections get made and you're able to make some progress.

MIRA: As teachers, we get accustomed to feeling isolated in our classrooms. There is value in attending meetings on issues you care about just to counteract that isolation. Also, the people you meet and the connections you make help prevent feeling discouraged.

BETSY: You don't know when those moments of connection are going to happen, but they certainly won't happen if you're not there.

IRISCHA: When you're a new teacher, you're trying to figure out, "What is this whole teaching thing I got myself into?" I didn't get involved in my union until about 10 years ago. Now, as a building representative, I'm wondering if I'm doing enough to engage members so they get involved.

MIRA: I didn't go to a membership meeting until there was a contract vote. Then I realized how powerful union solidarity is. I wish I had started going to union meetings earlier.

BETSY: Exactly! Definitely go to membership meetings, and then you'll see plenty of opportunities to get involved. □

*For details on what a just transition would look like, see "Climate Justice for All" in the Spring 2024 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/spring2024/vachon.

Engaging Students in Civic Action and Activism

Youth activism is a powerful force behind significant social change in the United States. As students learn more about civic engagement and their power to make change, they are emboldened to confront the issues that matter to them and their communities—and to imagine a brighter future for all of us.

To support these efforts, Share My Lesson has dozens of lessons and professional resources to inspire student learning and to support student-driven activism.

Empowering Students to Take Action

Students in grades 3–5 can learn about some of the nation’s iconic activists in the picture book *Enough! 20 Protesters Who Changed America*. The accompanying SML discussion and family guides provide questions and activities to help students identify and begin to address issues they care about at school, at home, and in their communities.

For grades 6–8, “Activism: Purpose Beyond Protest” covers the role of activists and advocates in democracy and how students can use their unique skills and experiences to not only protest but also pursue solutions to meaningful issues.

“People Power: How Engaged Citizens Change the World” is a six-lesson unit developed by SML partner Civic Voices to teach students in grades 9–12 how to engage in civic and political action to promote democratic change. Also for high school students is “Evaluating Students’ Right to Protest,” which delves into the history of the right to protest and encourages students to weigh the pros and cons of action on political issues.

One resource for students at all grade levels is “Community Service: Unifying Youth Through Action,” part of the Martin Luther King III Foundation’s “Realize the Dream” initiative to help students engage civically in real-world issues. For grades K–3, the unit is an introduction to the concept of community service that emphasizes taking action to help others. The unit for grades 4–6 has students research opportunities for community service and create an action plan for volunteering. In grades 7–8 and

9–12, students research reasons behind community service and are challenged to volunteer their skills with a community service organization. A companion webinar, “Realize the Dream: Answering Dr. King’s Call to Service in Your Classroom,” gives educators a framework to connect service-learning to curriculum standards and address real-world community and global issues that they and their students care deeply about.

Helping Educators Support Youth Changemakers

Several SML webinars (each offered for one hour of professional development credit) provide additional resources to help educators integrate civic engagement into their classrooms. “Supporting Civic Engagement: A Framework for Student Leadership, Community Service, Engagement, and Action” takes educators through the six-lesson Lead4Change curriculum for community service that empowers students to be leaders and change agents. “How Invention Education Helps Your Students Create Real Change” introduces “invention education,” a project-based learning approach that helps students identify a community problem and



PAMELA WOLFE

then research and invent a solution. Finally, “Youth in Front: Online Resource About Youth Civic Activism” addresses the history of youth activism in the United States and the legal and practical implications of civil actions; the webinar also gives practical tips for adult support and allyship.

Please reach out to us with any additional ideas or requests at content@sharemylesson.com.

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

Recommended Resources

Enough! 20 Protesters Who Changed America
go.aft.org/oa9

Activism: Purpose Beyond Protest
go.aft.org/9ol

People Power: How Engaged Citizens Change the World
go.aft.org/op4

Evaluating Students’ Right to Protest
go.aft.org/kb3

Community Service: Unifying Youth Through Action
K–3: go.aft.org/13y
4–6: go.aft.org/qvk
7–8: go.aft.org/ey5
9–12: go.aft.org/m00

Realize the Dream: Answering Dr. King’s Call to Service in Your Classroom
go.aft.org/uoh

Supporting Civic Engagement: A Framework for Student Leadership, Community Service, Engagement, and Action
go.aft.org/lgl

How Invention Education Helps Your Students Create Real Change
go.aft.org/jus

Youth in Front: Online Resource About Youth Civic Activism
go.aft.org/13f



The Imperiled Right to Learn

Teaching
in Troubled
Times

By Michael Bérubé

On February 15, 2024, the RAND Corporation published findings related to restrictions on teaching race and gender from its 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey. The results can be summarized succinctly: the state of the American teacher is *scared*. As the authors explain:

Public debates around whether and how teachers should discuss topics related to race and gender in the classroom have turned classrooms into political battlegrounds. Between April 2021 and January 2023, 18 states passed policies restricting teachers' instruction. Many of these state policies restrict teachers' instruction on topics related to race and gender; some also address how teachers can discuss current events or controversial topics.

In the 2023 State of the American Teacher survey, 65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class. This is nearly double the share of teachers who are located in states

that have enacted restrictions.... Regardless of the presence or type of restriction, teachers said that they limited their instruction because they were afraid of upsetting parents and felt uncertain about whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns.¹

Clearly, the educational gag orders issued by the culture-war right are having precisely the effect their proponents intend: to chill speech and stifle intellectual inquiry nationwide.² The very existence of these laws, backed by a national movement of renewed and intensified whitelash (in response to the massive rallies after the murder of George Floyd)* and anti-LGBTQIA+ panic (in which, appallingly, some gay and lesbian intellectuals have joined the anti-trans aspect of the panic⁵), has empowered right-wing activists from coast to coast, inflaming parents and school boards.⁶

Teachers' fear is well-grounded. No doubt many educators, especially at the K-12 level, are aware of the case of Mary Wood, the English teacher from Chapin High School in Chapin, South

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*The term *whitelash* is explained by journalist Wesley Lowery, author of the 2023 book *American Whitelash*: "Historically...., in moments of Black racial advancement, we see America's white majority lash out with rhetoric, with policy, but also with violence. We see a strengthening of that white supremacy and violence now."³ In Benjamin Wallace-Wells's *New Yorker* profile of conservative activist Christopher Rufo, a key figure in the contemporary whitelash, civil rights scholar and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw calls this latest phase of whitelash "a post-George Floyd backlash."⁴

Carolina, who became a target of conservative rage—and was reprimanded by administrators—for teaching Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* in her AP English class.⁷ Wood’s case is notable because the South Carolina statute Wood violated forbids teachers from making students “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” on account of their race.⁸ This is a particularly biting irony for a book in which Coates writes of his studies at Howard University, “It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort, was the process that ... would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness.”⁹ In this light, it is not too much to say that the point of right-wing assaults on our schools is to take the “educational” part out of our educational institutions.

From the Schools to the Campuses

The climate of fear in the schools has knock-on effects for higher education. As I write this essay in the spring of 2024, I am teaching *Between the World and Me* in a capstone course on creative nonfiction for my university English department’s creative writing concentration. I have enough job security to do so, and to suggest to my students that the case of Mary Wood is a spectacular example of whitelash. But my colleagues off the tenure track, who now make up about two-thirds of college faculty nationwide, have no such job protection.¹⁰ If they teach material that makes students and/or their parents upset, they do so at their peril—and the peril is growing greater with each passing year.

In 2022, I was approached by the Elias Law Group to write a report for a lawsuit brought by United Faculty of Florida (among other parties) challenging the constitutionality of HB 233, a so-called viewpoint diversity law that had gone into effect in Florida the previous year.¹¹ HB 233 mandates an “Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity” survey, the intent of which is to monitor the degree to which students, faculty, and staff feel free to speak their minds.[†] (Completing the survey is not mandatory, since that would constitute compelled speech, so it is no surprise that response rates have been extremely low, with percentages often in the single digits.¹³) More perniciously, the law allows students to video-record their classes and use the recording “as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding.” As I remarked in my report, this language quite clearly envisions *and fosters* an adversarial relationship between student and professor. Professors who find themselves

being recorded by their students under HB 233 could reasonably suspect adversarial or malicious intent. There is a national network that includes right-wing student groups such as Turning Point USA and Campus Reform (the latter of which actually pays students to write damning accounts of their professors¹⁴), which in turn report faculty members to outlets like the Daily Caller, Breitbart, and Fox News;¹⁵ any professor familiar with these groups knows that their course materials and their lectures can be ripped out of context and disseminated in ways that are very likely to leave them subject to harassment and even death threats. Jonathan Marks, a conservative professor of politics at Ursinus College, has eloquently argued in an essay on Turning Point USA that his conservative colleagues should be as alarmed about this phenomenon as he is: “I know relatively few conservative academics who look up from railing against wokeism long enough to notice or say much about the feverish, disgraceful character of too much of what passes on the right. From both a conservative and an academic perspective, that’s a dereliction of duty.”¹⁶

Nontenure-track faculty teach material that makes students and/or their parents upset at their peril.



This is dystopian, to be sure, but the provision of HB 233 I want to focus on is the so-called anti-shielding provision, which baffled me for weeks until I managed to reverse-engineer it—partly by way of reading through the transcripts of the many legislative hearings on the bill to learn how this toxic piece of sausage was made. The anti-shielding provision forbids Florida’s public colleges and universities to “limit students’ faculty members’ or staff members’ access to, or observation of, ideas and opinions that they may find uncomfortable, unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive.”¹⁷ It is effectively a hate speech protection plan, very much in line with what has become conventional wisdom among university administrators and offices of general counsel—that free speech absolutism trumps all other

[†]I have written about viewpoint diversity elsewhere, arguing that it is a red herring—and not synonymous with intellectual freedom: “‘Viewpoint diversity’ has become a watchword among critics who believe that universities are inhospitable to conservative views, but there is nothing *intrinsically* valuable about a diversity of viewpoints, particularly in an intellectual setting that exists precisely to distinguish viewpoints that deserve a hearing from viewpoints that do not.... Some fields benefit from viewpoint diversity, particularly with regard to social, cultural, and political affairs; but there is no value in a ‘viewpoint diversity’ that includes a Ptolemaic understanding of the universe or the belief that ‘hysteria’ is a medical condition involving the dysfunction of the uterus. Crucially, even in fields that do benefit from viewpoint diversity, the benefit derives not from the diversity in and of itself but from the intellectual value that diverse viewpoints bring to a more comprehensive and adequate understanding of the subject matter; no field of study includes an infinite diversity of viewpoints for the sake of diversity. All fields of study define themselves, and evolve, by vetting viewpoints in order to determine which perspectives constitute useful contributions to human understanding.”¹²

considerations, including legitimate educational objectives. In a published February 2024 letter, Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe pushed back on this conventional wisdom:

The current doctrinaire insistence that we cannot restrict speech unless it falls within previously recognized narrow exceptions such as the “incitement of violence,” “fighting words,” or “true threats” wrongly elevates free speech above all other freedoms—including the bedrock principle that every student should be free to access education without discrimination. Just as a commitment to free speech can surely coexist with a campus rule banning calls for killing Black students or shunning LGBTQ students even if those calls single out no student in particular, so a commitment to free speech can certainly coexist with a rule banning calls on campus for killing all Jews, whatever the specific context.... Transplanting to university campuses rigid legal categories developed for the evaluation of criminal laws conflicts with the discrimination-free environment that the Constitution

requires public universities to afford all their students and that federal civil rights laws demand of private universities receiving federal funding.¹⁸

Tribe is right that free speech absolutism conflicts with other freedoms students should enjoy and is right that it has become a matter of doctrinaire insistence; in Florida, it is now enshrined in state law.



The point of right-wing assaults on our schools is to take the “educational” part out of our educational institutions.

What makes the anti-shielding provision so remarkable in HB 233—and what puzzled me when I first read it—is that it has been enacted in the same state whose governor announced, upon signing the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop W.O.K.E.) Act in December 2021, that “in Florida we are taking a stand against the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory.”¹⁹ There are the obvious facts: the opponents of critical race theory (CRT), led by Christopher Rufo, have no idea what that body of knowledge consists of and no interest in finding out (indeed, Rufo has been admirably honest about his willingness to lie about it*), and the whitelash against CRT spectacularly bears out CRT’s critique of structural racism. But leaving those aside, the Stop W.O.K.E. Act very emphatically seeks to shield Florida’s employees and students from ideas that are unwelcome in con-

servative circles. So what is a professor in Florida’s public universities to do if, under HB 233, she decides that her students should not be shielded from CRT?

Teaching and Learning in Diverse Classrooms

The language of “shielding” was taken from the influential “Chicago Statement” of 2015, which was issued by the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago in response to the discourse around trigger warnings. That statement declared that “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.”²¹ HB 233 closely tracks the Chicago Statement in protecting “ideas and opinions that [students] may find uncomfortable, unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive.” But there is a decisive difference between the Chicago Statement and HB 233: the Chicago Statement has guardrails. In the paragraph following the shielding clause, it adds:

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University.²²

Time, place, and manner restrictions are already central to First Amendment case law; what I want to call attention to here is the restriction of expression that is “directly incompatible with the functioning of the University.” HB 233 contains no such guardrails—no acknowledgment that universities are educational institutions that can legitimately restrict speech that undermines their educational mission.

As history professor Malick W. Ghachem argued in January 2023, the sweeping nature of the Chicago Statement is problematic because it does not grapple with the “subtleties of teaching in diverse classrooms where the challenge is to turn disagreement into an occasion for learning.”²³ HB 233 goes much further, as Florida state Representative Omari Hardy explained during the state House legislative hearings on March 18, 2021. Noting that “school officials have not only the right but the responsibility to regulate expression when they reasonably conclude that it will materially and substantially disrupt the work and discipline of the school,” Representative Hardy argued that

this bill is so vague that nearly anything an administrator or professor would do to control the academic environment could be recast as shielding or limiting someone’s access to

*In a pair of tweets in March 2021, Rufo wrote, “We have successfully frozen their brand—‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.” The tweets have since become deservedly infamous as examples of a post-Trump, post-truth media landscape.²⁰

or observation of expressive activities or speech that might be offensive, unwelcome, and so on.

And so I wonder, can a professor teaching a class on terrorism stop a student from contributing to the class discussion by showing video clips of American soldiers being harmed abroad? Can a professor of gender studies stop a proponent of pedophilia from having that kind of discussion in the classroom? Can a faculty member or ... a faculty advisor of a Christian student organization stop a member from the Church of Satan from using a meeting of that Christian organization to advocate for the benefits of abortion? Can an administrator [prevent] ... a student from distributing nude photos of a classmate in a hallway if the student characterizes his effort as an art project or a protest? ... In each and every single case, the offending student could conceivably recast the professor or the faculty member's attempt to gain control of the academic environment as an attempt to shield or limit other students from observing expressive material, however unwelcome. And that's concerning.²⁴

"Concerning" is putting it mildly, but Representative Hardy's concerns were ignored by every single one of his Republican colleagues. As I testified in court in early 2023, HB 233's anti-shielding provision licenses a complete free-for-all in the classroom and was approved on a largely party-line vote by people who apparently have no understanding of or interest in the subtleties of teaching in diverse classrooms. Quite apart from Ghachem's critique of the Chicago Statement, then, the use of the statement in HB 233 demonstrates that the document is quite easy to weaponize.

The Right to Learn in a Focused Classroom

In 2003, I published an essay about "John," a disruptive conservative student in an honors seminar who became increasingly belligerent and combative. In a discussion of Richard Powers's 1988 novel *Prisoner's Dilemma*—which, in part, is an alternate history involving the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II—he insisted that the internment was justified.²⁵ The class burst into an uproar. I managed to settle things down and then generate a useful conversation. We discussed three key points:

- a. *Korematsu v. United States*, the case in which the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of Fred Korematsu (who was born in the United States) for refusing to relocate from his home in California during World War II;
- b. the 1983 overturning of Korematsu's conviction on the grounds that the government had suppressed and/or destroyed evidence gathered by its own intelligence agencies that Japanese Americans posed no security threat; and
- c. the official congressional statement in 1988 that "there was no military or security reason for the internment" and that "the internment of the individuals of Japanese ancestry was caused by racial prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership."²⁶

That statement was signed by President Ronald Reagan, which should have put the matter to rest even for conservatives. But the

discussion ate up a great deal of class time that I had not anticipated, believing as I did that no reasonable person in the 21st century could argue that the internment was justified. I thought of Thomas Jefferson's famous 1820 letter to William Roscoe, an English abolitionist, about his new university in Charlottesville: "this institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. for here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."²⁷ A noble sentiment indeed, though Jefferson did not specify precisely *how long* we have to combat it in the course of a 75-minute class.

My point is that disruptive students can be ... disruptive. And students empowered by a limitless anti-shielding law are basically being given a license for disruption, just as students and parents now feel entitled to demand that a teacher be punished or fired for creating a classroom in which some people feel uncomfortable. Surely any teacher, whether in the K-12 system or in higher education, is aware of the challenges disruptive students pose and knows that the most difficult aspect of teaching involves the improvisatory techniques one has to master.

Free speech absolutism conflicts with other freedoms students should enjoy.



But in all the discussion of classroom discussion over the past few decades, I have rarely seen anyone argue that disruptive, combative students are infringing on other students' right to learn—or that the "right to learn" might encompass the right to learn about the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates or Toni Morrison.[†] (After all, many students might want to claim that right! They

[†]Perhaps that will change now that Beacon Press has published *The Right to Learn: Resisting the Right-Wing Attack on Academic Freedom*, edited by Valerie C. Johnson, Jennifer Ruth, and Ellen Schrecker.

might even believe that a free society should tolerate and foster criticism of its various failures to operate as a free society for all who dwell in it.) Even though my own students in that honors seminar repeatedly complained to me that John was taking up all the oxygen in the room, I did not think of making such an argu-

ment until last year, in the course of a long lunch with the dean of the Belisario College of Communications at Penn State, Marie Hardin. Marie had a number of questions about the parameters of academic freedom, and after I had gone through my usual exposition²⁸ of the 1940 Statement of Principles of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), she asked, “And where are students in all of this?”



Students empowered by a limitless anti-shielding law are basically being given a license for disruption.

I replied that I unfortunately had developed an allergy to that kind of question, thanks to David Horowitz (whom the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as “a driving force of the anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-black movements”²⁹); in the early aughts, he campaigned for an “Academic Bill of Rights,” which included the creation of an organization called Students for Academic Freedom—a deliberate attempt to confuse the meaning of academic freedom by insinuating that students need the academic freedom to resist indoctrination by leftist professors.³⁰ However, allergic reaction aside, I had to acknowledge that the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn are two sides of the same coin. Though it can’t be denied that the AAUP has far more to say about the former than the latter, the AAUP handbook *Policy Documents and Reports* (better known as the “Redbook”) does contain the 1967 “Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students.” On the conduct of classrooms, that statement is clear and unexceptional:

The professor in the classroom and in conference should encourage free discussion, inquiry, and expression. Student performance should be evaluated solely on an academic basis, not on opinions or conduct in matters unrelated to academic standards....

Students should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled.³¹

In follow-up emails, Marie informed me that she was also consulting with staff at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), one of whom defined students’ academic freedom as their freedom to access information. She offered that staffer a better definition, informed by our conversation, emphasizing the right to learn.

Marie’s exchange with FIRE seems to me to encapsulate what is wrong with an understanding of teaching and learning that is not informed by classroom dynamics and classroom experience. The right to access information is basically the right to use the internet or a public library; granted, this is not a right enjoyed by billions of people living in autocracies around the world, but it is (so far) uncontroversial in the United States. The crucial point is that accessing information is only one very basic aspect of education—the absolute minimum, one might say. The right to learn also entails the right to open, civil, *but inevitably bounded and focused* discussion in the classroom, in which students are properly “shielded” from irrelevant and erroneous information. The right to learn also entails the right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation—though not without the fear of criticism or even opprobrium (the responses sometimes attributed to a censorious “cancel culture” even when the criticism or opprobrium is directed at shameful utterances, like the claim that the Japanese American internment camps were justified). And finally, the right to learn must include the right to learn about the ways in which the United States has failed to live up to its egalitarian promise. American educators should imagine that one part of their mission is to ensure that events like the 1921 Tulsa massacre—which sparked widespread national discussion a few years ago only because showrunner Damon Lindelof based his reboot of *Watchmen* on reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’s essay “The Case for Reparations”—are never ignored by leaders and forgotten by the public again.³²

Postscript: The right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation after October 7, 2023

Hamas’s unimaginably horrific attack on Israeli civilians, followed by the Netanyahu government’s unimaginably horrific pulverization of Gaza, has made the ideal of open and civil discussion about Israel and Palestine nearly impossible—on campuses and in schools as everywhere else, as even families and lifelong friends find themselves torn apart by their varying responses to the atrocities. The crisis has revealed many ugly things, from Netanyahu’s and the Israeli far right’s codependent relation with Hamas (an organization that conveniently allows them to perpetuate the belief that Israel does not have a credible partner for peace³³) to the sorry fact that many diversity, equity, and inclusion programs on American campuses are not well prepared to deal with situations in which Jewish students, faculty, and staff legitimately feel vulnerable³⁴—shunned and vilified even if they have been passionately opposed to the Netanyahu government from the outset and especially to its massive crimes against humanity in Gaza since Hamas’s attack.

It comes as no surprise to me, as a member of the academic left, that pro-Palestinian voices on and off campus are marginalized if not demonized; it also comes as no surprise to me, as a member of the academic left who is not always in good standing with some parts of the academic left, that there are some pro-Palestinian voices from which one can hear the belief that Israel bears all the

responsibility for the wanton massacre, rape, torture, and kidnapping of its people on October 7; the belief that Palestine must be free from the river to the sea (which can be a call for either a single binational state or, as it is sometimes taken, the elimination of the state of Israel); and the belief that it is morally wrong to foreground—or even acknowledge—Jewish suffering. Perhaps there have been some pro-Israeli voices on American campuses willing to echo the Israeli far right’s arguably genocidal calls for an ethnic cleansing in Gaza; if so, I have not heard them. I have heard exclusively that it is a very lonely, painful time to be a progressive Jew in American higher education. At the same time, there has been no institutional pressure on Hillel chapters on campus to account for Israel’s pulverization of Gaza, but Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) has been banned at Brandeis University, Columbia University, and George Washington University—and in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis ordered that all public universities shut down their SJP chapters.³⁵ Columbia also banned Jewish Voice for Peace³⁶ and convened a task force on campus antisemitism that has raised concerns that antisemitism will be conflated with criticism of Israel.³⁷ There is no symmetry between supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestine on campus; the latter group is and has been far more vulnerable than the former, in American universities as in the Middle East itself.

As this essay went to press, that vulnerability was exploited on many campuses as administrators called the police to disperse and arrest protestors in encampments. A new chapter in human hypocrisy was written as many politicians and administrators who had been championing free speech on campus demanded the suppression of peaceful protest against the slaughter in Gaza. Not every protest was peaceful, but so far, most of the violence—on campuses such as Dartmouth College,³⁸ Emory University,³⁹ and Indiana University⁴⁰—has involved excessive use of force by police. Not every protestor has been blameless; some have engaged in reckless sloganeering and indiscriminate criticism of all things Jewish. And as has been widely noted, the protests do not seem to include any demands that Hamas free its hostages. (My own rule of thumb is to consider whether such slogans and critiques are likely to alienate liberal and progressive Jews, without whom there can be no just solution in the Middle East, and to consider the intentions and effects of protestors who do not care about this likelihood.) But reckless sloganeering and indiscriminate criticism *are* free speech—and do not warrant the aggressively militarized response launched by increasingly authoritarian university administrations, first at Columbia and then on campuses across the country. To be sure, there were exceptions at universities like Brown,⁴¹ Johns Hopkins,⁴² and Wesleyan.⁴³ But the hair-trigger response of the universities where police were summoned remains remarkable—and deplorable.

In this context, therefore, at a time when even the invocation of “context” has become controversial, I do not want to be understood as saying that the right to learn—more specifically, the right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation—is imperiled only by right-wing culture warriors. I believe that right-wing culture warriors have mounted a largely successful, well-organized, and profoundly anti-intellectual cam-

paign against things they think of as “woke” and “liberal indoctrination,” and that their ignorance of what actually takes place in educational institutions at all levels is, for their constituency, one of their political strengths. I also believe that the phenomenon of liberal-centrist “both-sides-ism,” which promotes false equivalences between threats to intellectual freedom from left and right, is real and pernicious, and that comparisons of “cancel culture” to the Red Scares that followed the two world wars of the 20th century are too laughable to merit serious debate.* And



I also believe that the campus left is sometimes demonstrably an obstacle to open and constructive debate, and that it affords its opponents too many opportunities for saying so.† I therefore close this essay in the hope that the atrocities in the Middle East might lead us to acknowledge, without denying the far greater scope of the atrocities in Gaza, that the American campus is a place where Jewish and Muslim students, faculty, and staff may plausibly feel imperiled—and might lead us to rededicate ourselves to the extraordinarily difficult task of fostering all our students’ right to learn. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/berube.

*There will therefore be no discussion in this essay of Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott’s 2023 book, *The Canceling of the American Mind*, which relies explicitly on such comparisons.

†For me, the most painful example was the response of trans students and their allies at Reed College to a visit by Kimberly Peirce, the director of the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*. Peirce, who is nonbinary, was met with threatening posters and was subject to prolonged heckling—despite the fact that her film was groundbreaking in its depiction of violence against nonbinary teens.⁴⁴

Free to Teach, Free to Learn

Examining the Lines Between Education, Discrimination, and Indoctrination



By Andrew Manuel Crespo

Sitting in the faculty room alongside my colleagues at Harvard Law School, I read the words projected on the screen above us and tried to place a dawning sense of dread.

The bolded words at the top of the screen should have been a source of comfort. “Harvard University Non-Discrimination Policy,” they read. As a legal scholar who has written academically and publicly about racial discrimination, as a lawyer who has defended scores of Black and Latino people harmed by the US penal system, and as the director of an organization called the Institute to End Mass Incarceration, I’ve spent much of the past decade working to combat unlawful and unjust discrimination in our society. My efforts have focused on the criminal system. But I have long held the conviction that discrimination needs to be identified and opposed in our educational systems as well.

That conviction was impressed upon me from an early age by my first and best teacher. For 40 years, my mother taught in public elementary schools. In the school where she spent the lion’s share of her career, she was the first Latina and the first person of color hired to be a teacher. For decades, she was the only one.

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I will always remember being seven years old and asking my mom why she hadn’t taught me Spanish, the only language her father, my grandfather, comfortably spoke (and which I later learned to speak reasonably well). “I saw too many teachers discriminate against Latino kids in their classrooms,” she answered. “I didn’t want you to have an accent.”

From those early lessons, and on through almost 20 years studying and later teaching at Harvard, I’ve always believed discrimination to be antithetical to what education is all about. Educators teach everyone. And students learn best from a diversity of experiences and perspectives—among their instructors and among their peers. This much I know to be true. And so I remember reading with approval the announcement from our university’s provost sometime in 2021 that Harvard would be assembling a working group to “develop new University-wide policies” to “address forms of prohibited discrimination” in the learning environment.¹

But sitting in the faculty room and reading the resulting policy on the screen two years later, the feeling I experienced was, at the very least, dread adjacent. Reading it closely, I was able to pinpoint my concern to two words at the end of the policy’s opening sentences.

Harvard University is committed to the principles of equal opportunity in education and employment. Discrimination on the basis of the following protected categories, or any other

legally protected basis, is unlawful and is prohibited by this Policy: age (40+), race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity and gender expression, as well as pregnancy), genetic information, ancestry, religion, caste, creed, veteran status, disability, military service, sexual orientation, *political beliefs*.² (Emphasis added.)

Those last two words, *political beliefs*, struck me as categorically different from the others on the list. Age, race, ancestry, genetics, the country or caste in which you are born—those are all things you can't change about who you are. That's less true of things like religion and military status, which might be changeable for some people. But it's hard to see why a university would have any interest in encouraging such changes or in treating students differently based on these attributes.

Political beliefs are different. Political beliefs are *ideas we choose* to embrace or reject. Moreover, they are ideas that can, and arguably should, evolve over the course of a lifetime. Perhaps most importantly of all, they are ideas that evolve *through the process of education*. As William T. Foster, the first president of Reed College, poetically put the point, "It is the primary duty of a teacher to make a student take an honest account of his stock of ideas, throw out the dead matter, place revised price marks on what is left, and try to fill his empty shelves with new goods."³ Echoing Foster, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) wrote in its seminal 1915 "Declaration of Principles" on academic freedom and tenure that it is part of "the duty of an academic instructor to give any students old enough to be in college a genuine intellectual awakening."⁴

Education, in other words, entails in large part the discovery and interrogation of *new* beliefs. This is true for instruction in the natural and social sciences. And it is true for the study of philosophy, law, ethics, religion, and public morals—all domains that, to varying degrees, are inescapably political in nature. For that reason, political beliefs and ideas, like so many other ideas, can be expected to change as educators build and navigate students through the reflective learning environments that bring such change—such education—about.

For that to happen, educators sometimes need to interact with, act upon, react to, and *assess* the ideas (including the political ideas) expressed by their students. Those interactions and reactions can be messy. Indeed, the more closely we examine them, the blurrier the boundaries between education, discrimination, and indoctrination become. Nor are those boundaries static. A given pedagogical technique or approach—a given mode of interacting with, reacting to, or assessing a student's ideas and beliefs—might be appropriately lauded as exemplary education in one pedagogical context and appropriately condemned as discrimination, indoctrination, or both in another. Complicating matters even more, those determinative contexts differ across a curriculum, even for a single professor. In my own case, teaching a mandatory introductory course one semester, an upper-level elective survey course another, and an applied law school clinical course the next, my pedagogical approaches and contexts vary dramatically. And with them so too do the markers of what I would call good—even necessary—teaching.

The pedagogical context and mission of a given course, in other words, are essential components of the analysis when defining

prohibited forms of ideological discrimination in the classroom. And as a result, the question of the instructor's rights and responsibilities when *defining* that pedagogical context and mission are just as critical to consider.

This is the nuance that I feared was missing from the blunt words of Harvard's policy, which declare discrimination on the basis of political beliefs "prohibited" whenever it manifests in a student receiving "less favorable treatment" because of those beliefs or ideas.⁵ To teach in the best and most responsible way we know how, is it possible my colleagues and I might sometimes employ pedagogical practices in tension with this policy's terms and goals?

Students learn best from a diversity of experiences and perspectives—among their instructors and peers.



This essay is an effort to think this question through with a community of readers across the country who I imagine face similar challenges in their own careers, at a time when the intersection between education and political beliefs is perhaps more fraught than ever.

Competing Freedoms

Most discussions of the relationship between teaching and political beliefs take as their touchstone the principle of academic freedom. Foundational texts on the subject, including the AAUP's seminal 1915 and 1940 statements, have always described academic freedom as entailing "the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning."⁶ But as Bruce Macfarlane, a professor of higher education, writes, these two freedoms are typically "tagged onto the end of definitions of academic freedom as a largely rhetorical device." Far more prominent are concerns over the rights of teachers and students to express unpopular or heterodox views

inside and outside of the classroom when those rights are “threatened by forces external to the university such as governments and social lobby groups.” Even when speech within the classroom is at issue, the core academic freedom controversies tend to focus on teachers’ right to *express their opinions*, and less on pedagogical *actions* they might take that treat one set of students differently than others. The upshot, Macfarlane concludes, “is a comparative dearth of literature about the freedom to teach” as manifested in the interrelationship between teachers and students in a shared pedagogical setting.⁷

Political beliefs are ideas we choose to embrace or reject. Most importantly, they evolve through the process of education.

Within that relationship, academic freedom is an idea that can carry us only so far. Because unlike threats to a professor’s extramural speech or to a student’s right to protest outside of class, the curricular interactions between teachers and students implicate a set of *competing* academic freedoms, each with important substantive content: the freedom to learn and the freedom to teach.

The Freedom to Learn

The student’s freedom to learn includes a right not to be discriminated against in the classroom. At a minimum, this entails freedom from discrimination based on immutable characteristics, which is generally unlawful under federal statutes, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination “on the ground of race, color, or national origin” in any “program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (which virtually all schools and universities do).⁸ Put more generally, a student’s freedom to learn entails the right to be treated as an *individual*, free from projections or assumptions derived from group affiliations or other attributes. To quote the AAUP’s “Statement of Professional Ethics,” the freedom to learn means that teachers must “demonstrate respect for students as individuals and adhere to their proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors.”⁹

Related to these principles is an important, but complicated, corollary. As law professor David Rabban wrote more than 30 years ago, “Professors violate the norms of academic freedom when they ... indoctrinate students.”¹⁰ The reasoning here is straightforward. As Justice Felix Frankfurter (who served on the US Supreme Court from 1939 to 1962 and, before that, taught at Harvard Law School) wrote, we “regard teachers—in our entire educational system, from the primary grades to the university—as the priests of our democracy” because they “foster those habits of open-mindedness and critical inquiry which alone make for responsible citizens, who, in turn, make possible an enlightened and effective public opinion.”¹¹ Frankfurter

was echoing the AAUP’s 1915 statement, which declares that a professor must, “above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves.” A teacher must therefore always be on guard, the statement concludes, “against taking unfair advantage of the student’s immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher’s own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question.”¹²

As then-Columbia University President Lee Bollinger would write almost a century later, this professional obligation to avoid indoctrination is sometimes tested:

Within the academy, we always face the impulse to jettison the scholarly ethos and adopt a partisan mentality, which can easily become infectious, especially in times of great controversy.... In the classroom, especially, where we perhaps meet our highest calling, the professor knows the need to resist the allure of certitude, the temptation to use the podium as an ideological platform, to indoctrinate a captive audience, to play favorites with the like-minded and to silence the others.

These temptations, Bollinger concludes, pose “special challenges for those of us who teach subjects of great political controversy.” But the “responsibility to resist belongs to every member of every faculty.”¹³ Indeed, as Stephen Finn (the director of West Point’s Center for Faculty Excellence) concludes, a failure to do so would “deny students their own academic freedom to form, discuss, and defend their own views.”¹⁴

The Freedom to Teach

Much as the freedom to learn entails freedom from indoctrination, the freedom to *teach* carries an obligation to do so fully and completely, with generosity on the part of academics to share their expertise, including what they know and think on a subject. As sociology professor Frank Hankins wrote in 1937, the professor “is not a mere waiter serving nourishment prepared by others; he is cook as well.” Hankins posited that it is “bad teaching” to offer students “a mere statement of historical events,” facts, or information. Rather, the professor’s obligation to “be objective” is matched by an obligation to “also be thought-provoking.”¹⁵ In the words of history professor Hans Kohn (from 1938),

The teacher is expected to present to his students the whole truth, as he understands it in the light of his research and thought. He should put his whole individuality into his teaching with no other guide but his individual conscience. Only in this way can he present to the student, and make the student share in, the dignity of spiritual and intellectual endeavor and the seriousness which it exacts. The teacher must be free to speak his mind, the student must experience his effort at truth.¹⁶

And here, too, the AAUP’s seminal statement is in accord. No one, it observes, “can be a successful teacher unless he enjoys the respect of his students” and has “their confidence in his intellectual integrity.” This confidence “will be impaired if there is suspicion on the part of the student that the teacher is not expressing himself fully or frankly” or dares “not speak with that candor and courage which youth always demands in those whom it is to

esteem.” And so, the AAUP concludes, it is the teacher’s duty to “give the student the best of what he has and what he is.”¹⁷

That duty captures a core component of the teacher’s own academic freedom. As Macfarlane sums it up, a “university teacher who does not enjoy” the opportunity to fully perform their craft as described above “will be operating as a service delivery worker rather than an academic. They will not, in effect, have the freedom to teach.”¹⁸

Paradoxes and Sandboxes

With these working definitions of our two freedoms in hand, we can see how they might at times come into tension. Macfarlane, building on philosopher Karl Popper’s idea of the “paradox of freedom,” summarizes the tension: “When the university teacher exercises their freedom to teach in accordance with their own opinions and beliefs, the freedom of their students, the ‘meek’ with less power and authority than the academic, may be compromised as a result.”¹⁹ The basic fear, as Hankins described it, is that professors will be “dogmatic and intolerant” toward students who do not share their “own type of social idealism” and will ultimately tilt the classroom into a theater of “persistent and overt propaganda.”²⁰ Framed as such, one can see in the paradox of freedom what Macfarlane identified as the foundation of accusations, advanced repeatedly over time and vociferously of late, that “professors holding ‘liberal’ views” will end up “discriminating against conservative students.”²¹

Policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of political beliefs might seem like welcome guardrails against these concerns. But the paradox cannot tidily be resolved simply by prohibiting ideological discrimination. In order to live up to the duty to teach, to be the student’s intellectual guide, a teacher must engage with and challenge students’ ideas and beliefs—and be challenged by them in return. And that reciprocal challenge must by necessity be *bounded*.

This is a critical point. Education occurs within the conceptual parameters of a given classroom, which requires some shared starting premises. Borrowing from the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, we might call these shared premises the *life-world* of a classroom, the shared “stock of knowledge” against which the “processes of reaching understanding,” the processes of exploration and education, “get shaped.”²² Without these shared premises, classroom discussions and the mutual understanding they seek to bring about would not be possible—and could quickly become intolerable or incoherent. Every question and exchange would be open to endless contestation, questioning, and unraveling, all in infinite regress.

Put more simply, you can think of a classroom as a sandbox. Within that sandbox, the student enjoys the “academic freedom to form, discuss, and defend their own views,” free from a propagandizing or indoctrinating instructor.²³ But the teacher has the right—and arguably the responsibility—to keep the pedagogical discourse inside the box, and thus to defend the integrity of the box’s conceptual boundaries when students try to move beyond those limits.

And now we can start to see the problem. For as law professor Eugene Volokh writes, a professor who guards these essential boundaries “will inevitably need to” impose some “viewpoint-based restrictions on his students.”²⁴ A biology professor, for

example, may well need to insist that students who believe in intelligent design and reject the theory of evolution must nevertheless check those beliefs at the classroom door. So too a professor teaching a seminar titled “Evaluating Solutions to Climate Change” need not permit students who insist that climate change does not exist to turn every class exchange or assignment into a debate over that (politically disputed) premise. Likewise, an introductory microeconomics class need not be overtaken by debates over Marxism as an alternative to capitalism, no matter how committed a Marxist a given student may be. In each instance, students must adopt or at least perform within the class a worldview that they sincerely and perhaps deeply reject, as a condition for entry into and participation within the course.

Note what this means. Students forced to check their worldview, their deeply held political beliefs, at the classroom door may experience intense and distracting cognitive dissonance throughout the semester. It may not be easy to learn while pretending to believe something they do not. A student who considers that cognitive dissonance too much to bear, or who fears (reasonably) that they won’t be able to perform as well on assessments as students who are not so encumbered, may decide not to take the course. Either way, it seems hard to deny that these students will be receiving from the professor “less favorable treatment” compared to students who hold the opposite beliefs—the evolution believer, the climate change believer, the capitalist—and who can take the class without any such burdens or impediments.



A teacher must engage with and challenge students’ ideas and beliefs—and be challenged by them in return.

And yet, this form of viewpoint discrimination, based on these particular political beliefs, in the context of these particular classroom settings, seems simply unavoidable. Without it, the boundaries and conceptual integrity of the class would teeter or collapse. The biology class would become a theology class where students debate the existence of God and the interrelation of science and religion instead of learning the mechanism of the Krebs cycle or the nature of mitochondrial DNA. The climate change class would become a seminar where students explore how media silos and other structural aspects of modern society cause epistemic ruptures and disinformation instead of studying the comparative advantages of carbon capture, electric vehicles, and renewable energy.

The classes, in short, would become fundamentally different from those the professor set out to teach. And that, in its own way, would violate the freedom of the *other* students to learn in the classes they signed up to take.

Beyond Biology

What is true for classes in the sciences holds true for other academic domains. Take law school, which I know well. Even within a single subject matter area, like American constitutional law, different classes within a course catalog occupy discrete conceptual and pedagogical zones. A class designed to teach students how to craft effective briefs to the Supreme Court (which my school offers) is not the same as a class designed to explore what contemporary constitutional law says or ought to say on given topics like abortion or affirmative action (a class my school requires). Nor is either class the same as one exploring whether the Supreme Court should have the power to interpret the Constitution in the first place, or whether the Constitution should even exist or be seen as authoritative (two hotly contested questions in today's leading law schools).²⁵ Given the related but distinct pedagogical missions of these different courses, classroom discussions or pedagogical approaches could be inside the box in one setting but outside of it in another. In the brief-writing class, for example, a student whose deeply held political belief is that the Constitution is an invalid document may appropriately be asked to check that belief at the door, and could be negatively assessed by the professor for turning in assignments that press the anticonstitutionalism argument—even though such “less favorable treatment” is based on the student’s “political beliefs.”

That reciprocal challenge must by necessity be bounded. Education occurs within the conceptual parameters of a given classroom.



The same dynamic plays out in my own teaching. When I offer our school’s required introductory survey course on American criminal law or our upper-level course on the constitutional law of policing, I present complex and politically contested material. Especially in my required classes, where students don’t get to pick me as their professor, I am sensitive to the fact that the 80 people in the room hold a broad set of views. And so, consistent with the AAUP’s guiding principles, I bring my own research and perspectives into my teaching while also delighting over Socratic exchanges with students who offer views on mass incarceration or police power different than my own. A decade into this work, I routinely see that delight shared by the students on the other end of these authentically educational exchanges—a point confirmed for me this spring when a group of students from the local chapter of our school’s Federalist Society, a national conservative legal organization, told me over breakfast how much they valued and appreciated learning from and with a professor whose perspectives differ from their own.

And yet, when I teach a different class—an experiential elective course that aims to show students how to operate effectively and responsibly as lawyers in solidarity with anticarceral social movements—my pedagogical mission and context change. The point of this class is not to debate whether mass incarceration exists or whether it should end. The goal is to explore the relationship between lawyers and organizers in the effort to bring that end about, and to help students learn how to enter into those relationships and that shared work most effectively. A student who rejects the premise that mass incarceration is a serious problem or who lacks the desire to do something about it will likely struggle to succeed in the course, and ultimately may not be able to do so.

At a conceptual level, these examples strike me as indistinguishable from the biology, climate change, and microeconomics examples. Yet the shift to these transparently more political subject areas surfaces a controversial and perhaps even provocative idea. We are accustomed to using pejoratives like indoctrination and propaganda to describe, in Hankins’s words, “the teacher who presents what is unorthodox” and who acts as a “social evangelist who seeks to convert students to his own type of social idealism.” But if good teaching requires an instructor to hold firm to the shared starting premises of a given class, to guard the boundaries of the box, might it not be the case, as Hankins writes, that “all teaching has in it an element of propaganda”?²⁶

Context and Judgment

Taking together all of the above, the crux of the analysis when assessing the relationship between the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn seems to be twofold.

First, we must ask the essential antecedent question: What is this class *about*? What is the lifeworld, the sandbox, of the educational endeavor that the teacher and the students are undertaking together? As Finn puts it, we cannot assess whether a professor’s pedagogical approach is appropriate or effective unless we know “the educational goals of the course.”²⁷

And second, we must ask an equally essential and related question: Who gets to decide what the course’s

pedagogical context and mission are? Here, I submit, there is no single answer. As Karen Singer-Freeman, Christine Robinson, and Linda Bastone (scholars of teaching and assessment) write, academic freedom typically affords educational institutions, acting through “the faculty, as a group,” the right to restrict the decisions of individual faculty members, including “by requiring uniform syllabi or grading policies” in certain courses.²⁸ Likewise, it is the responsibility of the faculty as a whole to attend to the diversity of perspectives across the broader ecosystem of the curriculum.

But as these authors go on to observe, in the absence of any collective faculty guidance or constraint on a given class, it is a broadly accepted principle of academic freedom that professors have wide “discretion in using the pedagogical approach most appropriate to the academic course being taught” and thus “have the right to make decisions about how they will teach, what they will teach, and how they will assess student learning.”²⁹ Indeed, this “autonomy in the day-to-day business of determining how to teach and assess students,” what Macfarlane calls *academic judgment*, “is a precondition that lies at the heart of the freedom to teach.”³⁰

Translated into practice, this idea of academic judgment boils down to discretion. As Sir Walter Moberly, a philosophy professor, put the point in 1949, teachers need “plenty of elbow-room” when it comes to deciding “what they are to teach, and how.”³¹ Of course, discretion has its discontents. If I let you choose what to do, I may not like the choices you make. That is the nature of discretionary judgment, a point sociology professor William Pendleton captured well when discussing the risks—and the need to tolerate them—that academic freedom entails. His cautionary and illuminating words, published 30 years ago, offer a helpful coda to our discussion:

Academic freedom does not ensure perfect or even the best possible education in every class. But it is the best means of ensuring that, over the course of a student’s career, he or she receives an education that is broad, flexible, nondoctrinaire, and subject to the self-correction inherent in exposing students to many teachers, all free to pursue the pedagogy and content of their classes as they judge best.

Accepting academic freedom requires accepting that some will not teach ... as others think they should....

This system has served higher education well. Efforts to depart from it for religious, political, or social regulatory purposes have been, for the most part, detrimental to excellence; with the passage of time, such efforts have come to be seen as ludicrous by subsequent generations of scholars....

Yet the temptation remains to make things “better” by imposing controls on the classroom.... Should not universities protect students from improper views, outdated theories, and distorted data? If faculty remain free to teach as they wish, will they not release evils of the worst sort on the impressionable young? These questions are raised repeatedly, as they should be. But the too-frequent answers—add new administrative powers, allow intrusion into the classroom, provide for regulation of faculty by persons little qualified for the task—are supplied because they are easy and they appeal to those who little understand education.³²

Back to Harvard

Let me return to where I started. This essay stems in part from my worry over the language in Harvard’s new nondiscrimination policy. But more concretely than that, it stems from concern over how I have seen my institution react when charges of political discrimination in the classroom have arisen.

In particular, I have in mind the case of my colleague and collaborator, Marshall Ganz, whom our university newsletter recently profiled as “the Rabbi of Organizing.”³³

Think of a classroom as a sandbox. The teacher has the right to keep the pedagogical discourse inside the box.

As our colleague, Theda Skocpol, explains in that profile, Ganz “has helped to train many of the organizers who have worked for some of the major political campaigns” and social movements of our time, teaching “people how to relate to others, how to build organizations,” and “how to harness moral passion for collective purpose.”³⁴ Ganz does this work through a set of classes offered as part of the Practicing Democracy Project that he directs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he has been on the faculty for decades. His core class on organizing, which regularly enrolls over 100 students from countries around the world, is intensely experiential. The “students work together to form values-based leadership teams, work with a community on behalf of a shared purpose, and strategize how this community can turn its resources into power it needs to achieve goals, aligned with their shared purpose.”³⁵ The ultimate goal is to teach the students how to “practice democracy”³⁶ by organizing others to fulfill “the democratic promise of equity,”³⁷ in which communities come together to help build societies where people have equal rights and opportunities to flourish.

It was against the backdrop of this course that Ganz was charged in the spring of 2023 with discriminating against three of his students. Here is how he describes what took place:

Last April, while classes were still in session, I was suddenly called to an urgent meeting with Dean Doug Elmendorf at the Harvard Kennedy School....

That semester, 127 students from 30 countries had enrolled in my spring “People, Power and Change” class.... One of the teams consisted of three Israeli professionals at midpoints in their careers....

These students stated that their purpose was to organize Israelis “building on a shared ethos of Israel as a liberal-Jewish democracy.” I asked them to consider whether the concept of a “Jewish democracy” is a contradiction in terms and whether this framing of their purpose would be helpful or harmful to the project’s goal of bringing people into an organizing movement. A Jewish state is one thing. A democratic state is another. But a state that limits full citizenship to a

specific ethno-religious group, essentially a racial test, denies the excluded from that ethno-religious group the equality of voice that gives democracy its legitimacy....

The students would be wiser, I argued, to reframe their team's statement of purpose. They rejected my suggestion, keeping their statement as originally drafted. The students were not punished or disciplined in any way for that choice, nor suffered any academic consequences, and the class moved on....

After the course ended, the three students ... [filed] a formal claim with the Harvard General Counsel, [in which] their lawyers argued that by having a conversation with them about their work in the class, where I pushed back on their definition of the state of Israel, was to discriminate against them.... The dean acted as grand jury, prosecutor, investigator, and judge. The result was a finding (which I emphatically reject) that I had discriminated against these three Israeli students.³⁸



Without shared premises, classroom discussions and the understanding they seek to bring about would not be possible.

The school's formal finding was that Ganz "sought to silence the speech of Jewish Israeli students about a topic that he viewed as illegitimate" and in so doing engaged in teaching practices "inconsistent with the free speech principles set forth" in university policies.³⁹

As Tracey Meares and Benjamin Justice (professors of law and education, respectively) write, "culture wars over the overt content" of educational curricula and classroom instruction "have been an endemic feature" of American education for centuries.⁴⁰ This dynamic has become only more apparent and more troubling in recent years, as captured by a recent joint statement from the AAUP and PEN America condemning "a spate of legislative pro-

posals being introduced across the country that target academic lessons, presentations, and discussions of racism and related issues in American history in schools, colleges and universities."⁴¹

That was all before October 7, 2023. Since then, as the conflict in Gaza has unfolded, debates over Israel and Palestine have roiled higher education, leading to the discipline and arrest of students, the discipline and arrest of faculty members, and the termination of multiple university presidents, including my own. There are few topics more fraught or divisive at this moment in American public life. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that academic freedom controversies related to this conflict would erupt.

And yet, the principles of academic freedom described throughout this essay should help us more clearly assess the charges leveled at Ganz. As Ganz has said, "the pedagogical mission" of his class "was to enable every student to learn to organize."⁴² To Ganz, organizing is the practice of democracy. "Democracy," he says, "is not something you have, but something you do."⁴³ The mission of this class, plain and simple, was to teach students *how* to do it. It was not to debate which versions or forms of democracy one ought to pursue. Rather, in this class, the definition of democracy was a starting premise laid out in the first line of the syllabus, which described organizing as a practice aimed at "fulfilling the democratic promise of equity."⁴⁴

Measured against that starting premise, the students' project, in Ganz's view, did not seek to practice democracy. It sought, he believed, to contest the meaning of democracy from which the course's pedagogical mission proceeded—to contest, as he would later write, "the equality of voice that gives democracy its legitimacy."⁴⁵ In other words, Ganz believed the students' project was venturing outside the sandbox. And so, he encouraged them to reconsider, to contemplate the definition of democracy that the class was designed to help them practice.

To be clear, the questions and the project Ganz's students wished to explore may well have intrinsic merit. In a different class asking what democracy or equality mean, Ganz may well have viewed the questions about religious and national identity implicated by the students' project as within the box. But that was not the class Ganz set out to teach, nor was it the class the students signed up to take.

Ganz's students unquestionably had the freedom to learn what he *was* trying to teach. And he just as clearly had the freedom to teach it. We who are Ganz's colleagues and fellow educators have the right to question his pedagogical choices—for that too is academic freedom. But if the freedom to teach is to have any real meaning, Ganz must be afforded the elbow room to decide how best to question, coach, direct, and assess the students in his class. Applying these principles, it seems to me straightforward that Ganz's actions were consistent with his students' freedom to learn. And that in finding him guilty of discrimination, Harvard did not respect Ganz's freedom to teach.

That, I fear, was a dreadful mistake. If the essential, fragile principle of academic freedom and the institutions of higher learning it animates are to survive these challenging times, it is a mistake we as educators must better learn to identify, to understand, to grapple with, and ultimately to avoid. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/crespo.

Defending Academic Freedom

How Bipartisan Coalitions Can Strengthen Our Educational System



By Patricia Okker

No one reading *American Educator* would likely question the assertion that 2023 and 2024 have been difficult for education in the United States. K-12 teachers across the country are facing ongoing consequences from the pandemic, devastating teacher shortages, low student attendance, and divisive school boards. In higher education, colleagues are also facing significant challenges: enrollment pressures, declining public confidence in the value of a college degree, and campus turmoil related to national and global events.

As if these weren't enough, educators at all levels are also grappling with growing legislative efforts to restrict what teachers can say and do in the classroom. Often focused on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these legislative efforts initially targeted the supposed threat of critical race theory but have more recently expanded to include a broad range of issues, including classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity. In some cases, entire disciplines—African American history, gender studies, sociology—have been restricted. PEN America, which has been tracking educational “gag orders” since 2021, estimates that 1.3 million public school teachers and 100,000 higher education faculty have been directly affected. PEN

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America's estimate of the effect on students is far higher: “The students who have been directly affected—through canceled classes, censored teachers, and decimated school library collections—likely number in the millions.”¹ As Eduardo J. Padrón, former president of Miami Dade College and a 2016 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, has explained, “Make no mistake: this is censorship at work.”²

I have had a front-row seat to the rapid escalation of these threats to US education. Florida, where I have lived for almost three years, is an instructive case study of how quickly this censorship movement has developed. In October 2020—less than four years ago—the Board of Governors (which oversees all 12 universities in the State University System) issued a bold white paper declaring its “steadfast commitment to prioritize and support diversity, racial and gender equity, and inclusion in the State University System.” The Board of Governors charged each university with ensuring that its “strategy plan, as well as its mission statement, should prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide clear direction *for the total integration of D.E.I. initiatives throughout the institution.*”³ (Emphasis added.)

This was the political climate in which I applied to be president of New College of Florida, a small public liberal arts college that is part of the State University System. Known for its innovative and rigorous curriculum, New College is designated by the Florida legislature as the state's residential honors college. I joined the institution in July 2021, thrilled to be chosen as New College's sixth president. One of the many things that attracted me to the institu-

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tion was the state's commitment to DEI, and I was especially excited that DEI in Florida did not appear to be a partisan issue. While there were differences of opinion about its impact and methods, DEI was embraced by state educational leaders, including the Board of Governors, whose members were closely aligned with the state's Republican administration.

The fact that the Board of Governors was both conservative *and* committed to DEI made sense to me at the time. Florida's population, after all, was becoming increasingly diverse, with the state's Latino population increasing by almost 35 percent between 2010 and 2020, in contrast to the state's overall population growth of less than 15 percent.⁴

In 2024, educators in Florida—in higher education and K–12—face an entirely altered landscape. The state legislature and the Board of Governors have joined the growing chorus of state leaders attacking DEI, including initiatives that the Board of Governors had itself *required*. The new mantra, as Governor Ron DeSantis has so frequently proclaimed, is that Florida is where “woke goes to die.” Florida now leads the nation in book bans⁵—with many of the books targeted for discussions of race, sexual orientation, or gender identity—and the state has passed some of the nation's most restrictive anti-DEI legislation, including HB 1557 (a.k.a. the “Don't Say Gay” law) and SB 266 (eliminating or severely restricting DEI initiatives at state universities). In addition to affecting extracurricular programming available to students, these laws are already impacting what is taught in our classrooms.

Sadly, many other states are following Florida's lead. As PEN America's 2023 report makes clear, 22 states had passed 40 educational gag orders into law or policy as of November 1, 2023—with 6 more gag orders either passed or pending as of March 2024. The effect on higher education and K–12 classrooms has been profound, with many teachers reporting self-censorship out of fear of losing their jobs.⁶

And at New College of Florida, this anti-DEI movement has expanded to include central questions of academic freedom, governance, and institutional autonomy. Nineteen months after I became president, seven new trustees were appointed with a mandate to turn this public honors college into a “Hillsdale of

the South.” (Hillsdale College is a conservative, private Christian college in Michigan.) Within days of these appointments, one of the new trustees, Christopher Rufo, proclaimed on X, “We are organizing a ‘hostile takeover.’”⁷

Although the future of New College is far from certain, the intents of the “takeover” are not hard to decipher. Some of the ideas initially proposed by the new trustees included eliminating tenure, canceling the contracts of all faculty and staff, and abolishing DEI and gender studies. Even before the new board had met, the press was reporting that a close ally of DeSantis had been selected as the new president. That rumor proved true at their first meeting on January 31, 2023, when the newly constituted Board of Trustees fired me and began to implement its plan to transform the institution.

The developments at New College continue to draw national attention. Several national organizations have issued statements about the irregularities in governance and the threats to academic freedom, including the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). A significant portion of the AAUP's 2023 report on “Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida's Public Higher Education System” was devoted to events at New College. AAUP's position was formalized in February 2024, when it officially sanctioned New College, concluding that it “stands as one of the most egregious and extensive violations of AAUP principles and standards at a single institution in recent memory.”⁸

As much as New College represents an important test case, the issues here are much larger. I believe it is time for educators across the nation to reimagine how we protect academic freedom in the United States. Although this work will not be easy, I believe we can build a broad bipartisan coalition in support of academic freedom in the United States. Below, I outline five possible strategies of how to begin.

1. We must articulate a positive defense of academic freedom, grounded in the benefits to our students.

One of the most difficult aspects of defending academic freedom is that there is no shared understanding of what it is. As Brian Rosenberg (president emeritus of Macalester College) has recently written, academic freedom is often confused with freedom of speech and has been used to defend all kinds of activity: classroom discussion, social media posts, and controversial speakers, to name a few.⁹

The popular shorthand descriptions of academic freedom—“I can teach/research what I want”—moreover, do nothing to establish a clear foundation of what it is or why it is essential to our educational system. This focus, almost exclusively on faculty rights, has sadly weakened public confidence in our educational system.

As the AAUP's “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure” makes clear, faculty rights are an essential component of academic freedom, which this document defines as including “full freedom in research and in the publication of the results” and “freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject.”¹⁰

But the 1940 statement does not stop there. It clearly articulates that the reason for academic freedom is the “search for truth.” And that search for truth requires teacher responsibilities in addition to rights. Teachers are charged with taking care “not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.” And both in and out of the classroom,

I believe it is time for educators across the nation to reimagine how we protect academic freedom in the United States.

faculty “should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.” Notably, the 1940 statement also specifically addresses “the rights of the teacher in teaching” and “of the student to freedom in learning.”¹¹

We would do well to amplify this essential aspect of academic freedom: that academic freedom exists so that students and teachers alike may search for truth. Our goal is not, of course, to “indoctrinate” our students—to use a term all too popular these days—but to provide them a model of what a search for truth might look like: an emphasis on accuracy, on respect for different opinions, on curiosity.

One of the benefits of articulating a student-centered understanding of academic freedom is that it welcomes K-12 colleagues into the discussion. The AAUP document is, of course, a statement by an organization of university professors, and we must attend to the important differences between K-12 and higher education. But teachers and staff in K-12 and higher education are struggling with many of the same issues: how to create an academically rigorous environment when some want to limit what students can read and study, how to help students engage in respectful debate, and how to help students develop the confidence to ask and answer difficult questions. These are the reasons we need academic freedom.

2. We must develop new alliances among educators.

Our commonalities notwithstanding, education is notoriously siloed. Collaboration across K-12 schools and districts is often difficult, if not impossible. Likewise, in higher education, many of our strongest national organizations focus on specific kinds of institutions (research universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, etc.), and faculty members have long identified primarily with their disciplines. Faculty members teaching political science at a regional public college in the Midwest, for example, are far more likely to see themselves as allies of political science faculty members at an East Coast liberal arts college than they are to identify with their local high school social studies teachers or even the community college composition teacher who works five miles away.

And the problem isn’t confined to how faculty organize themselves. On many college campuses, student, faculty, and staff leaders operate independently of each other, often unaware of the strategic priorities of their counterparts on campus. Rather than build a broad, powerful alliance of faculty, staff, and students, these groups have focused primarily on their relationships with campus administration and vice versa.

These organizational structures have left education politically vulnerable. As a former college president and a long-time faculty member, I recognize and celebrate the unique governance role that the collective faculty have on college campuses. But I also recognize the value in developing coalitions that expand beyond faculty. Although faculty voices are powerful, combining the voices of faculty, students, and staff is even more so and has greater potential for leveraging actual political power when it is needed most.

Our organizational structures also inhibit statewide coalitions. Although the recent restrictions on higher education are a national phenomenon, all of the actual political work has been enacted at the state level. But we in education have almost no structures to bolster statewide partnerships among educators.

The lack of collaboration is especially concerning across K-12 and higher education. Virtually every college campus has a K-12 school district in the vicinity, yet with the exception of dual enrollment, we have limited opportunities for K-12 and higher education collaboration.



Our inability to create thriving coalitions among educators at all levels limits our ability to advocate for our students’ right to read and learn in a climate of intellectual independence. There are, no doubt, important differences between higher education and K-12, but we are increasingly facing more similarities than differences. To cite one promising area of collaboration, I wonder how a coalition of K-12 and higher education teachers might address the decline of public confidence in education. According to Gallup polls, public confidence in higher education dropped to just 36 percent in 2023, down from 57 percent in 2015 and 48 percent in 2018.¹² Numbers for public K-12 schools show similar declines.¹³ Perhaps a fresh look at the value of the US educational system, with input from educators from K-12 and beyond, might begin to reverse this troubling decline.

3. We must establish communication training as a requirement for leaders on campus, not just campus administration.

Having followed dozens of campus crises, and been involved with two that gained national attention (one at the University of Missouri,¹⁴ the other at New College), it seems to me that few institutions are well prepared to communicate with the campus or broader community during a crisis. And when crises develop, faculty and staff leaders are often discouraged from communicating key messages to the public. My comments here are not intended to question the valuable work that central communication experts provide. But as important as their work is, in most cases we also need to hear from faculty and staff leaders with direct knowledge of the issues involved, especially when those issues include academic freedom. With ongoing training and practice, educators



can become key communicators as we seek to raise awareness of and support for the foundational principles of US education.

4. We must recommit ourselves to meaningful community engagement.

One of the most interesting results regarding Americans' view of education is the difference in perspectives about our

K-12 system between the public and parents of K-12 students. When US adults were asked how satisfied they were with K-12 education, only 36 percent indicated satisfaction. When parents were asked the same question about their oldest child's education, however, 76 percent were satisfied.¹⁵

Presumably, the more one knows about K-12 education (or perhaps more precisely, the more one knows *actual K-12 teachers*), the more positively one views K-12. People who know teachers know that they are not trying to indoctrinate students, as so many of our detractors try to suggest; rather, teachers are focused on making sure students have a well-rounded education so that they are prepared to navigate the world.

I am not advocating for a system in which higher education faculty communicate directly with parents. Our students are adults, and we have reasonable policies for treating them as such. But could we collectively do more to ensure that more members of our local communities know more about us and know what we are teaching and why?

Academic freedom exists so that teachers and students alike may search for truth.

Most higher education faculty members are not trained in such public engagement, and our usual practices for presenting our work in academic conferences are extremely inappropriate models for community engagement. But people across this nation *are* interested in what we teach. People from all political persuasions read books, spend time in nature, listen to music, try to improve their health, and puzzle over our political system. We have experts on all of these and more. Surely it is in our collective self-interest for higher education faculty to spend some portion of our time sharing our passion for our fields with the public. Doing so will require investments of time and resources, and we may well have to reconsider faculty workloads and even promotion and tenure standards. But we cannot let the obstacles keep us from this work. How else will we ever reverse the trends regarding the

public's view of education? No one is better situated to advocate for academic freedom than the people who spend day after day directly with students.

5. The new education coalition must be bipartisan.

It is difficult to imagine finding common ground since so many recent education bills are deeply partisan. But there is increasingly solid evidence of the potential for bipartisan support for academic freedom. Book bans are notoriously unpopular with the public, regardless of political affiliation.¹⁶ And just last year, it was Republican leaders who voiced the most persuasive objections to eliminating gender studies at the University of Wyoming, on the basis that universities—not state governments—are best able to decide what should be taught on college campuses.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, recent polling suggests that 68 percent of Americans have similar beliefs.¹⁸

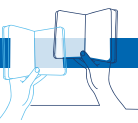
I even see hope for bipartisan support for academic freedom among our students themselves. As much as higher education is sometimes portrayed as an oasis of radical liberals (or perhaps we are imagined as the desert), my own experience is that the political leanings of college students are far more nuanced. While it is true that nationally, college students are more likely than the general public to identify themselves as liberals, most college campuses, especially large public ones, have vibrant student organizations for students from a range of political views.¹⁹

Even at New College of Florida, which I believe has wrongly been portrayed as having an extremely left-leaning student body, I found the reality on campus to be quite different. One of my fondest memories of New College was my almost weekly Wednesday lunch in the cafeteria. I would randomly pick a table, ask to sit down, and talk about whatever the students wanted to talk about. In all those wonderful conversations, I cannot recall a single one about politics. Yes, there were some students who were activists on key social issues. Every campus has such students, and I am proud of their commitment to their causes. But those students, from my perspective, were not the norm at New College. In fact, the three things students most wanted to talk about during our informal lunches were how much they loved their classes and professors, how much they loved their clubs, and how much they loved their pets. I know this sounds like a fantasy, but I can assure you that anyone who knows New College students knows that, almost without exception, they love what they study. And they found their way to that school not for the fine dining or a culture of political activism but rather to be part of an intellectual community that celebrates the joy in intellectual pursuits.

Historically, US classrooms have long been places in which students can learn with and from people with whom they do not agree politically. Surely, this is one of the greatest achievements of the US educational system—and something that is critical to the health of our democracy.

My hope is that thoughtful action now by educators in all sectors can strengthen and protect academic freedom and, in so doing, make our educational system once again a source of pride for all Americans, regardless of political affiliation. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2024/okker.



THE EDUCATION WARS

*In recent years, there's been an alarming rise in book banning, curriculum censorship, and disinformation about what's being taught in our public schools. What's going on? In *The Education Wars*, journalist Jennifer C. Berkshire and professor Jack Schneider explore the extremist forces trying to divide families and educators. Here, we offer a brief excerpt of this insightful book.*

—EDITORS

For as long as there have been public schools, there have been battles over what they should look like. As states enacted laws requiring young people to attend school in the 19th century, some parents revolted, declaring that they didn't coparent with the government. Twice during the 20th century, panics over Communist infiltration led to reckless campaigns against educators and battles over the curriculum. And nearly as soon as the second Red Scare abated, we began to fight over sex education, the expansion of LGBTQ rights in schools, and "secular humanism." Again and again, we've faced off over what gets taught, what schools are for, and who gets to decide.

And yet, this time it really is different. In state after state, culture war is being used as a pretense to privatize schools.

Public education that is taxpayer supported, democratically controlled, and universally accessible is central to the American promise of equal opportunity. And as beleaguered as our schools may be—plagued by segregation, underfunding, and teacher shortages—we are a far more equal country than we would be without them. Today's attacks on schools, teachers, and students, then, more than just represent another culture war. They are part of a broader effort to undermine the American commitment to educating every child, no matter their circumstances. They are part of an attack on democracy itself.

The concern that public schools and K-12 teachers are radicalizing youngsters has been persistent across the decades. But as young voters have broken decisively in favor of Democrats in recent elections, the rhetoric about indoctrination has reached a newly fevered pitch. The outsized role played by young voters in the 2022 mid-term elections, essentially blocking GOP gains, has resulted in calls to raise the voting age and has intensified scrutiny on schools and what they teach.

On a broad range of issues, young people are far more progressive than their elders and are rapidly becoming more politically engaged. Limiting what they learn in school is one way to try to shape the thinking of future generations in a more conservative direction. Strengthening the rights of certain parents over their children is another. New policies giving parents more say regarding what their kids can read, or what pronouns

they can use at school, are also ways of tapping the brakes on generational change.

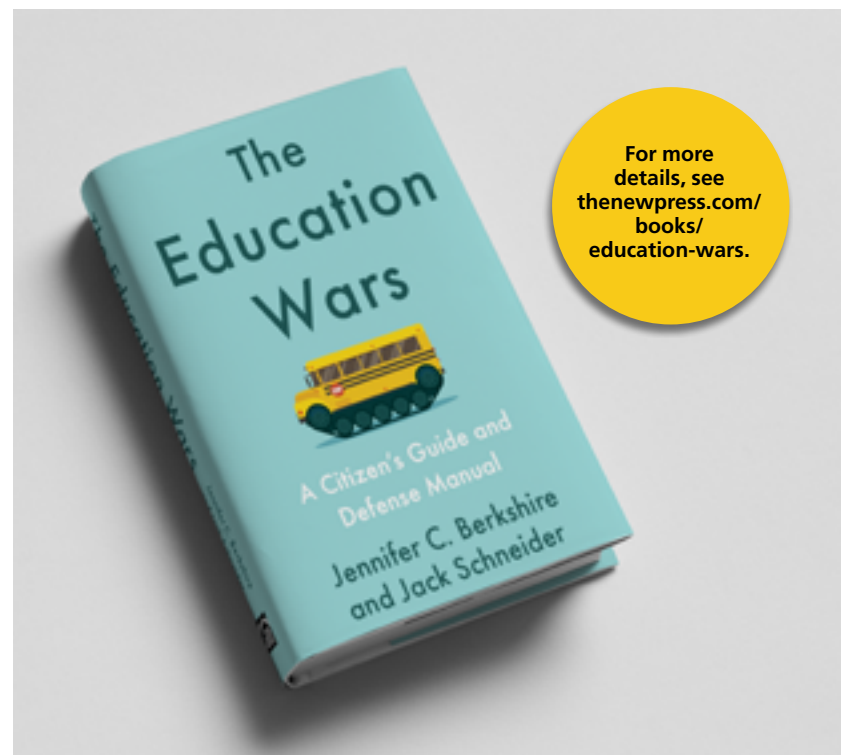
Our fights over parental rights also reflect another tension over the extent to which young people should have a voice and a say when it comes to policies that affect them. Young people are increasingly demanding more voice when it comes to such issues as gun violence, climate change, and the rights of LGBTQ youth. Today's parental rights movement represents a backlash to that youth-driven movement.

This book is first and foremost about informing ordinary Americans—those who, whatever their political affiliation, care about public education. If public education is going to have a future in this country, they need to understand what's happening in this challenging moment. But if this book is intended to be a guide to the "why" of the education wars, it's also a manual for surviving them.

Nobody can or will "win" the educational culture wars, because as a populace, we are simply too diverse and divided for that. If we are to preserve our schools, it must be clear that public education is for all of us. We must win the peace.

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Today's attacks on schools, teachers, and students are part of an attack on democracy itself.





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