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Education for a Better Future

PROTECTING OUR KIDS AND COMMUNITIES

Protect Our Kids

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

AS PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP tries to abolish the US Department of Education (ED) by executive order and Elon Musk takes a chainsaw to the federal government and the services and security it provides Americans, the AFT is fighting to protect our kids against the gutting of federal funds our kids now receive. We are fighting for our students to have more, not less. On March 4, as part of our Protect Our Kids campaign, we joined with students, families, educators, and advocates across the country, leading over 2,000 local actions to show that we won't stand by as vital education funds are slashed to hand a $4.5 trillion tax cut to billionaires.

Actions included clap-ins and walk-ins, teach-ins and rallies, parent meetings, webinars, and more. From coast to coast, communities focused on what our kids, public schools, and universities need. Like in Sacramento, where college and K–12 affiliates of the CFT marched with students and advocates. Educators at scores of schools in Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami held walk-ins and handed out leaflets. Corpus Christi AFT held a press conference and rally in front of district headquarters to safeguard public education from severe budget cuts, and Texas AFT's virtual town hall featured former ED staff explaining what dismantling ED would mean for students, from pre-K to postdoc. Members of the Detroit Federation of Teachers clapped in their students, distributed fliers, and participated in a citywide virtual teach-in. After actions across Massachusetts, like the walk-ins at 27 schools hosted by the Lynn Teachers Union, AFT Massachusetts and several partners hosted a virtual town hall to ensure families know how gutting federal education funding would harm students—and to build a path forward together.

And in my home state of New York, I joined hundreds of educators, families, and advocates—led by New York State United Teachers President Melinda Person—at a rally in front of the state capitol in Albany in the morning. In the afternoon, I marched with the New Haven Federation of Teachers, several labor and community partners, and hundreds of advocates.

What's at stake? This isn't about ED's bureaucracy—it's about how ED funding streams create opportunities for needy kids. ED ensures 7.5 million students with disabilities receive special education services. It funds smaller classes, additional instruction in reading and math, mental health programs, and preschool, afterschool, and summer programs for 26 million kids living in poverty. It helps 12 million students in career and technical education master the skills and knowledge needed in today's economy. It protects students from discrimination based on race, sex, disability, religion, and national origin. It puts higher education in reach for 10 million students from working-class families. It does this and much more—with funds appropriated and approved by Congress on a bipartisan basis.

Musk has already cut $900 million in grants focused on improving teaching and student outcomes. The We the People program that I used to teach had an $11 million multiyear grant stopped, cutting professional development for the Civics That Empowers All Students program. At the same time, Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency has been trying to steal the Social Security numbers and bank account information of millions of Americans who rely on ED for financial aid. The AFT is the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit to stop Musk—and we already won a restraining order that temporarily prevented Musk's team from accessing personally identifiable information while we prepared for additional hearings.

Trump's directive to "return decision-making to the states" doesn't pass the smell test. States and school districts have always been in charge. Local school boards typically set property tax rates, and state legislatures and school officials establish teaching and learning standards, adopt curricula, distribute dollars, and determine what it takes to graduate. The federal role is to level up opportunity, making the promise of public education real for every child. Gutting federal support for education will break that promise; either students will lose services or states and communities will have to raise taxes to maintain those services.

AFT

We are fighting for our students to have more, not less.

Some lawmakers want to convert federal funding that is currently targeted for needy students into no-strings-attached block grants. Funding that provides speech and occupational therapy for students with disabilities, for example, should not be diverted to pools of money that states can use for unrelated purposes like vouchers (which have a disastrous track record on student achievement) or tax cuts.

This attack on our kids' futures is wrong. It's a perfect storm of chaos, confusion, corruption, and cronyism. But we're fighting back shoulder-to-shoulder with parents and other community members. In the courts, and the court of public opinion, we will continue to press Congress to protect our kids and strengthen—not destroy—public education. □

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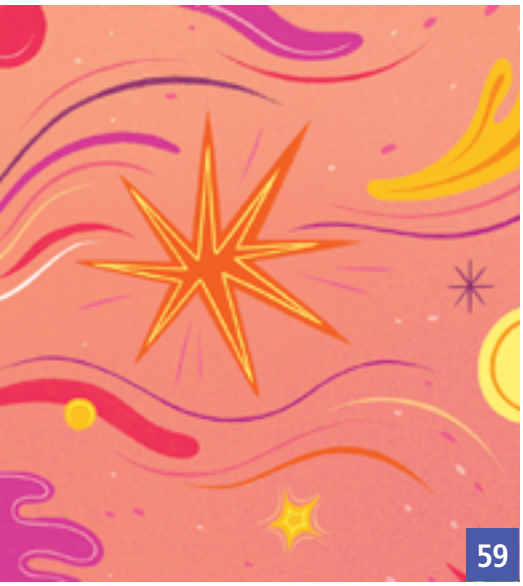

Education
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OUR MISSION

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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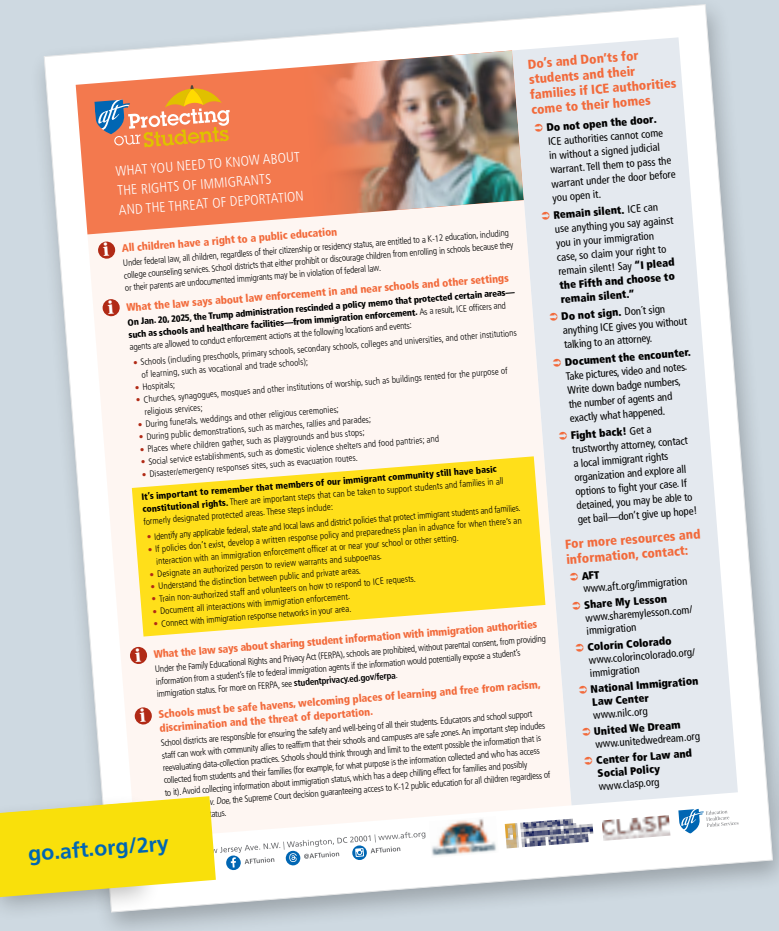
Protecting Our Immigrant and Refugee Students

As part of a plan for mass deportations, one of the Trump administration's first moves in January was to allow Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids at schools (and hospitals, churches, and other sensitive locations). In response, AFT President Randi Weingarten called out the "un-American" policy and asked President Trump to reconsider (see go.aft.org/4h2), noting that: "Schools and hospitals are supposed to be safe and welcoming places. A policy that allows law enforcement to destroy that environment will cause irreparable harm, indelibly scarring not only immigrant families, but all families."

Weingarten also ensured that AFT members have resources to help protect the children and families we serve. The enhanced Immigration (go.aft.org/dms) and Standing United (go.aft.org/jn3) sections of the AFT's website provide critical information and toolkits. The Immigration page has many resources in Spanish, with some in Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, and Tagalog. Here, we show some highlights. Share these resources with colleagues and throughout your communities so that our immigrant and refugee students and families understand their rights and know where to turn for help. We all deserve a chance to build a better life for ourselves and our families.



go.aft.org/2ry

go.aft.org/jk0

Did you know?

If a school district has adopted a policy to protect immigrant and refugee students, then a judicial warrant is needed for an ICE agent to enter a school. If your district has not adopted such a policy, then it is harder to prevent ICE agents from entering. To see a model policy, go to go.aft.org/yfl.

Have you witnessed or experienced an immigration enforcement action in your community?

The AFT is working with community partners on a rapid response to help our immigrant communities. Please go to go.aft.org/hwg and report enforcement actions in your school or community to help us mobilize resources and provide support to those impacted. All reports are confidential.

PAUL BECKER / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

go.aft.org/3y5

Protecting our Students

1. **Inform students and their families** of their rights.
2. **Stress the importance** of taking proactive steps to ensure the safety and well-being of children and entire communities.
3. **Distribute "know your rights" materials** to students and communities about what to do if a raid occurs or an individual is detained.
4. **Find out** if there is a local immigration raid rapid response team in your community. These teams usually consist of attorneys, media personnel and community leaders who may be able to provide support.
5. **Partner with a pro bono attorney**, legal aid organization or immigrant rights organization to schedule a "know your rights" workshop on campus to inform students and families about their rights.
6. **Provide a safe place** for students to wait if a parent or sibling has been detained.
7. **Provide counseling** for students who have had a family member detained by ICE.
8. **Maintain a list of resources**, such as the names of social workers, pro bono attorneys and local immigration advocates and organizations, that can be shared with your students and their families.
9. **Identify someone at your school** who can serve as the immigration resource advocate in your building or on your campus.
10. **Work with parents** to develop a family immigration raid emergency plan.
11. **Make your school** an ICE-free safe zone by pushing for policies that protect student privacy and records.
12. **Work with your school board** to pass a resolution affirming schools as safe havens and welcoming places of learning for all students, distancing the schools from enforcement actions that separate families.
13. **Issue statements** condemning raids and calling for the immediate release of students.
14. **Get involved with local civil, human and immigrant rights groups** and create a list of resources to help undocumented students access private scholarships, fellowships and job opportunities.
15. **Pledge to support** and work with undocumented students and families.

Immigrant and Refugee Children

15 Things

educators, school support staff and communities can do to help protect undocumented students and their families

For additional tools and model resolutions to create safe, welcoming environments for all students, visit **www.aft.org/immigration/ICEraid**.

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Standing United to Protect the Rights of Immigrant Students and Their Families

Do you know your *Plyler* rights?

The law is clear. All students, regardless of immigration status, have the right to a K-12 public education. Denying children residing in the United States a public education based on their immigration status, or the perceived status of their parents or legal guardians, is illegal.

Public schools are prohibited from doing anything to deny, deter or chill access to that constitutional right, including by reporting, or threatening to report, children to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These principles have been established by the Supreme Court in *Plyler v. Doe* and other federal laws and cannot be changed by the secretary of education, the attorney general, states, local law enforcement, school districts, a single school or any individual.

It is imperative that all school district officials and their employees understand that if they report students to ICE or otherwise discriminate against them on the basis of national origin, they could face liability for violating the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the constitutional rights of their students.

Schools must be safe havens and welcoming places of learning, free from discrimination, racism, bullying and the threat of deportation.

The American Federation of Teachers and its partners stand ready to work with school district employees to ensure that they understand and are in compliance with the applicable laws. If you believe that a sch... district or employee is violating a student's *Plyler* rights, contact the AFT's human rights depart... hts@aft.org or call the AFT legal Department at 202-393-7472.

For additional resources to ...

Protecting Our Students *and Their* Families

What are sanctuary and safe zone policies?

There's no universal definition for sanctuary and safe zone policies; however, these policies limit local and state law enforcement officers from implementing federal immigration laws. They bar local law enforcement from asking for proof of citizenship and arresting immigrants who lack proof of citizenship, and they allow local law enforcement to disregard requests from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to indefinitely hold immigrants beyond their detention date unless they are suspected of committing other criminal offenses. Sanctuary and safe zone policies are not meant to offer safe harbor to criminals.

Schools, campuses, cities, municipalities and states have adopted a wide range of sanctuary and community trust policies to build trust between communities and local law enforcement. Sanctuary policies provide safe places of learning and communities to live free from discrimination, hate and the threat of deportation. It's important to note that sanctuary policies cannot prevent federal enforcement actions from taking place, but they can limit the degree in which immigrants are unfairly targeted and criminalized.

What's the role of educators and school support staff in protecting and supporting immigrant students?

Educators, school support staff, community-based organizations and other service providers play a key role in defending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and protecting undocumented students, refugees and their families from the threat of deportation. It's not only a moral obligation for educators and other school employees—it's the law. All children, regardless of immigration status, have a right to a K-12 education. Denying children residing in the United States an education based on their immigration status, or the immigration status of their parents or legal guardians, is illegal. These principles were established by federal laws and the historic U.S. Supreme Court case Plyler v. Doe.

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Fighting for a Better Future

Labor and Education Policy

On December 4, 2024, Randi Weingarten gave the keynote address for the 25th Annual David N. Dinkins Leadership and Public Policy Forum at Columbia University's Institute of Global Politics. Dinkins, the first African American mayor of New York City, was known for celebrating his city's diversity and for supporting families through initiatives such as keeping schools open in the evenings. Serving as mayor from 1990 to 1993, when crime was high across the country, Dinkins had to contend with widespread fear. But his initiatives were effective and crime fell. Most importantly, he restored hope and gave New Yorkers a path forward. With this keynote, Weingarten is following in his footsteps, showing how we can build a better life for all.

APRIL RENAE / COLUMBIA SIPA

Along with reading Weingarten's remarks, watch the full forum by going to go.aft.org/sty.

–EDITORS

By Randi Weingarten

I want to start by talking about two fellow New Yorkers, first the man for whom this forum is named, Mayor David Dinkins. Mayor Dinkins was elected with a swell of hope amid a sea of fear. Dire challenges—the crack epidemic, homelessness, fractured city services—were all made worse by a deep fiscal crisis. Mayor Dinkins addressed them with humility and humanity. His policies centered on helping children, families, and communities—from afterschool programs to community policing.

I was the counsel to the United Federation of Teachers at the time, and had started teaching in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in September 1991, just weeks after the Crown Heights riot—the incident that was the turning point in his mayoralty.

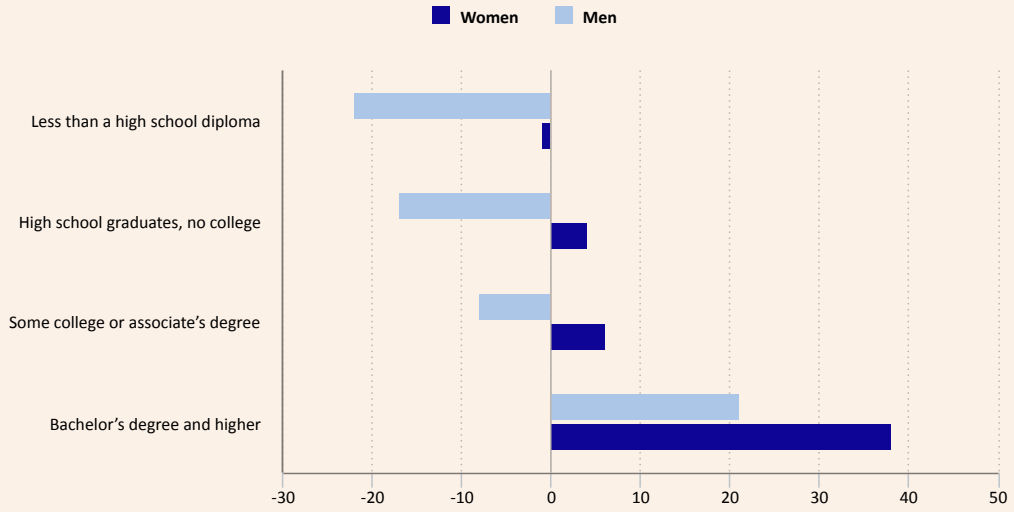
David Dinkins loved the city he called the "gorgeous mosaic."[1] He believed New York could prosper if we respected our diversity, if we found common ground and pursued mutual goals—each of us important and distinct pieces of the gorgeous mosaic.

I am honored to deliver a lecture named for him. Etched in me from that turbulent time is an understanding that, in public policy and politics, we are always in a race between hope and fear, aspiration and anger.

We are in another turbulent time. My remarks are an attempt to chart a path forward—a path that leans, as Mayor Dinkins did, on hope, not fear, recognizing full well that fear, anger, and a sense of powerlessness in many ways fueled the results of the 2024 election.

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.*

Percentage change in inflation-adjusted median usual weekly earnings of women and men, by educational attainment, 1979–2019



SOURCE: US BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, "HIGHLIGHTS OF WOMEN'S EARNINGS IN 2019," DECEMBER 2020, BLS.GOV/OPUB/REPORTS/WOMENS-EARNINGS/2019.

Which brings me to another New Yorker who looms large today—actually a *former* New Yorker, Donald Trump. It's fair to say that his approach is quite different than Mayor Dinkins's, and that the United States is at a turning point with his reelection.

My primary purpose today is not to analyze the election—this esteemed university has plenty of intellectual firepower to do that. But I think incumbency, inflation, immigration, and identity were at play. (Yes, I love alliteration.)

- When people feel powerless to improve their lives, they often vote to punish the incumbent. Indeed, incumbents are being voted out across the globe.[2]
- Inflation. In our fractured society, Americans had at least one thing in common: the cost of housing, gas, and eggs is too high.[3]
- Then, as the Wizard says to Elphaba in *Wicked*, you must have a scapegoat to blame, which in this election became immigrants.[4]
- Finally, identity. Of course, race and gender played a role. But so did class, big time, as evidenced by Trump's gains among non-college-educated voters of all races.[5]

With all these factors interacting in this election, how do we begin to understand what happened? I start with people's economic well-being. We know that millions of Americans share deep fears and doubts about being able to support themselves, let alone supporting their families. Two charts speak volumes to me.

One (above): the trajectory of wages since 1979 for men with a high school degree. Those workers make 17 percent less than they did 45 years ago.[6] This is downward mobility, and it has real economic consequences, but it also inflicts psychic wounds on a country that has long believed each generation would do better than the last.

Downward mobility inflicts psychic wounds on a country that has long believed each generation would do better than the last.

The second chart (on page 8): for the first time, Democrats won the richest third of Americans while losing low-income and middle-class Americans.[7] *The party of working people lost working people*.

These trends began after the 2008 financial crisis, when people perceived their government was doing more to bail out big banks than help families recover. And while Democrats tempered those trends in 2018 and 2020, it swung back hard this year. Indeed, in 9 of the last 10

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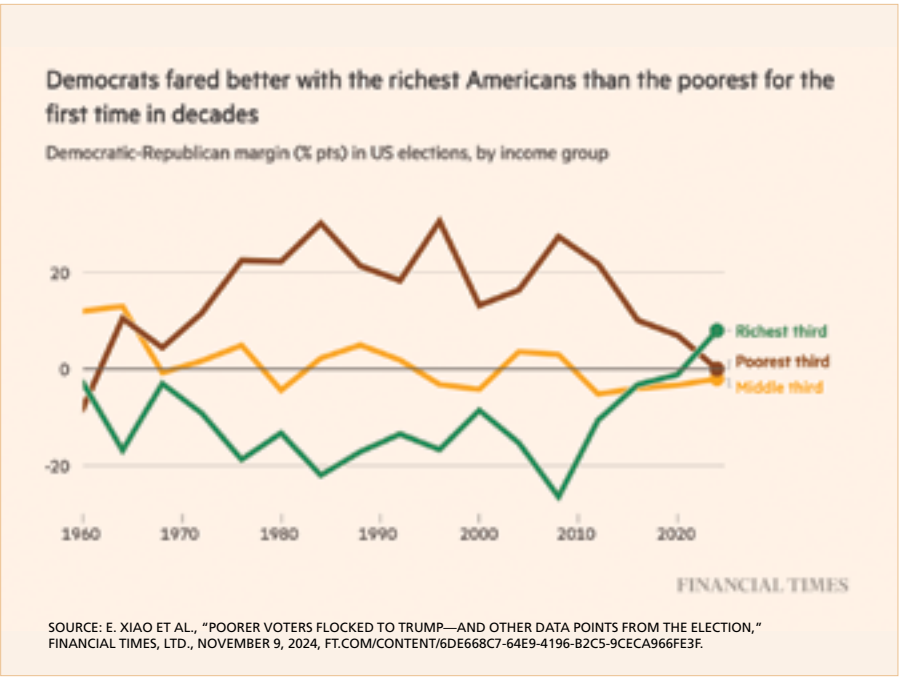


SOURCE: E. XIAO ET AL., "POORER VOTERS FLOCKED TO TRUMP—AND OTHER DATA POINTS FROM THE ELECTION," FINANCIAL TIMES, LTD., NOVEMBER 9, 2024, FT.COM/CONTENT/6DE668C7-64E9-4196-B2C5-9CECA966FE3F.

federal elections, one party or the other has lost control of the House, Senate, or White House.[8]

People suffering economically and feeling powerless to change their condition expressed their dissatisfaction through their vote. But other sources of agency and opportunity exist. Americans don't need a strongman promising to "fix" their lives. Education, good jobs, and the labor movement are ways people are able to empower themselves. My union works to strengthen these engines of opportunity. And in this election, voters overwhelmingly supported both public schools and workers' rights when they were on the ballot, including where Trump won.[9]

In one Nebraska county that Trump won by 95 percent, private school vouchers were defeated 60–40.[10] North Dakota voters rejected a bid to end property taxes that would have decimated public schools and services, even as they voted for Trump by more than two-to-one over Kamala Harris.[11] These were not anomalies.

So yes, I am worried about our democracy, and whether we are headed toward autocracy and fascism. I am worried about our fundamental rights. But, as Cas Mudde, a political scientist who specializes in extremism and democracy, recently posted on Bluesky, "The fight against the far right is secondary to the fight to strengthen liberal democracy."[12]

Pathways to Opportunity

Public education and growing the labor movement are vehicles for creating agency among Americans. They are requisites for Americans to prosper and for democracy to not just be salvaged but strengthened. These pathways to opportunity require fair public policy.

And our test for policy is twofold: Will it help make people's lives better? And does it respect people's humanity?

It's why, for example, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pramila Jayapal have all said that if Trump means what he has said about enforcing antitrust laws, protecting Social Security and Medicare, and capping consumer credit rates, they will support it.[13]

But if Trump does the bidding of Big Tech, Big Oil, and the billionaires who bankrolled his campaign, as early signs suggest,[14] we must expose this monumental betrayal of the working people who voted for him seeking lower costs and a better living standard. And we can reconnect with these voters by fighting for policies that help working- and middle-class Americans have a better life.

Whatever Trump does as president, Americans who care about our democracy have to recognize the needs of and respect the agency of low-income and middle-class Americans. This means breaking with decades of neoliberal, trickle-down economic policies.[15] Policies that have disempowered and disconnected us from each other and hollowed out communities and the American dream while consolidating power for billionaires.

That means learning from another New Yorker, Franklin Roosevelt, who enacted policies that gave all Americans a fighting chance to succeed.[16]

And strengthening the two best pathways to opportunity—public schools and unions, through which all Americans can attain a better life. Where we fight for dignity and respect for all.

In a world of great distrust, of great unease, AFT members—who work in preK–12 education, higher education, healthcare, and public services—are

Americans don't need a strongman promising to "fix" their lives.

MARIANA KRUEGER / CCR STUDIOS

trusted. We are trusted because we make a difference every day in the lives of others.

While we may punch above our weight, the AFT's 1.8 million members make up just 0.5 percent of the country's population. None of us can do everything, but each of us can do something to reclaim the promise of America.

Engaging Students

Here are three educational strategies that can enable agency, opportunity, and trust. And can be done ground up. Neighborhood by neighborhood, community by community. Because that's where it works best.

First, literacy. Reading should be a national priority—for students and the 20 percent of adults who have difficulty reading.[17] That is what the AFT is doing through our Reading Opens the World campaign. We've given away 10 million brand-new books to children, families, and community partners over the last decade—books with engaging topics and characters who kids exclaim "look like me."

In response to the educational losses from the pandemic, the AFT has used Reading Opens the World to disrupt learning loss, connect with families, and build relationships. As others have banned books and tried to erase history, we have given out books (including acclaimed banned books) at more than 400 community events across the country, breaking down barriers and spreading joy.

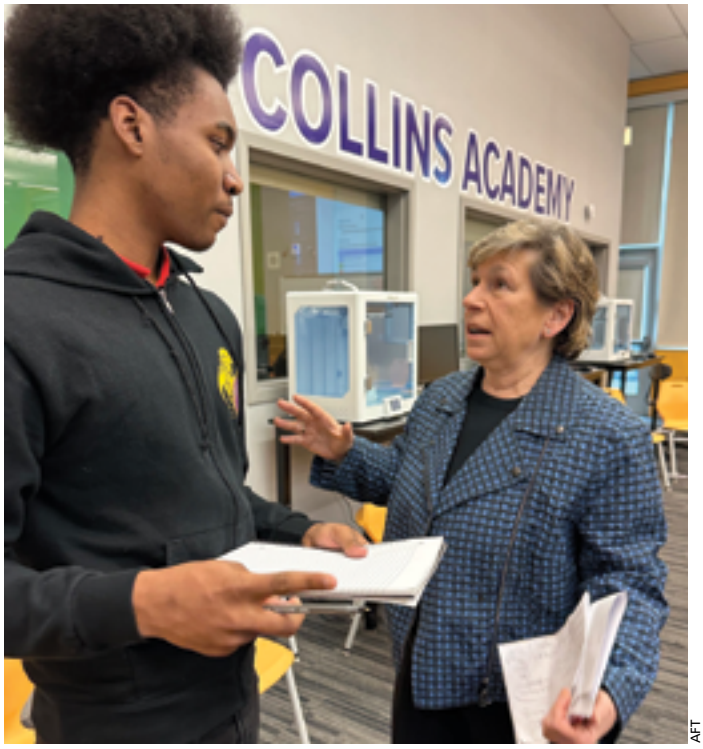
We have given books to social workers to bring on home visits to help them connect with children and to school bus drivers so students can read on long bus rides.

Last December (2023), AFT members in Cleveland gave out thousands of books during the Christmas holiday reading parade. This December (2024), we were at community events in Texas and Florida. And we plan to give away one million more books in 2025. We will work with any philanthropy, any city, any library, any union, and any school board to do so.

Second, student, family, and educator well-being must be a focus. The AFT is working across the country to open more community schools—public schools that are both a place and a partnership between educators, students, families, community members, and service providers. From services for immigrant families and adult education, to community food banks and clothes closets, to longer school days like Mayor Dinkins's Beacon program, community schools are one of the most effective strategies we have to help students and their families thrive.

The AFT is working with parents to minimize the harms of social media for our young people, taking on tech companies that put profits ahead of children's well-being.

If you know a teacher, you know that they are stressed out, burned out, overworked, and underpaid. They are depleted by the difficulties of the pandemic and demoralized by the creep of culture wars into education.[18] All of this has created alarming teacher shortages.[19] The AFT is working on several fronts to reduce stress, improve well-being, and support teachers and school staff so they don't feel the need to leave the profession and the students they love.*



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Education, good jobs, and the labor movement are ways people are able to empower themselves.

Third, school should be relevant and exciting, so kids want to be there. They need engaging, experiential, hands-on learning. A Gallup student survey found that engagement is critical for student success, which is why XQ has "meaningful, engaged learning" as a core design principle for reimagining high schools.[20] High school must be more than college prep. Every student deserves opportunity, whether they are immediately college-bound, eventually college-bound, or among the more than 60 percent of US adults who don't complete a bachelor's degree.[21]

Whether the next stop is a university, a microchip fab, or a small business, young people need to be adept in four skill sets: critical thinking, problem solving, resilience, and relationships. These are the new basics. That is why the high school experience must be transformed.

Career and technical education (CTE) is a great example of this engagement. CTE students gain knowledge and real-life skills and experiences in everything from healthcare to advanced manufacturing to automotive repair. CTE programs partner with industry to offer students internships, apprenticeships, and stackable credentials in good, in-demand jobs. Here in New York, we're working with Micron Technology, a leader in semiconductor manufacturing, to train middle school and high school students for high-tech careers. And with Microsoft, we are helping educators from communi-

*For one such initiative, see "Bucking Burnout: How AFT Locals Are Meaningfully Improving Educator Well-Being" on page 51.

AFT

ties as varied as New York City; Wichita, Kansas; and San Antonio, Texas, building students' AI literacy so that they can thrive in a rapidly changing work landscape.

Ninety-three percent of students who take at least two classes in high-quality CTE programs graduate from high school,[22] and they often graduate with industry-recognized credentials in their field. These experiences should be the norm.

All of this takes resources, which is why Trump doubling down on his pledge to eliminate the US Department of Education (ED) and expand school vouchers is dead wrong.[23] Let's be clear—the teachers I represent don't care about protecting a bureaucracy in Washington. But you bet we care about protecting the vital federal funds that go directly to helping kids from poor and working-class families—funding that disproportionately goes to red states, by the way. You bet we care about protecting students with disabilities and ensuring the civil rights of all students. These essential ED functions, if eliminated, will have a disastrous impact on children and families.

Public schools ignite opportunity for students. A union card sustains that opportunity throughout their careers and into their retirement.

Organizing Workers

I am going to throw down a gauntlet. If Trump wants to make good on his populist promises to working-class voters, he will support all workers' right to organize and join unions. Which, by the way, his designee to lead the Department of Labor has supported.

The economic advantages of union membership are clear. Union members enjoy higher wages and better benefits.[24] Union households have nearly four times the wealth of nonunion households, and they are more likely to own a home and have a retirement plan.[25]

Support for unions is at the highest level since 1965.[26] Almost 90 percent of Americans under age 30 support unions[27]—a group that swung toward Trump in the election. Nearly half of nonunion workers say they would vote to join a union if they could.[28] Yet only 1 in 10 workers in America is in a union. In fact, Americans are 13 times more likely to have an Amazon Prime membership than to have a union card.

One cause is five decades of efforts by billionaires and big businesses to decimate unions, speaking of Amazon. De-unionization is a significant factor in the surge in inequality and the decline of the middle class over the last 40 years.[29]

No wonder so many working people feel hopeless. Feelings of loneliness and hopelessness and lack of agency are especially acute for young men.[30] Just take a listen to the manosphere podcasts.

Unions, as well as the educational strategies I've outlined, are antidotes to the anxiety and isolation that so many feel. Yes, people form and join unions to have agency—to control their own destiny. And unions, like public schools, allow people across races, backgrounds, and political beliefs to connect, to see they have common interests and values, and to build solidarity.

Conversely, the downward mobility and anxiety facing working people today are the result of a trickle-down economy enabled by our political leaders. Over the last 40 years, a new set of economic rules have prioritized wealth over work, corporate profits over worker pay, shareholder returns over societal value, and the bogus claim that, in a plutocracy, economic benefits somehow will trickle down to the rest of us. This system concentrated power in the hands of billionaires and big corporations, giving them wealth and influence at levels exceeding even the 19th-century Gilded Age. It's no coincidence that as worker power has diminished, wealth has been consolidated at the top, inequality has grown, and public confidence in democracy has weakened.[31]

It's no coincidence that as worker power has diminished, inequality has grown and **confidence in democracy has weakened**.

Yes, of course, we need to grow the economy—which is always the pretext for neoliberalism. The myth goes like this: unregulated and unbridled markets, with no guardrails, will solve everything. This neoliberal trickle-down philosophy doesn't work, hasn't worked, and will never work for anyone but the rich. Yet it keeps getting repackaged and resold to the American people with promises that this time it will be different. It's like an ex claiming that this time they've really changed. It's time to break up with trickle-down neoliberalism once and for all.

As a teacher of history, I have looked back to an earlier time of economic crisis and turmoil—the Great Depression—for inspiration on a path forward.

Think about 100 years ago—the 1920s—not just flappers, speakeasies, and *The Great Gatsby*. It was a time of immense economic inequality and unprecedented wealth at the top, racism and lynchings, immigration crackdowns, tariffs and trade wars,

isolationism, a president who first coined the America First movement, and policies that led to the Great Depression.

It was also the time of the original progressive movement, which advocated for social and political reforms to help the working class, to fight against political corruption, and to reduce the political and economic influence of the ultra-wealthy and big corporations. Progressives and politicians like New York Governors Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt were focused on tangible solutions that made life better for people, ideas and policies that later became the New Deal.[32]

Once FDR was elected president in 1932, these progressive policies led the country out of the depths of the crisis, especially for the least advantaged Americans. One of my sheroes and a Progressive Era reformer herself, Frances Perkins, served as FDR's secretary of labor. Perkins pressed for the landmark Wagner Act, giving workers the right to organize unions and bargain collectively. She fought for the first federal minimum wage and maximum workweek and chaired the commission which developed legislation that became the Social Security Act. Roosevelt and Perkins believed in reforms that would propel opportunity for generations and fundamentally restructure America's economy to benefit working people.[33]

The decades that followed saw union membership in America surge, and with it the creation of the greatest middle class in the history of the world. But starting in the 1970s, neoliberals and corporate interests coordinated to weaken or dismantle these policies, which has led to our current inequality, economic insecurity, and crisis of democracy.[34]

So let's gather inspiration from those progressive reformers who showed us that we must match times of great anxiety and hopelessness with great ambition. Laws and policies and institutions must meet the moment. Congress must pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act. Increase the minimum wage. Rewrite economic rules to stop big corporations and billionaires from rigging capitalism further in their favor. Let's keep building upon the Affordable Care Act and guarantee Social Security for generations to come. And finally invest adequately in public education.

FEA COMMUNICATIONS

None of us can do everything, but each of us can do something to **reclaim the promise of America**.

Let's provide educators and students with the support and resources they need for meaningful pathways that engage students and equip them to graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge needed to secure a good union job or go to college if that is their path. To have the agency and opportunity to find their American dream.

And if the powers that be in this country fight against this agenda, we fight back.

We must create an economic movement for all families to be better off—and that takes organizing in our communities and the halls of power. Whether it's transforming a high school, organizing a community literacy event, participating in a local election, supporting a local union, cleaning up a park, or any civic participation that builds agency, trust, and community.

My union will do our part. AFT members are making a difference in the lives of others every day, paving pathways to opportunity and fighting for respect and dignity for all Americans.

We are in a race between hope and fear. For hope to win, this requires all of us. The simple truth is that we all do better when we all do better. We must fight for the promise of America for all of us—for our freedoms, for our democracy, and for working folks and kids to have real agency and opportunity. ☐

AFT

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/weingarten.

The Kids Are Not OK, But Education Innovations Provide Hope

By Carol Graham

We have an increasingly divided country, polity, and society. While this strains our family dinners and creates anxiety on the left and right, one of the most notable results is the stark decline in the well-being and mental health of our youth. They are facing deep uncertainties about the future of jobs and labor markets, being able to afford college and the consequences of not having a degree, worsening climate change, declining communities, and toxic civic discourse.[1] The youth mental health crisis in large part reflects a decline in hope that has resulted from these trends.

The deterioration in youth mental health first became evident in 2011.[2] Today, our young adults ages 18 to 25 are the least happy demographic group, departing from a long-established U-shaped relationship between life satisfaction and age in many countries worldwide.[3] The longstanding U-curve reflects the unhappiness and stress that most people experience in the midlife years as they juggle financial and family constraints (such as caring for both their children and their aging parents), while both the young and the old exhibit higher life satisfaction and lower stress, anxiety, and depression.[4] But now, youth in the United States are faring worse than their stressed-out parents.

Our young are also unhappy compared to the young in many other countries, including those that are far less wealthy than the United States. These include Bulgaria, Ecuador, and Honduras.[5] In 2024, US youth ranked 62nd in the world happiness rankings. Even more concerning, they also are experiencing an increase in anxiety, depression, and suicide.[6]

There is no magic solution for this crisis. Most suggested policies focus on better regulation of social media and increased access to mental health care. While both of these things are important, they will not address the deeper economic, climate, and civil discourse challenges that precipitated the well-being crisis. Social media and misinformation surely exacerbate the trends, but the root causes are deeper and broader.

The costs of not solving this crisis are high, not only for the youth who are suffering during what should be a very happy time in life, but also in terms of future earnings and productivity and our society's health and life expectancy. In 2021, life expectancy for college-educated adults in the United States (who make up

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just one-third of our population) was eight and a half years longer than for adults without a bachelor's degree—more than triple the gap in 1992.[7] And today, many of the jobs available to those without a bachelor's do not offer health insurance.

In addition, we have a more general crisis of "deaths of despair,"[8] primarily driven by premature deaths due to suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol and other poisonings. Initially, these deaths were concentrated among middle-aged, blue-collar white people in communities suffering from declines in manufacturing, mining, and related industries; these industries typically anchored their communities, often serving as the main source of employment and supporting related civic organizations and local resources such as grocery stores, restaurants, and newspapers. Now, these deaths are spreading to a wider range of races and age groups, including Black people—who have long displayed resilience in the face of injustice and hardship—and teenagers. This crisis is of such magnitude that it has steadily driven down our national average life expectancy since 2015, with overdose deaths alone surpassing 100,000 per year in 2021 and 2022.[9] The increasing participation of the young in these patterns suggests that our crisis of despair is becoming an intergenerational one.

The prospect of intergenerational transmission is disturbing, and there are signs of it throughout research my colleagues and I have conducted in low-income communities. For example, a survey of white youth in Missouri found that they have finished or want to finish high school and, at most, perhaps an additional year of technical education—but their parents do not support them in achieving higher levels of education. This reflects, among other things, a decline in the American narrative of individual effort being the key to success for the white working class.[10] There is no longer a stable work-life narrative for those who do not acquire higher education or technical skills. This is especially concerning because the factors that underpin despair can make people more susceptible to extremist ideologies and create entire geographies that are prone to radicalization and violence. Poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and low education levels are all relevant factors in radicalization, extremism, and mass shootings.[11]

Restoring Hope

An important and underreported solution to the crisis lies in restoring hope. While hope resembles optimism—as individuals believe things will get better—an equally important part of hope (and not optimism) is that individuals can do things that improve their lives and thereby demonstrate agency over their futures. Helping the young form a vision of what their futures can look like will help them have hope and aspirations. This is crucial because, as my research has found, there are strong linkages between hope and long-term outcomes in education, health, and mental well-being, with hope more important to the outcomes of youth with limited access to education and mentorship.[12]

Psychiatrists often cite restoring hope as the first step to recovering from mental illness but offer very few prescriptions for doing so.[13] A classic definition of hope—which entails aspirations, agency, and pathways to achieve goals—provides a good frame for thinking about how to restore hope, but lacks examples relevant to today's youth.[14] Yet today an increasing number of new programs aim to provide students with the agency and pathways to acquire the education they need to lead healthy and productive futures. One potential policy innovation that most people can agree on and that will help restore hope among the young is the development of new models of education that focus on the mix of technological and social-emotional skills students need to succeed in tomorrow's labor force.

Education Innovations

Educational innovations are taking root across the country that focus on middle and high school students and on helping students who want a college education to achieve it. Community colleges and career and technical education (CTE) programs stand out, as they often bridge the gaps between the skills kids learn in high school and those that are needed to succeed in college and the workplace. CTE in particular provides a productive longer-term track for those who do not want or cannot afford to pursue a college education.

Starting as early as middle school, some programs focus on the social-emotional skills that students will need to succeed in

The youth mental health crisis in large part reflects a decline in hope.

rapidly changing labor markets, such as creativity, adaptability, and self-esteem, in addition to traditional technical skills. The #BeeWell program in Greater Manchester, a large county in the deindustrialized northeast of England, introduces these skills as an integral part of its student engagement process in over 160 schools.[15] It includes strategies to combat loneliness, which is increasing among the young in both the United States and the United Kingdom and is often a precursor to depression.[16] The program relies on the cooperation of families and communities and uses inputs from large-scale surveys of students. Surveys over three years showed modest improvements in student well-being, and demand for the program is increasing in and beyond Greater Manchester.[17]

An important part of hope is that individuals demonstrate agency over their futures.

Youthful Savings is a high school program founded in the United States that targets low-income students. The curriculum addresses basic economic principles, financial literacy, ethical entrepreneurship practices, and protecting mental well-being. Students who participate in the program tend to go on to a vocational school or four-year college. A key feature of the program, according to the four program leaders and participants I interviewed in June of 2024, is the active mentorship that the program leadership provides—that mentorship was a critical factor in the students' decisions to go on to some form of post–high school education.[18]

Across the country, CTE programs are playing an increasingly important role in helping youth develop pathways to good jobs—and therefore restoring hope. In Massachusetts, for example, supporting CTE is a statewide initiative based on creating pathways to successful careers by fostering STEM skills for students of all income levels and backgrounds. Some of the programs are based in high schools and require that students spend part of their training time in local organizations, such as local engineering and building firms, among others. The state has also implemented higher reimbursement rates for high school building projects incorporating CTE programs. These efforts are aimed at modernizing and enhancing vocational and technical education opportunities for students throughout the state.[19] And an innovative CTE program in Cleveland has high school students taking classes and engaged in workplace learning in a hospital as they explore healthcare careers—they can even graduate high school with state-tested nurse aide credentials.[20] Similar high school–hospital partnerships are now expanding thanks to Bloomberg Philanthropies.[21]

Community colleges are also playing a critical role in helping low-income youth find fulfilling education and work opportunities. Macomb Community College (MCC), outside Detroit, has pioneered a model that allows students to take courses from participating state universities and complete four-year degrees while remaining on the community college campus. This avoids the expenses and time constraints introduced by moving and/or long commutes and is particularly important for older students who often must balance work and family obligations. Each student who comes to MCC is partnered with a mentor who advises them on their academic progress and steers them to mental health resources when needed. Approximately 65 percent of students who attend MCC complete four-year degrees, either on the campus or at state schools.[22]

Another aspect of the MCC model is the James Jacobs Legacy Series, which sponsors civic engagement activities and periodic lectures for the students and the community. Macomb County is diverse, with retired auto workers, a longstanding but traditionally discriminated against African American community, and new immigrants. The Legacy Series aims to increase civic engagement across the three populations and to expose students to new connections and networks that enhance their chances of living and working in Macomb post-graduation.

A related initiative inspired in part by the MCC model is underway at Lorain County Community College in Ohio. The college collaborates with employers and other regional partners to provide targeted curricula and paid internships, with the objective of setting up every student for success. Some programs at Lorain, such as one in microelectromechanical systems, have a 100 percent success rate in placing graduates in full-time jobs. This is because internships in local firms are a mandatory part of

its curriculum, and that curriculum is frequently updated with employer input. The internships provide students with both hands-on experience and focused mentorship.[23]

On the demand side of the story, efforts to renovate regional economies and communities in the parts of the country that have suffered the most from the decline of manufacturing industries and employment largely hinge on having local colleges and universities. Higher education institutions provide not only relevant training for the labor force, but also the threshold of knowledge and civic engagement that is necessary for communities and small cities to attract and retain new industries and their workforces.[24]

Mentors and Mental Health

As noted above, a critical part of the success of efforts to restore hope and give youth new opportunities is the provision of mentorship. Mentors not only guide young adults in their goals of skill acquisition but also provide advice on how to deal with mental health and other issues that often arise during the transition from youth to adulthood. While stress and anxiety are not new for high school– and college-age youth, as the rising number of serious incidents shows, they have been severely exacerbated by the above-noted uncertainties about the future of job openings, education, climate change, political divisions, community declines, and even the nature of information itself. While these trends affect many of us, they are particularly challenging for young people trying to make decisions about how to aspire to and invest in better futures.

Insufficient access to mental health care is also a central issue, especially in the roughly 80 percent of rural counties that do not have a single psychiatrist.[25] The role of peers and mentors is invaluable to encourage those who need it to seek necessary treatment. Peers can also help available—and new—providers identify vulnerable people and populations, as does the Visible Hands Collaborative in the environs of Pittsburgh and beyond.[26] This is particularly important for young men; while they often are more reluctant than young women to seek out mental health care because of the continued stigma attached to it, they are showing increasing signs of distress, such as low college completion rates and high levels of labor force dropout.[27]

Given that most mental health conditions emerge during school years, efforts to expand detection and early intervention in schools are promising. Efforts in Massachusetts and Texas that focused on urgent access have shown potential for rapid scaling.[28] And several organizations are collaborating to establish a new "theory of change" in this area by involving trusted community members—ranging from hairdressers to school teachers—to assess the risk of mental health disorders in communities.[29] It is worth a note of caution, though, that projects that seek scale and widespread coverage at low cost are more effective at treating the average case than dealing with complex or more serious mental health issues. That said, given that mental health is increasingly considered a societal challenge on a much larger scale than in the past (and certainly than before the COVID-19 pandemic), it is worth exploring strategies that can reach more people—particularly those who previously have not had access—in new ways. This could help catch the problem in its early stages rather than wait until more extensive and medically intense treatment is necessary.

Providing youth with the skills and support they need to navigate the uncertainties in the economic, social, and other facets of their lives is an important step forward in addressing the crisis of youth mental health. By helping young people facing decisive junctures in their lives gain agency, skills, and connections through education, the initiatives described above show that restoring hope and taking on mental health issues during these very uncertain times is indeed possible.

We can help young people facing decisive junctures in their lives gain agency, skills, and connections.

Even though these programs—and others nationwide—are gaining momentum, we must generate a broad base of public support for them so that they do not operate in silos or only in "supportive" states and counties. This will require broad consensus and the cooperation of both public and private sectors. Without it, we are unlikely to make progress on solving the crisis that threatens the future of our country's young and their ability to even conceive of pursuing the American dream. Especially now, in the early days of understanding how our political, economic, and social divisions are impacting our youth, we must have hope. Our shared concerns for our children and our country give us common ground—that alone gives me hope that we can resolve our differences enough to reimagine the opportunities we offer our youth. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/graham.

Marching to Their Own Beat

HOW MUSIC EDUCATION HELPS STUDENTS FIND PURPOSE—AND JOY

By Fedrick C. Ingram

Souls, like music, start with a beat.

From there, we build. Next comes joy and pain, from our first kiss to our last goodbye—these are the instruments and voices that accompany the beat, building into a full-fledged human being. We take those experiences out into the world and join a chorus of other people, ultimately contributing to a symphony of love and sorrow that keeps us all moving forward.

But there is always the first beat.

For me, that first beat was heard by one of my elementary school teachers, Mrs. Lydia Richardson. She saw something in a shy boy from the Miami ghetto who stuttered (if he spoke). She knew music would bring that something out. She taught me to sing, and I learned new and different definitions of who I was—and who I could be.

From there, my song grew. In high school, I joined the band. Next, I was the first in my family to attend college. At Bethune-Cookman University, I was a drum major—now leading a band onto a field of hundreds of screaming fans. After graduating, I became a high school music teacher myself.

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It was during my time as a music teacher that I first heard another beat.

Michael (not his real name) was 14 years old when we met. When he was in my class, he was often asleep, and I would later find out Michael slept at school because not only did his Miami project apartment have no air conditioning, but he was up all night selling drugs to support his family. Michael had already spent time behind bars and had been kicked out of school more than once. He was, for many people, a sad statistic to be vilified and campaigned against during election cycles.

But Michael started meeting me in the band room at 6:30 every morning when I arrived at work so that he could play the drums, and I heard something different. I remember pulling up a chair next to him one day, looking him in the eye, and telling him, "If you trust me and we rely on each other, I will make sure that you get where you want to go."

And trust me he did. He was a natural drummer and, even more importantly, worked hard to master his skill. I worked hard at ensuring he knew his innate worth—if no one else heard him, I did.

Two years later, Michael was playing drums at a Miami megachurch, making paychecks bigger than mine. But his song was bigger than Miami. So, when he set his eyes on New York City after graduating from high school, I connected him with everyone I knew there, and off he went.

Today, Michael is the main drummer for a neo-soul legend and has traveled the world making incredible music—that all began

with a beat in the heart of a poor 14-year-old kid who society had written off.

There is a rhythm to our lives.

I tell my story and Michael's story to illustrate not just that our lives are so unique, but that they are special. They show us something specific and magical about music's ability to connect us to ourselves and reveal our purpose. These stories are also a testament to the efficacy and value of an arts education.

An arts educator helped me find a new purpose in my life. And, as an arts educator, I saw purpose and potential in my students and gave them the tools to discover it for themselves.

Finding Purpose—and Joy

During my time as a high school music teacher, most of my kids were Black and Caribbean and had very little. These kids led challenging lives, dealing with poverty, crime, hunger, and other forces outside of their control. But in my classroom, they won some of that control back. By embracing the challenge of the instruments in their hands, they were giving themselves something new to understand and ultimately master on their own steam.

I know music kept me out of trouble and off the streets. The same was true for the kids I taught, who would be so worn out from practice that they didn't have time to get into trouble after school. Mastering their instruments opened the door for them to opt for a greater purpose in which they felt joy and shared it by performing. It allowed them to reprioritize what was really important in their lives—not just what was easiest or most popular. Ultimately, I like to think that music saved their lives just as it saved mine, by offering them a structure on which they could build a new version of themselves.

It's not just my anecdotal experience that speaks to this. A study that examined the impact of an arts initiative in Houston that involved 42 schools and over 10,000 third- through eighth-grade students illustrates how arts education can improve a child's well-being. Students who had access to, on average, "10 enriching arts educational experiences across dance, music, theater, and visual arts disciplines" saw mental, behavioral, and academic improvements, including "a 3.6 percentage point reduction in disciplinary infractions, an improvement of 13 percent of a standard deviation in standardized writing scores, and an increase of 8 percent of a standard deviation in their compassion."[1]

Even a cursory glance at the growing body of research about music education reveals its amazing benefits for students' academic experience. I'll start with the obvious: test scores. A longitudinal study of 112,000 Canadian students found positive relationships between music participation and exam scores in English, math, and science.[2] Another study focusing on middle school students in California found higher scores on math and English language arts standardized tests for those who participated in instrumental music, band, or ensemble for at least one year.[3] These results are in keeping with a body of research that has found a correlation between participating in a music education program or playing an instrument and academic achievement.[4]

Music education also seems to contribute to well-being and academic success in college[5] and in students preparing for careers in healthcare. A disproportionately high number of musicians are admitted to medical school,[6] and music participation has been shown to be a key indicator of academic performance and resilience in nursing students.[7]

I like to think that music saved my students' lives just as it saved mine, by offering them a structure on which they could build a new version of themselves.

This makes sense to me and to anyone who has had to learn the intricate and often confusing ways to not only play an instrument but make music. Due to its complexity, making music engages the technical and emotional parts of your brain and requires them to work in tandem. Children who engage with a music education have higher levels of brain plasticity[8] and greater executive function[9] and social-emotional growth,[10] which can lead to better communication, critical-thinking, and cooperation skills.[11] And as in Michael's story—and the stories of my other students who later became music ministers or wedding or corporate musicians—these skills can lead to satisfying, good-paying jobs both during school and later in life.

PHOTO BY ALLISON SHELLEY / THE VERBATIM AGENCY FOR EDUIMAGES

COURTESY OF FEDRICK C. INGRAM

Inspiring Education, Community, and Activism

As encouraging as these study results are, students have to actually show up to benefit from an arts education, and that is not a given in our post-pandemic world. In the 2022–23 school year, 26 percent of public school students were chronically absent—missing at least 10 percent of the school year*—a sharp increase from the 15 percent who were chronically absent in 2018–19.[12] But that's just the average: it has been said that when America gets a cold, Black folks get the flu. Over that same time period, absenteeism rates for nonwhite students rose from 17 to 30 percent, and for students in low-income, under-resourced districts, they rose from 19 to 32 percent.[13]

> In learning to play or create music, kids enter a new world in which they can become what they never before imagined.

Though there are many tools educators and parents can use to help stem the tide of absenteeism, I can tell you through my own experience that an arts education can do wonders for preventing it in the first place. Before I truly gained a love of education, I was like a lot of kids, reluctant to sit through class. I was bored easily and tuned out when a subject no longer interested me. However, once I discovered the worlds that music opened for me, I became excited to go to school.

In learning to play or create music, kids enter a new world with its own language, culture, and customs in which they can become what they never before imagined—cultivating a love of learning from the inside out. I think back to Michael, asleep in my classroom until he picked up the drumsticks. Soon, he was the first to class and the last to leave. Arts educators have an incredible opportunity not just to introduce students to new ideas through the arts but to create a unique environment unlike other classrooms. By encouraging students to open their internal worlds, we can make school a soul-deep and cathartic experience they are unlikely to have elsewhere in their school day.

Thankfully, the truth of the matter is not dependent on my experiences alone. A study examining the impact of arts education on absenteeism among K–12 students in New York City schools concluded that the lack of arts education is a good predictor of high absenteeism rates, and the benefits of an arts education are most significant for elementary school children.[14]

In my experience, there is no better place to witness this in real time than watching children play in a band. They are having an intensely *personal* and *communal* experience by mastering their own instrument while ensuring it melds with the instruments and tempo around them. Playing in a band requires a sense of self and a sense of belonging to a larger collective simultaneously.

The sense of community that music cultivates is also key to the cultures many of our students are coming from. Black, Asian, and Latine students are often the children of parents who have experienced both societal and systemic discrimination and disenfranchisement. In response, their communities, neighborhoods, and churches have often produced music that not only dominates global culture but also is the soundtrack of political resistance and change.

Music has always been at the heart of social commentary and activism in our country. For every movement, there are songs that drive it and that give us the energy to keep pushing. Especially for those of African heritage, we know how music can define and refine the culture. Our ancestors turned spiritual songs into code, communicating crucial information they were

*To learn more about the impacts of chronic absence on student and educator well-being, see "Back to School" on page 28.

forbidden to read, let alone share. Songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Wade in the Water," and "Steal Away" were testaments to the power of music to unite people for a common goal, communicate details, and challenge the system of oppression they fought against.

That activism is seen in music from gospel to blues to jazz to rock to hip hop—moving from the interior of Black homes to national radio and beyond with the popularity of artists such as Melle Mel and the Furious Five, Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Common, Beyoncé, and even Taylor Swift—but there was always a beat. Learning not only how to play an instrument but also its legacy in our history as a vehicle for articulating struggle and resistance is an important part of music education. Connecting then to now requires the critical-thinking skills and empathy that an arts education can provide and insulates our students from myopic visions of the past and, by extension, their future.

Funding the Future

Sadly, all of these benefits of arts and music education are not equally distributed across the country, and funding for it is hardly commensurate with its positive outcomes. While federal provision for arts and music education was made through Title I of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act and allowed through the 2023 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding following COVID-19, state and local agencies have broad discretion over how funds are applied.[15] Recent data indicate that 92 percent of public schools have access to music education, but that access is widely inequitable. The millions of students without access are disproportionately Black, Hispanic, or Native American and go to school in low-income and urban communities.[16]

Learning an instrument's legacy as a vehicle for articulating struggle and resistance is an important part of music education.

PHOTO BY ALLISON SHELLEY / THE VERBATIM AGENCY FOR EDUIMAGES

TANCREAD / FLICKR, CONVERTED FROM COLOR TO BLACK AND WHITE

Music is foundational to our lives. We sing in the shower, we tap on our desks at work, we rap in our cars. We use music to amp up, to calm down, and to teach important concepts. Through it, we find ourselves, develop ourselves, and become better people. But when we downplay the arts by not properly funding arts and music education for all students, we downplay what music can do in us and through us. We must treat arts education not as an elective or an afterthought, but in the same way we treat math, reading, and other types of education. While schools are encouraged to increase funding for technology—computers and coding—the same does not go for music. My own experience as a music teacher has shown me schools with old, damaged instruments and educators who must dig in their own pockets to ensure their students have the right resources to learn and thrive.

Music not only unites us—through adversity and across demographics—but ignites a flame of discovery in a child. Some of my fondest memories as an educator are watching a school band perform for the first time in front of their families and peers. Until this point, we'd all heard them practice and it didn't always sound great, but once they are marching together, performing together, everything changes.

I've seen their faces—both students and their families—when they hear all that hard work finally pay off. It does something to your heart to know these kids have found the motivation and discipline to be excellent. You see them taking that first step into their new future that began when they decided to pick up an instrument or sing out loud. As their teacher, my only job was to convince them that we could do this together and to guide them on their way. But we cannot work this magic without the support these programs need.

It all starts with a beat. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/ingram.

The Right to Rap

How Hip Hop Helps Students Heal from Trauma

By J.C. Hall

Hip Hop saved my life. It was my therapy long before I entered therapy, keeping me alive just long enough to make it there. I spent my teenage years in and out of rehabs and psych wards that left more wounds than they healed, but there was always one resource I could reliably turn to: Hip Hop. Writing in rhythm and rhyme was a way to structure the unmanageability inside my mind. Making beats allowed me to express my hurt and hope and make the unspeakable heard. Recording and performing connected me with others when I felt lost and alone.

Hip Hop provided me agency, but unfortunately, it was not always enough. The first time I was institutionalized was the summer before my senior year of high school. I spent two months involuntarily in a drug treatment center. Upon arrival, a staff member confiscated my CD player, headphones, and rhyme books. When I vehemently protested, I was told that rap music would only further encourage the substance abuse and criminality that brought me there. I did not know how to articulate that the music was a way to cope with my mental health struggles and find some semblance of purpose in life—and I did not feel I should have to. But I did know I was being punished for my love of and identification with Hip Hop.

This was a common experience for me across various institutions, from rehabilitation facilities to hospitals. For years prior to and after that first institutionalization, every mental health professional I encountered pathologized the cure. Making matters worse, therapy did not resonate with me because it was not relevant to my everyday experience. It wasn't until years later, when I met a therapist who respected my love of the music, that I gave therapy a genuine try. Ultimately, it was both Hip Hop and therapy that saved my life.

Spawned from the rubble of the postindustrial urban climate of New York City in the 1970s, Hip Hop rose as a countercultural phoenix from the ashes of the "burning Bronx."[1] In response to government abandonment of urban neighborhoods and removal of basic city services, such as those provided by police and fire departments, youth found a way to not only survive but thrive. What began as an economically feasible form of entertainment rapidly transformed into innovative styles of self-expression—including DJing, MCing, breaking, graffiti, beatboxing, and fashion—that took the world by storm. As an expressive form of alchemy, Hip Hop turned the commonplace to gold; through it, not only did forgotten youth find a way to cope, but they created multiple pathways to self-empowerment.[2]

J.C. Hall, LCSW, EXAT, is a Hip Hop artist and social worker at Mott Haven Community High School in the South Bronx, where he founded the Hip Hop Therapy Studio program to provide culturally resonant treatment to youth through artistic media. In 2020, he won a national Jefferson Award for Outstanding Public Service Benefiting the New York Community. He is also the 2024 recipient of the Psychotherapy Networker Vanguard Award and a 2024 winner of The David Prize.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MINK COUTEAUX. PHOTOS: PAGE 20 BY MARKUS SCHWER FOR THE DOCUMENTARY *BACK TO TAPE 3*; PAGES 22 AND 23 COURTESY OF LEO PFEIFER FOR THE DOCUMENTARY *HAVEN IN THE BOOTH*; PAGES 25, 26, AND 27 COURTESY OF KYLE MORRISON FROM THE DOCUMENTARY *MOTT HAVEN*

In the face of systemic neglect of low-income urban neighborhoods, Hip Hop was much more than entertainment: it was a countercultural revolution embodied as a way of life bound to community action and social change. Across modalities, Hip Hop represents the democratization of art-making. No prior knowledge or formal training is needed to participate. Rap is conversational; if you can talk, you can rap. If you can hear, you can DJ; see, and you can tag (graffiti); move, and you can break (dance). Hip Hop's accessibility embodies its equalizing function. Hip Hop is still considered a voice of the oppressed and a tool to confront those in power[3] and fight injustice.[4] Its mass appeal extends far beyond the aesthetic: people relate with the message. Its sociopolitical resonance is arguably the reason for its global reach.[5] Hip Hop represents resilience, resistance, and redemption for those living on the margins; to this day, it is an art form for the underdog and is used in social action and political protest all over the world.[6]

Given their drastically different cultural underpinnings, it might seem counterintuitive to merge Hip Hop and therapy. In both, however, people are partaking in expressive practices to help them release, communicate, and connect. In a group setting, whether sitting in a circle or entering what we call a "cypher" in Hip Hop, individuals share their personal experiences in response to one another through verbal and nonverbal means. This interpersonal exchange is built on the curative capacity of connecting to a community. Hip Hop has always been healing—and will continue to be, with or without professionals. Whether intuitively or explicitly, Hip Hop has served therapeutic purposes since its inception, rooted in practices that trace back to the beginnings of humankind. We have used the arts, language, rhythm, and ritual to heal for millennia.[7] In that sense, Hip Hop is a modern adaptation of ancient healing practices. Merging Hip Hop and therapy also helps address a primary critique of psychotherapy, which is that it represents Eurocentric, upper-middle-class ideals and is dismissive of cultural differences. A push for culturally competent treatments has been underway for several decades due to significant evidence of disparities in the quality of mental health services delivered to racial and ethnic minority groups[8] as well as cultural bias in healthcare considerations and decision-making.[9]

While Western psychological traditions of healing focus primarily on verbal therapies, cultures around the world depend upon mindfulness and physical action, including rhythmic movements, in healing rituals that are also underscored in religious ceremonies. These traditions take into account the vitality of physical synchrony with oneself and others, particularly since the formation of relationships and attachment is embodied in expressions, gestures, and touch.[10] Trauma results in visible bodily dysregulation; yet when individuals play and create together, the shared experience of agency and enjoyment generates a sense of physical attunement.

The Restorative Potential of Hip Hop Therapy

In the mid-'90s, a clinical social worker began laying the empirical foundation for integrating Hip Hop's healing capacities into mental health treatment. *Hip Hop therapy* (HHT) was first coined and introduced to the literature by my late professor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Edgar Tyson. HHT blends the inherently cathartic components of the culture with well-established treatment modalities, from music, poetry,[11] and other expressive therapies[12] to solution-focused,[13] narrative,[14] cognitive behavioral,[15] psychodynamic,[16] and dialectical behavioral therapies.[17] It takes what is relevant to the client within these more traditional approaches and reimagines their applicability and procedural processes. Similar to how DJs created sonic arrangements by revising popular records or rejuvenating dated and abstract ones, HHT is a culturally resonant remix of therapeutic conceptions, revitalizing established forms of psychotherapy that have historically overlooked disenfranchised populations.

Developed as a specific intervention using rap music to initiate therapeutic dialogue, HHT has evolved into a conceptual framework that entails various methodologies from song analysis to creation of the art itself (music or otherwise). Based on Tyson's assertion that Hip Hop culture is the "central mechanism of HHT" and cannot be distilled down to one element,[18] Hip Hop therapy is an umbrella term for all Hip Hop–based psychotherapeutic interventions. Much like the culture, Tyson's original model has evolved into an approach with significant global resonance.[19] In fact, one of the greatest strengths of bringing Hip Hop into treatment is its propensity for cross-cultural diplomacy. Its transcendence of geography, race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status highlights Hip Hop as an intercultural tool with the unique capacity to address the traditional lack of multiculturalism in therapy. The same way Hip Hop culture was born out of oppressive structures that pathologized marginalized communities, HHT was born from the need for culturally competent treatment amid a nonrepresentative and even harmful mental health care system.

Hip Hop represents resilience, resistance, and redemption for those living on the margins.

HHT highlights the innate hardiness within a maligned and criticized culture. Over the decades, the mainstream conversation about Hip Hop has highlighted its supposedly corrupting influence on youth.[20] When researching the use of Hip Hop in treatment, all Tyson found was literature on the negative influence of rap music.[21] There was no acknowledgement of its social justice goals, its empowering of individuals and communities, or its rich history as a culture. Given its many art forms, parallels can be drawn between HHT and expressive arts therapy, which is a synthesis of the creative arts therapies (also known as expressive therapies) that include music, writing, drama, dance, and art therapy.[22] Similar to HHT, expressive arts therapy transitions freely and purposefully between two or more creative forms of expression to aid in deeper personal and social exploration and promote individual growth, community development, and transformative healing.[23] Although the majority of HHT-related research focuses on music, some studies—not to mention five decades of testimonials from the Hip Hop community[24]—also indicate the therapeutic potential of Hip Hop dance and visual art.[25]

As a component of HHT, rap's form and function make it particularly well-equipped for use in treatment. Its form mirrors an effective therapeutic environment[26] similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, where the ideal setting for growth involves something that is optimally challenging (not too hard or too easy). Rap vocals have rhythmic complexity that can feel somewhat chaotic in comparison to singing but are within the context of a basic, grounding drumbeat. When done well, it is a beautiful, efficient balancing act between order and chaos. The same occurs in therapy, or anywhere (including educational spaces) that meaning-making occurs. A holding environment—a psychological space that is simultaneously safe and challenging, structured but not stifling—must be established. In function, rap is deeply rooted in self-analysis and vulnerability, which is evident in the fact that some of its biggest artists (e.g., Tupac, Biggie, Eminem, Jay-Z, Nas, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and Drake) are those who have most deeply explored their own internal worlds and sociopolitical circumstances. Rapping has also been notoriously uncensored, with lyrical content often tackling taboo subjects—this is ideal for therapy sessions in which you need to be able to discuss anything.

Hip Hop and Trauma

When individuals relive a traumatic experience, their capacity to clearly think and speak becomes impaired. This limits their ability to make sense of what is going on within themselves and others around them.[27] Opening lines of communication between the verbal and nonverbal parts of the brain can allow us to process trauma and break free from the rigid patterns it locks us into. Uncoupling these thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations is essential to the reevaluation and reintegration of memories.

As a result, theorists have endorsed approaches such as expressive arts therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) when traditional talk therapy is unsuccessful.[28] Engaging in artistic endeavors involves a complex array of cognitive, sensory, and motor activities, encouraging the holistic functioning of the brain. In addition to their incorporation of nonverbal processes, the expressive arts embody "patterned, repetitive, rhythmic activity,"[29] a crucial tool for regulating the nervous system. Drumming, dancing, drawing, and singing engage and settle the mind and body, making relational and cognitive processes more accessible.[30]

Rap music is optimal for processing trauma because of its marriage of rhythm and meaning. Aside from the instrumentation, each unit of rhythm (stressed and unstressed syllables) holds verbal significance, making it impossible to separate the meaning from the music. Not only does rap create a grounding environment that regulates the nervous system through rhythm, but part of that rhythmic engagement is also rooted in cognition, bridging the mind-body gap.

Experts have noted the neurobiological underpinnings of meaning-making, highlighting that flashbacks occur when the brain fails to properly situate traumatic events in the past.[31] A simple grounding beat and the rhythmic arrangement and delivery of syllables help create an environment for reprocessing and novel meaning-making to situate a past trauma so that it is no longer triggered by present reminders. The dual focus established by writing rhymes to a beat is also reminiscent of EMDR, where a rhythmic, body-based task provides enough distraction for the mind to access and evaluate (reprocess) experiences that would normally trigger one's stress response system.[32]

Hip Hop Therapy in Practice: Mott Haven Community High School

With the foundation built by Dr. Tyson, I hit the ground running as a clinical social work intern in pursuit of my master's degree. A Hip Hop artist myself, I incorporated the more expressive elements of the culture, such as writing, producing, recording, and performing, into my work with clients.* In 2012, I was placed at Mott Haven Community High School, a newly founded "second-chance" transfer school in the South Bronx for over-age and under-credited students two or more years off track. Transfer schools are small public high schools that offer accelerated coursework and an opportunity to earn credits at a faster rate for students 16–21 years old who have either dropped out or fallen behind.[33] Compared to citywide school averages, these schools have predominantly Black and Hispanic students, with significantly lower Asian and white populations and much higher percentages of English language learners and students receiving special education services.

Mott Haven Community falls within the country's poorest congressional district;[34] 94 percent of students are economically disadvantaged,[35] and 45 percent of children live below the federal poverty line.[36] The students I work with face tremendous obstacles, from community violence and juvenile justice involvement to foster care placement, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, physical and sexual abuse, and mental health issues. Much of my work involves processing trauma rooted in these and a wide range of other experiences. In my internship, I used Hip Hop therapy with some students to address both trauma and specific mental health conditions, including mood disorders, substance use, and PTSD (more accurately conceptualized as developmental trauma,[37] which is complex trauma,[38] or the existence of multiple, often ongoing events, that begins in early childhood).

After my internship, I was hired full-time at Mott Haven Community as a social worker and continued engaging students through HHT. Upon seeing the interest and involvement of students who were the most difficult to engage, the school's principal provided me with a budget to build a professional recording studio in an old storage room. The origins of the studio program are chronicled in the award-winning short documentary *Mott Haven*, which is available for free at go.aft.org/sis. I have been running the studio for over

*Although people of all backgrounds can benefit from elements of HHT, such as writing down their feelings and vocalizing them rhythmically, Hip Hop is not culturally resonant with everyone. In these cases, I do not incorporate it into interventions tailored to meet clients' specific needs.

a decade now, and in that time the space has more than doubled in size. Being able to provide this outlet to youth in the birthplace of the culture that saved and helps sustain me is beyond my wildest dreams. It is truly poetic justice.

The Hip Hop Therapy Studio

The HHT studio is a voluntary afterschool program open for several hours a day. There are typically 12 to 15 total participants at a time, although due to varying schedules, most sessions range from 8 to 12 students. In the studio, I offer direction, assistance, materials, and hands-on training in the expressive components of HHT, and I facilitate group therapy and discussions surrounding relevant themes.[39] I also meet with group members for individual sessions throughout the school day, where I employ both expressive and receptive (i.e., listening) methodologies. Group discussions regularly involve students showing me and each other songs and videos, which naturally evolves into conversations about related topics relevant to their lives. I find that this informal, natural flow of events is conducive to engaging students in therapeutic dialogue because it is noninvasive and a more realistic reflection of social interaction.

The studio provides students a space to socialize and express themselves freely through creative processes in a positive, supportive environment.[40] They form strong bonds and help each other through these undertakings—and they tend to keep each other in check, making sure everyone respects one another and follows group norms. Once these norms have been co-constructed, redirection is rarely needed. Because only so many individuals can create a song per session, and only so many songs can be shared and discussed, members are invested in the group progressing smoothly and efficiently. Participation alone is positive reinforcement for respecting one another and the space. To this point, Hip Hop–based interventions are particularly powerful in that what is therapeutic is perceived as a reward rather than a punishment. The implications this has for youth engagement and investment cannot be overstated, particularly for youth whose introduction to therapy is too often coerced and based on thoughts and actions deemed problematic by adults in their lives. Adolescents are commonly considered resistant to treatment,[41] but it is vital to evaluate how mental health professionals are failing to engage them in authentic, strengths-based ways.

In the studio, students are encouraged to engage in music-making and are given the tools to do so. For those who need it, I illustrate how to rap by detailing the technical aspects of rhythm and rhyme and structuring lyrics within a beat. I demonstrate how to use the recording, engineering, and production equipment and professional audio software. I also guide them through performances: I teach them how to authentically express their content through emotional attunement in the recording booth and on stage, and I teach techniques such as visualization, breathing, and relaxation exercises for overcoming performance anxiety.[42] We discuss how to portray moods and meanings nonverbally, through posture, facial expressions, and tone. At the end of the year, we put on an annual showcase, which serves as a narrative through song with themes determined by the students and based on their work. The students codirect the show, developing skits, dances, props, and artwork to advance the storyline, which diversifies the modalities through which the therapeutic process materializes. All these experiences translate into social and emotional competencies, from emotional regulation through self-awareness and reflection to enriched verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Ultimately, the cultivation of these proficiencies is central to students' ability to navigate intra- and interpersonal conflicts,[43] and their skill development also increases their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy.[44]

Rap music is optimal for processing trauma because of its marriage of rhythm and meaning.

Healing and Feeling: Ephraim's Story

Although the youth I have the privilege of working with face incredible odds, they embody a degree of resilience that would be difficult for most people to comprehend. The grit, untapped talent, and growth I get to witness daily is profoundly inspiring.

Consider Ephraim Weir, a founding member of the HHT studio, who you'll meet in the *Mott Haven* documentary (and hear from in the sidebar on page 27). I was first introduced to Ephraim, a Caribbean American male, a couple of months into the 2013–14 school year. Only 17 years old, he had just returned from a month's stay in an inpatient psychiatric setting for a suicide attempt.[†] He had stabbed himself in the chest, and his mother explained that he seemed incoherent and unable to express himself beforehand, going days without eating or sleeping. The school was trying to re-engage Ephraim, and after debriefing me earlier that day, a school counselor brought him over for an introduction.

As he entered my makeshift office, the old storage room I was turning into a music studio, Ephraim had a suspicious look on his face. I could tell his trust would be hard-earned, as I know all too well the harm well-intentioned mental health professionals and educators can cause in the name of "helping." In addition to his legitimate mistrust of my profession as a social worker and therapist, my being white and dressed in professional garb likely did not help. Ephraim was wearing the latest street fashion and had a swagger that gave me the impression he was immersed in Hip Hop culture—for me, a promising sign that we could connect. Even if we

[†]If you or anyone you know needs support, call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

were from two very different walks of life at first glance, Hip Hop is something you can smell on people. As a culture, it goes well beyond the artistic expressions associated with it, being rooted in shared beliefs and customs affecting everyday existence.

When Ephraim entered, we engaged in an awkward handshake that was half shake and half slap. He was polite but clearly not looking forward to this interaction. He presented as sad and solemn—hopeless even—with his eyes glued to the floor. Other than the occasional cagey, fight-or-flight glance at me, Ephraim seemed resigned and indifferent to what he likely perceived would be another disconnected lecture forced upon him. I knew these looks because I had seen them in the mirror countless times.

The grit, untapped talent, and growth I get to witness daily is profoundly inspiring.

After our somewhat uncomfortable introduction, I asked Ephraim what kind of music he listened to. When he said "Hip Hop," I inquired about his favorite artists and songs. He obliged, surprised by my familiarity and mutual appreciation. We began trading songs, and what started as awkward silences and one-word answers soon evolved into an in-depth discussion of favorite lines, their meanings, and the intricacies of rhyming and creative writing. It felt like having a conversation with a long-lost friend about the current state of Hip Hop—until the bell rang. I knew we had made progress though, regardless of how momentary the lapse in hierarchy.

What may have appeared to some as a waste of time at best and a neglect of duty at worst, this first session with Ephraim laid the foundation for a strong therapeutic alliance that would last for several years until our work together concluded. In this initial meeting, I intentionally did not bring up his hospitalization. I wanted him to know that this experience did not define him, nor was it the most interesting or important thing about him that we could talk about. Maybe because I have been hospitalized on numerous occasions for psychiatric reasons, including at the very facility he had just been released from; maybe because during those stays, I had developed close friendships with many teens just like him—like me. Or maybe it was because I know that to develop a working relationship with a person, I need to see them for who they are, not just what they've done or what has happened to them. I need to see their strengths as well as their struggles. Knowing that Ephraim had Hip Hop as a cultural source of strength was a much more important finding in that moment than digging immediately into his past and presenting issues.

As I began working with Ephraim, his identification with Hip Hop culture became my window into his reality. After a while, he revealed that he wrote poetry, that all of his poetry rhymed, and that he had attempted to rap before and secretly always wanted to, but he felt he was not good at it. He insisted that he was not a rapper, and when asked what he meant by this, he explained that he did not like to write about money, cars, and women. This is a common reflection of the stereotypes associated with rap as opposed to the "more refined" poetic forms such as literary verse or spoken word. I found this deeply disconcerting. There was an injustice being perpetuated here: a cultural form of expression that resonated with him was being reflected back in such a way that he was discouraged from exploring something he had a natural knack for. A resource was portrayed as a vice, and a strength masked as a liability.

Ephraim should never have been steered away from rap and made to feel ashamed for a desire to rap, whether by someone he respected or the mainstream representation and criticism of this fundamentally Black art form. As a white kid from the suburbs, Hip Hop is not my native tongue, so I can understand the skepticism I've received about it my whole life. Misguided as it is, I get how my appreciation of and participation in the culture can lead to the occasional accusation of appropriation because of my appearance. But for Ephraim, a Bronx-born Black youth of the culture, in the birthplace of the culture, to have received the message that rapping is wrong was unacceptable. If anyone had the right to rap, it was him.

As a therapist, I tried to remain objective in exploring why Ephraim felt that way about rap. I challenged his preconceptions of what defined a rapper, and I explained that we create our own definitions. A rapper is merely one who raps. To me, a rapper is a warrior for human rights and social justice; to Ephraim, based on what he predominantly heard and saw, as well as the larger society's general interpretation and what was projected back at him, a rapper was selfish, materialistic, and antisocial. I clarified that both definitions can be true at the same time.

Ephraim seemed invigorated by the idea that rap can be what you make it, but he still believed he did not have enough innate talent. I told him that anyone can rap or write rap lyrics. Each individual has a unique perspective and story to tell. With some guidance and a blueprint for the form of rap music, I assured him he could be rapping in no time. Ephraim was skeptical, later admitting he initially thought I might have been trying to turn him into something he was not. However, he noticed I never pressured him or told him what I thought he should do; I merely offered assistance if he decided to give it a shot one day, in the meantime expressing interest in reading his poetry. He was not ready to share at that moment, and I did not push, simply suggesting he stop by the studio after school for a group session if he was interested. He had not made any friends in the school at this point, and I thought coming could be good for him whether he participated or not.

Ephraim took me up on the offer, initially coming and sitting against the wall, not communicating with anyone. He witnessed the other members taking risks, attempting to rap, some effectively and others clumsily. From the outside, it may have appeared like he was silently judging from a distance, but I knew he was just gauging the temperature of the group. He wanted to see if it was truly a safe space before he became willing to put some skin in the game. After a few weeks, Ephraim approached me in the hallway with a poem he wanted to show me. Elated, I asked him to read it to me, but he insisted that I read it on my own. This reminded me of when I first began sharing my writing. My lyrics were pieces of me, and they were so fragile that I could not bear to watch a person's initial response out of fear that they would hate it or, worse, pretend to enjoy it. I would ask others to read it or listen to a recording when I was not there, and this is what Ephraim was requesting. I

Mental Health in Schools

Although education is not the primary focus of my work as a therapist, I would be remiss to ignore its impact on students' life courses and how that relates to mental health goals. Mental health has long been correlated with academic achievement,[1] which is part of the rationale for incorporating an HHT program in a school setting. Unfortunately, children with mental health challenges are significantly more likely than their peers to develop substance use issues, engage in criminal activity, and drop out of school.[2]

In the United States, 37 percent of special education students with a mental health condition age 14 and older drop out of school (the highest dropout rate of any disability group).[3] In a recent survey, 40 percent of high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless in the past year that it interfered with their normal activities, and nearly 30 percent had experienced poor mental health in the past 30 days.[4] Tragically, suicide is a leading cause of death in the United States; in 2021, it ranked second for youth ages 10–14 and third for those 15–24.[5] Compounding the tragedy, many of these deaths (and their reverberating consequences) likely could be prevented if mental health care were widely available and easily accessible. Nearly 17 percent of youth ages 6–17 have a mental health condition, half of whom do not receive treatment.[6] There are also vast racial and ethnic disparities in access to[7] and use of mental health services in the United States, with people of color less likely to seek treatment,[8] and more likely to prematurely terminate treatment,[9] than white people.

When thinking about prevention and early intervention, it is important to keep in mind that 50 percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14 and 75 percent begin by age 24.[10] Since onset can be difficult to detect and millions of families lack health insurance, children must often rely on mental health resources provided by their schools. But schools are often ill-equipped to address mental health issues[11] (particularly in a culturally relevant manner), despite becoming the de facto mental health providers.

Few schools meet the recommended student-to-staff ratios[12] for social workers, school counselors, or school psychologists, and many of these professionals do not routinely provide psychotherapy. School counselors do not diagnose students or provide therapy,[13] and though they have a background in psychology as it pertains to education, they often get bogged down with academic concerns and graduation plans. School psychologists primarily provide academic and psychological assessments, identifying special education needs and developing support strategies rather than holding weekly therapy sessions. And while social workers may be clinically trained and licensed to provide therapy, in poorer communities they can easily get overwhelmed with needs-based assessment and assistance around food insecurity, unemployment, homelessness, and connecting clients to appropriate resources.

Our educational infrastructure must prioritize mental wellness if we are going to see any significant and lasting change in the capacity to self-actualize in our communities. In the mental health profession, we talk about meeting the clients where they are, and although this is meant metaphorically, it is important that we also meet them where they are physically.

–J. C. H.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/hall.

enthusiastically obliged, taking his poem back to the studio. What I read looked much like my first attempts at writing lyrics: deeply introspective rhyming poetry that simply lacked a defined structure.

When we next met for an individual session, I expressed how genuinely impressed I was with his writing and openness to sharing it with me. My excitement was palpable, and Ephraim's smile let me know he could see I was authentically engaged. I began going over it with him line by line and explained that he had already written a rap without knowing it. I illustrated how it fit on different beats with different tempos through a few simple rearrangements, and that because of its rhythmic structure, it would fit within a certain range as long as its delivery was sped up or slowed down. He was amazed, and at that point, his journey as both a rapper and a fully invested group member began. In group, Ephraim was applauded for his efforts by the other members, who had started to become wary of his silence. Slowly, he went from letting others read his work to rapping out loud and then recording and collaborating with the rest of the group. Despite being extremely nervous, he even mustered enough courage to perform in that year's showcase, shocking everyone who had met him beforehand.

I wish I could say it was all smooth sailing from there on out. However, many of the youth I work with are returning to war zones when they go home, often crossing gang lines just to attend school. One Friday evening in April 2014, weeks after that showcase, the group was wrapping up and Ephraim was annoyed that he did not

get the chance to record what he had been working on because our time had run out. I proposed that the upcoming Monday be all his. The rest of the group agreed; they were excited to see what he had been working on. But over the weekend, Ephraim was jumped by two assailants and stabbed eight times. Abandoned by his friends, he was left bleeding on the sidewalk alone. By some miracle, a stranger in a minivan pulled over, applied pressure to his wounds, and called an ambulance. He was rushed to the ER with a punctured lung and ruptured spleen, among other serious injuries. When he came to, fighting for his life in a hospital bed, Ephraim told me his first thought was of the studio and how he would not be getting his Monday.

After an extended recovery period, Ephraim returned to school with a cane and a stack of new writings. For the rest of that year, we spent much of our time processing his emotions surrounding that trauma—including anger and betrayal, with a desire for revenge at the forefront—particularly through his writings and recordings. He wrote an extraordinary song, his first full song ever completed, elucidating his healing process and renewed appreciation for life. What could have easily initiated a destructive downward spiral of retaliation became a point of reference for Ephraim reframed as a rebirth. The song is called "Heaven's Gates." It is an ode to his recovery, and the chorus sums it up best:

> Healing and feeling, we all just dealing
> Praying to the ceiling, hope for the realest
> Secrets revealing, then a lot of tearing
> Try to keep achieving, everything I believe in

This anthem about how he was healing, feeling all his feelings, and then moving on to achieve greater things is the essence of therapy: the means and the end. (To listen to "Heaven's Gates," go to go.aft.org/cmp.)

Ephraim was given a second chance at life, and through his art, he took on the challenge. After barely attending and failing the majority of his classes at a traditional public high school, at Mott Haven Community his attendance improved from 29 percent to 92 percent[45] and he passed every class he took. He entered Mott Haven Community in 2013 with three of the 44 credits and none of the five New York State Regents Examinations required to graduate. In 2016, he graduated with honors, receiving two scholarships for growth and perseverance for a total of $2,500 toward college tuition. The biggest change, however, extended far beyond academics. He exhibited tremendous self-awareness, confidence, and willingness to share and relate with others. He greatly improved his relationships at home, and his mother was especially amazed with his transformation. From having no friends, barely speaking to anyone, and getting into a fight during his first month at the school before his suicide attempt, Ephraim developed into a social butterfly loved by students and staff alike.

Tragically, Ephraim passed away in November 2024, but until his death, he continued to turn to Hip Hop and making music as a source of solace.* He inspired many students over the past decade as an embodiment of the studio's promise. His transparency, perseverance, and positivity transcended anything I've ever seen, and his heart will forever reverberate through our community.

Like Ephraim, every student I have worked with has made incredible personal strides against inestimable odds, and it has been one of the utmost privileges of my life to work with each of them. From improved peer, familial, and community relations to personal development, the HHT studio has had a positive impact on all participants over the past decade. Even students who had previously been deemed unreachable and who were closed off to the idea of therapy have excelled at identifying and exploring emotions, learning and utilizing positive coping mechanisms, and developing self-regulation capacities and tolerance for discomfort. They have flourished in fostering social awareness and skill sets through open interaction and developed communicative abilities that have allowed them to practice navigating social relationships, dynamics, and structures. They also have enhanced their critical thinking, in terms of themselves and society at large, leading them to examine the power of the individual and group and better understand how to effectively advocate for themselves. The studio provides a safe, supportive space for all of this to occur, where open dialogue, authenticity, and respect are primary.

In addition to socioemotional development, HHT has shown to be tremendously effective at helping youth process significant traumas they have experienced. I have worked with numerous students who used the creative process to address and reframe experiences they were previously too ashamed to talk about with anyone, let alone record and perform in front of the community. I have seen the process help reunite families by creating a space where they could authentically express how they felt about certain dynamics or events and then initiate communication and behavioral change. I have seen it cut across gang lines and create a space for collective healing and bond-building. I have seen youth come to terms with previous activities that led to incarceration, from harm inflicted upon others to harm inflicted upon them in the streets or by the justice system. I have seen youth process realizations about gang involvement and decide to avoid that lifestyle while prioritizing their personal goals and developing healthier relationships. I have seen it steer individuals away from retaliation for events that anybody would want revenge for. I have seen them work through losing multiple people in their lives, from friends and family to fellow classmates. I have seen it bring some back from the brink of serious self-harm and suicide.

I have also seen HHT breathe new life into students, providing joy, connection, and purpose. In creating a safe space to play, I have seen youth hardened by their environments get the opportunity to let loose and be children, often for the first time in their lives. I have seen them develop tremendous insight into their thoughts, behaviors, and actions and become change agents for themselves and those around them. And while education is only one focus of our work together, I have witnessed these students' graduation rates nearly double compared to other transfer schools in the borough as a result of the mental health benefits they experienced.

Although we work toward the same aims in other approaches, the advantage of Hip Hop therapy is its cultural responsiveness and cross-cultural applications. Very few things in this world can bridge racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, and geographic divides. Hip Hop is clearly one of them. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/hall.

*To learn how Ephraim and another studio participant continued to utilize the therapeutic relationship they developed with Hip Hop long after treatment ended, watch *Byways*, a follow-up to *Mott Haven*, available at go.aft.org/aj2.

Finding Connection and Confidence Through Hip Hop

BY EPHRAIM WEIR

I went to two high schools before Mott Haven Community. In one school, I was skipping classes to spend time with my girlfriend and I got behind, so my mom told me to find a trade. After trying a trade program, I begged my mom to go back to school. We started searching for credit recovery schools, and that's how we found Mott Haven Community.

I got into a fight my first month with a kid who I thought had gone through my bag. I was suspended and almost kicked out of school. Pretty soon, I was feeling overwhelmed with pressure to pass my classes and prepare for Regents exams (which are required to graduate from high school in New York). Depression and anxiety started kicking in. There were nights that I was so anxious about going to school the next day that I couldn't sleep. Plus, things weren't working out with my girlfriend, and I was becoming sad over that.

I started feeling like I wasn't going to get through the challenges of high school. All this pressure was building up inside me. I wasn't stable mentally. Then I got into an argument with my girlfriend that pushed me to the point that I wanted to take my life.

In the hospital, seeing people who were struggling with worse things than I was gave me some perspective. I also learned about activities like drawing that help when I feel depressed—and that I didn't need to be in the hospital to do. After I left, I still felt depressed and anxious sometimes, but music helped. I started listening and relating to artists who were going through the same things I was, and it helped me feel less alone. Writing poetry also helped. It became an outlet for certain emotions when my mind was cluttered. After I wrote, I'd feel like I could let go of the things I was holding inside.

When I met J.C. and learned about the Hip Hop therapy program, it sounded like a cool way to share my creative side with somebody who understood and who I could trust. In the studio, I learned to write rap, which was different than my poetry. When I wrote poetry, it was just for me. I didn't share it with anyone. But when I wrote rap, I wrote about things everyone could relate to because we're all just dealing. I liked thinking that maybe my words would resonate with someone and help them like other artists helped me.

Without the Hip Hop therapy program, I probably wouldn't have finished school. The studio got me excited about learning. Once I started writing rap, it was easier to write essays. Sharing lyrics on the stage made me more comfortable asking questions or presenting in class. And connecting with others in the group challenged and pushed me as an artist and as a person. Listening to them share their art and be vulnerable with their emotions taught me to respect others because everyone is going through something.

The program also helped me be more open to getting therapy because it didn't seem like therapy. It felt like just a class where I learned how to talk about what I was going through. I'd had another therapist before coming to Mott Haven Community, but when I talked with J.C., I felt like he was interested in what I had to say and he was really there to help me. I didn't feel like I was just talking to a wall. After graduating, the experience gave me the confidence to look for a therapist outside of school who was a better fit for me and even be open to taking medication if I needed it.

I think all schools should have a Hip Hop therapy program and a studio. You don't know what kids are going through at home. When I was coming to school with anxiety—feeling suppressed with no outlet—no one knew. But the studio gets you engaged with school. You learn to write your own story, and that gives you control over your life. That's what it did for me.

I used to feel nervous walking into classrooms. But now my life is a performance, and I'm the artist. So I walk into rooms with confidence. I wake up every day feeling like a superhero.

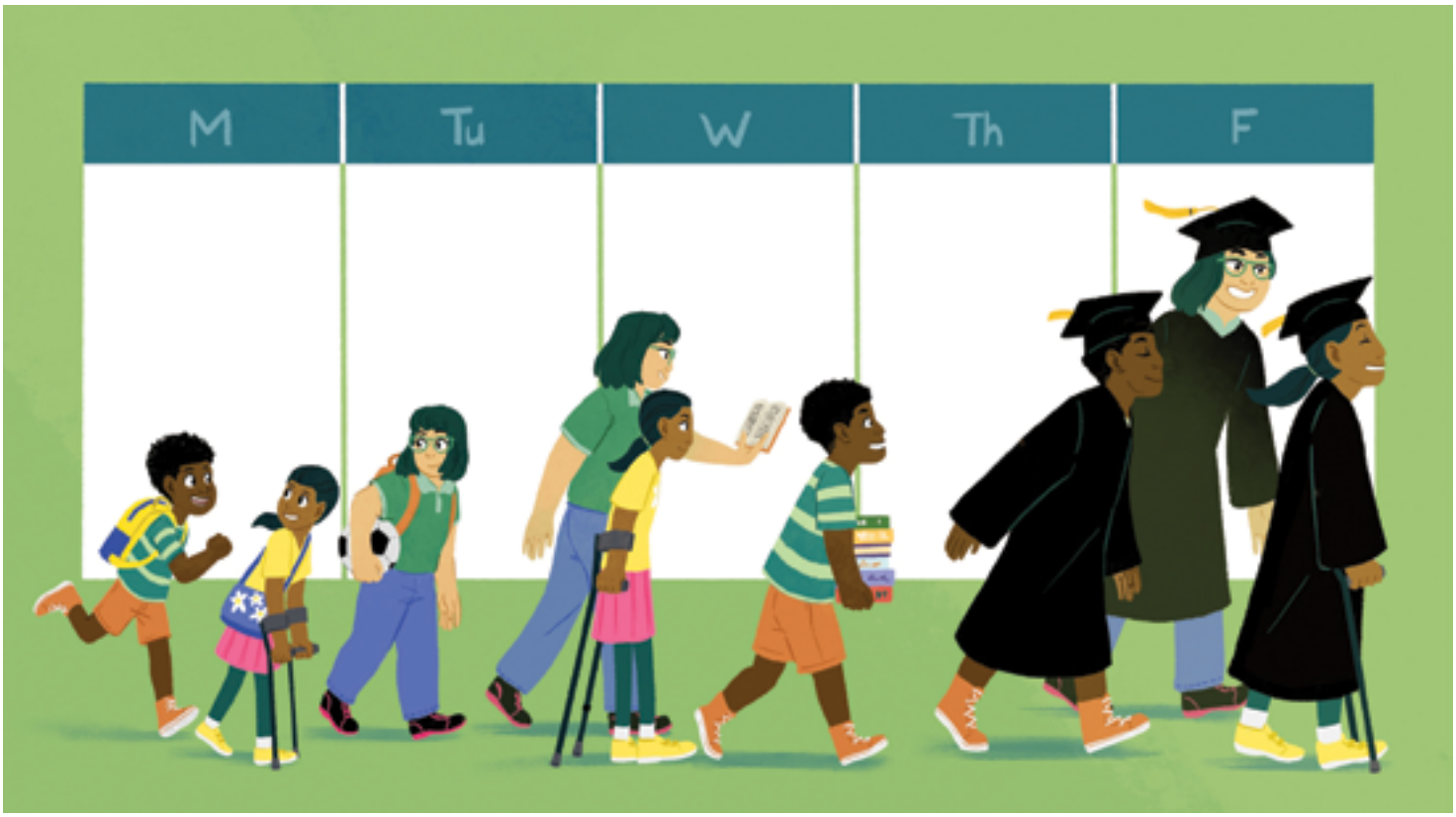
How can I save the world? □

The studio gets you engaged with school. You learn to write your own story, and that gives you control over your life.

Ephraim Weir, who passed away in November 2024 soon after completing this article for American Educator, *was a poet and Hip Hop artist by the name of HeFromWhere. He graduated from Mott Haven Community High School in 2016 and worked in Manhattan as a concierge.*

Back to School

Supporting and Engaging Students to Reduce Chronic Absence



As we all know too well, the pandemic intensified many of our society's problems, bringing the greatest hardships to those who were already struggling. One of those problems is chronic absence from school, which has nearly doubled across all student populations—but is especially concerning among the students who are most reliant on school for meeting their academic, social, emotional, and nutritional needs.

To learn how to address chronic absence, we spoke with four leaders who are dedicated to resolving the barriers to attendance and offering opportunities that draw students to school: Zeph Capo, the president of Texas AFT and an AFT vice president; Hedy N. Chang, the founder and executive director of Attendance Works; Denise Forte, the president and chief executive officer of EdTrust; and Nat Malkus, a senior fellow and the deputy director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

–EDITORS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANGELA HSIEH

EDITORS: What is chronic absence and why are you so concerned about it?

HEDY N. CHANG: Chronic absence is typically defined as missing 10 percent or more of school for any reason—including excused and unexcused absences and suspensions. When a teacher or counselor notices a student missing a couple of days one month, then four days the next, it's an early warning sign that something is amiss. Unless the school finds out what's going on and offers support, that student is at risk for not reading on grade level in elementary school,[1] falling further behind in middle school,[2] and dropping out of high school.[3] Beyond academics, chronic absence affects kids' social-emotional growth[4] and thus their ability to develop soft skills that matter in the workplace.[5]

When a large percentage of the student body is chronically absent, it's not just the absent students who are affected; teachers have a harder time setting classroom norms, and the students who are present also struggle to learn.[6] At high levels, chronic absence also increases teacher dissatisfaction.[7]

The good news is that even though our country is divided on many issues, I think we share the belief that all kids should have opportunities to learn and thrive, and that being in school is critical to the health and well-being of our country.

DENISE FORTE: Critically, if our students are not in school, they won't be able to access the teaching and learning that was interrupted by the pandemic. As Hedy said, this is the time, right now, to understand what is going on in young people's lives and in the classroom so that we can start to address what students need in school and fill the gaps in their learning. That's why I'm so pleased that leaders from 14 states and counting have signed on to the challenge EdTrust, Attendance Works, and Nat Malkus issued to reduce chronic absence by 50 percent in five years.[8] It's a sign not only that this is a widespread problem, but that there's deep commitment among education leaders to address it.

ZEPH CAPO: I agree. If students aren't in class, my 65,000 Texas AFT members can't teach them. In addition to the impacts already described, chronic absence affects school funding and teachers' jobs.

In Texas, our school funding system is tied to attendance. Budgets are set based on a particular day in the fall; when students are missing, it has a tremendous impact that snowballs across the school ecosphere. Making matters worse, the funding priority is test prep, so there is no additional money to have a truancy officer or social worker to bring kids back to school. On top of that, we have a draconian accountability system that will penalize teachers, and in some cases terminate them, based on test scores. The rate of absenteeism is tied to learning loss, of course, and when teachers are working with kids who have been chronically absent grade after grade, it has a detrimental impact that puts teachers' jobs at risk.

NAT MALKUS: I echo what everyone has said, and I want to emphasize that chronic absence makes teachers' jobs harder. When I was a teacher, it was tough enough to differentiate instruction to meet students' different abilities. When many different kids are missing different days, it's even more challenging to meet their individual needs. Meanwhile, the kids who *are* in class are less "in the groove"—that is, they experience less of the stable routines that make day-to-day classroom instruction and experiences go smoothly.

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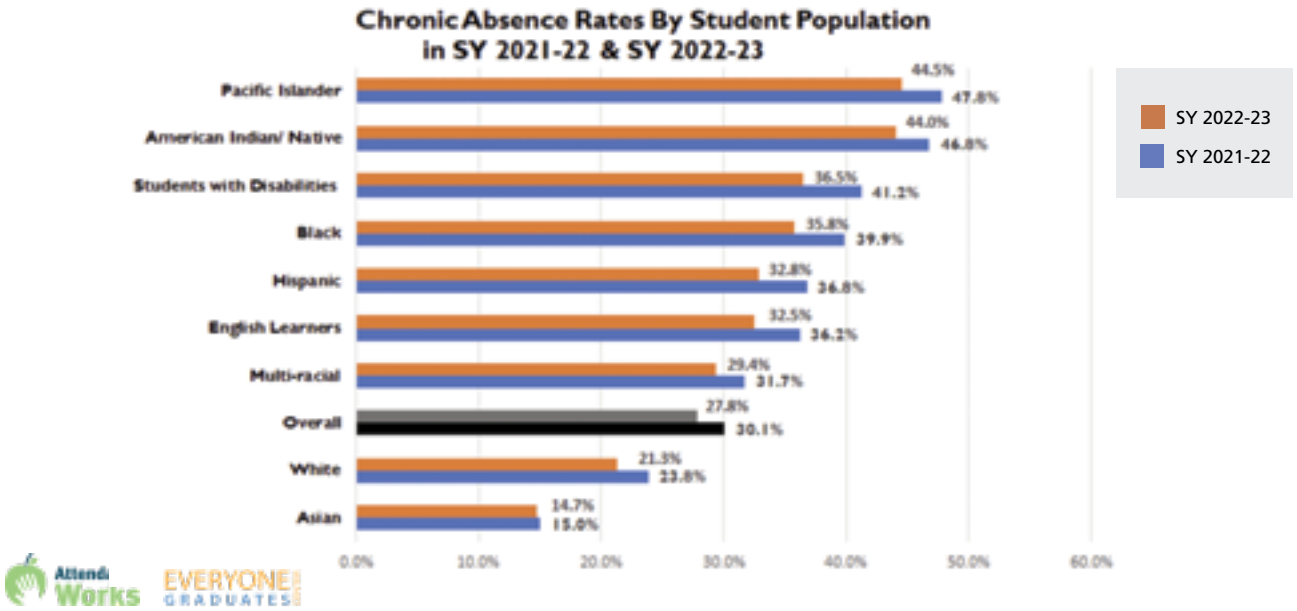
>
> –Hedy N. Chang

HEDY: Some data show that if kids are in a classroom where a lot of their peers are chronically absent, they are more likely to be chronically absent also.[9] In addition, when you have a lot of absenteeism, relationship building—which is essential for every aspect of teaching and learning—becomes much more difficult.

DENISE: That's so important: even the kids who come to school are missing out on being with their peers and building relationships.

ZEPH: Not to mention the additional toll that is directly put on teachers. Managing makeup work, reteaching, resetting class-

Chronically absent students are from all backgrounds. But some groups are more affected.



room expectations, reinputting grades, and other administrative work caused by chronic absence—this doesn't get talked about often. It takes time that otherwise would be devoted to deepening and extending instruction, such as science projects and civics debates, if everyone were in the classroom.

HEDY: That's one way that absenteeism contributes to teacher dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, research also shows that teachers tend to underestimate the abilities of chronically absent kids.[10] It makes sense; it's hard to know what these students are capable of, and even harder to differentiate instruction.

EDITORS: We know that all types of students are chronically absent, but are there groups you're especially worried about?

DENISE: We're particularly worried about those same students who were most impacted by the pandemic: students of color and students from low-income communities who had their lives totally disrupted due to health or employment issues or housing and food insecurity. Chronic absence is a universal issue, but it lands heaviest on students of color and students from low-income communities.

HEDY: That matches the data, as the chart on page 29 on chronic absence by student group shows. The only group I'd add is students with disabilities. In addition, data consistently show that the highest rates of chronic absence are found in the schools serving higher proportions of students experiencing poverty.

ZEPH: Anecdotally, this matches what we see in Texas in districts that predominantly serve students of color or students from lower socioeconomic communities. In addition, the high rate of students with disabilities being absent resonates with me. Talking with parents, I've learned that many aren't sure if it's safe for their medically fragile kids to return. They're right—Texas didn't keep students safe during the pandemic, especially medically fragile students. Now, it's taking longer than we hoped to assure those families that they can come back.

NAT: I think we have to hold two ideas in our head at the same time. Before and after the pandemic, disadvantaged students have had higher rates of chronic absence. But it's also important to recognize that during the pandemic, chronic absence nearly doubled for almost every student group.[11] It's still affecting disadvantaged students more, but it's a problem for almost every school, almost every district, almost every kind of student.

I gathered data from the majority of the country's schools on how long districts engaged in remote learning during the pandemic. Although the districts that were remote for the longest had a slightly higher rise in chronic absence, that was not the driving factor.[12] So while school closures were an obvious point of tension during the pandemic, there was plenty of tension in schools that were open as they dealt with quarantines, social distancing, and disagreements over masking.

For good reason, lots of messages were sent during the pandemic about being careful about returning to school. But more recently, we haven't had equally powerful messages conveying, "Now it's time to get back to normal routines of attendance." If we're going to get closer to regular attendance for the vast majority of students, we need to push hard to get those messages out.

EDITORS: How can schools reengage students?

HEDY: If we really want to improve attendance, we have to understand what's causing kids to not show up. As summarized in the figure on page 31, kids face many different challenges. Barriers like lack of access to healthcare or transportation, housing insecurity, and community violence are most prevalent among low-income families. Issues of aversion—including anxiety and bullying—affect students across the board. Disengagement is also a problem for all groups of students, as too many kids feel bored and don't see the relevance of school. And finally, there are lots of misconceptions, so families don't realize how harmful being absent is.

The Ad Council surveyed 5,000 families to explore how messaging about attendance should change.[13] Before the pandemic, focusing on the academic impact of chronic absence was motivating. Now, families are more motivated by hearing about the whole child. Families recognize that peer connections, hands-on learning, and social-emotional development are what make

> "Chronic absence is a universal issue, but it lands heaviest on students of color and students from low-income communities."
>
> –Denise Forte

school important. Families have seen what their kids missed during the pandemic in terms of learning how to socialize, solve conflicts peacefully, and learn from others.

DENISE: I agree with Hedy on the message; we do have a united cause here that it matters for children to be in school—for their sake academically and socially, and for our nation to be more competitive. Along with messaging, we have to make sure kids are engaged so they want to be in school. We need to invest in school-based and afterschool programs that integrate social-emotional learning to help kids feel more connected to school, including the arts, career and technical education (CTE), and dual enrollment.

> "Growing CTE programs and offering … enriching afterschool programs are tremendously important not only for absenteeism but for students' individual growth."
>
> –Zeph Capo

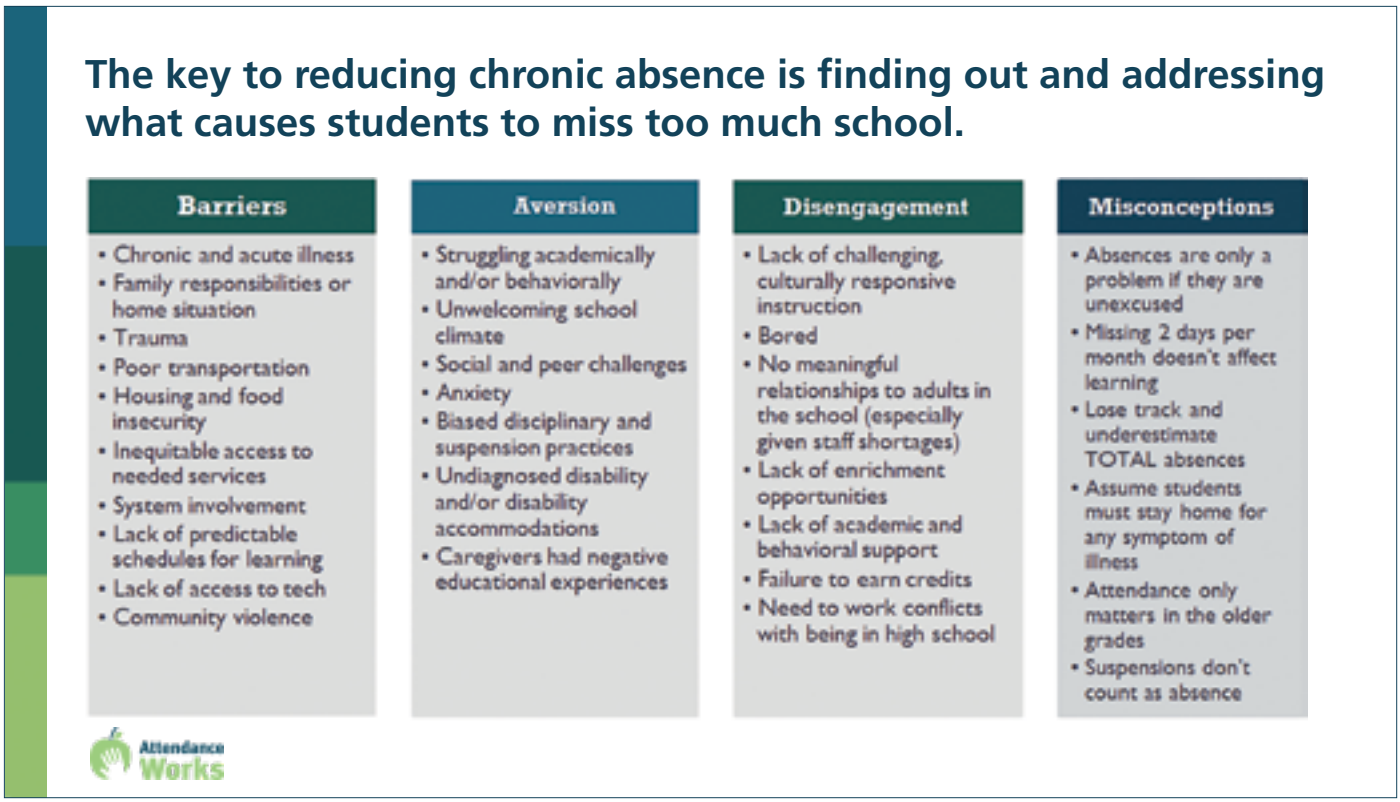
ZEPH: Absolutely. Many students come to school for the extracurriculars and the relationships they build. Growing CTE programs and offering a diverse array of enriching afterschool programs are tremendously important not only for absenteeism but for students' individual growth.

The emphasis on college for all over the past couple of decades has been detrimental. While every kid should have the opportunity to attend college, we need quality alternatives to a four-year college degree that lead to fulfilling and well-paying jobs.

When I served as an elected community college trustee, I focused on systemic shifts toward flexible pathways in which young people could access education as needed—such as going into an apprenticeship right out of high school to become an electrician and going to college years later to earn a degree in electrical engineering. We need to let kids know that it's OK to take different paths, earning certificates and degrees as needed over many years to pursue their interests and build a career.

One area that I wish we emphasized more in the United States is apprenticeships. During a study trip to Germany with a group of AFT leaders, I saw firsthand several longstanding, robust apprenticeship programs. Students in Germany have paid positions with employers and continue taking courses directly related to their work experiences. Just as important, there were many different apprenticeship opportunities, so students were pursuing their interests. Currently, opportunities in the United States pale in comparison. We could do a lot better, particularly if we focused on fields with critical shortages of workers.

NAT: We often talk about how chronic absence is related to test scores, but it's also related to things that are harder to measure, like the soft skills that students learn in school and use in the world of work. We don't serve students well if we let them pass through school in ways that suggest irregular attendance is going



to work in the labor market. Apprenticeships usually have regimented training to learn skills for a particular job, and part of that regimen is showing that consistent attendance is necessary for not only learning the content but also executing the job. Soft skills like showing up every day are huge parts of life; they make schools work—and they make life after school work.

DENISE: We have heard that from our business partners: soft skills, including social and emotional skills, are in demand. We should value them as much as academics.

ZEPH: Imagine having interest in a career at 15 or 16 and being offered an opportunity to work with an experienced adult who has mastered the relevant skills. You get to see what that job really is and learn the culture of the workplace. You're in a different environment—not surrounded by other teens—and can observe behaviors in the workplace. You see how the professionals communicate with each other and resolve their issues.

Building relationships with adults in the workplace impacts not only students' knowledge and skills but also their cultural norms for interacting in different places. Apprenticeships show youth that what has come to be tolerated behavior for a host of reasons at school often is not acceptable in the workplace. Opportunities to experience that shift from the sheltered school environment to a more rigid one, whether through apprenticeships or some other means, are important to help students start their work life off on the right foot.

> "Soft skills like showing up every day are huge parts of life; they make schools work—and they make life after school work."
>
> –Nat Malkus

DENISE: In addition to apprenticeships, we need to make dual enrollment and advanced coursework available to all students. These programs and courses are about young people seeing themselves in engaging curricula, realizing that they can handle college-level work, and seizing opportunities to earn college credits for free. When we present kids with more opportunities and more variety, they become more engaged.

ZEPH: Yes, dual credit is really important—but funding is needed. As a community college trustee, I saw dual enrollment students lose the opportunity to be in the college environment because of funding issues. Dual credit classes have been offered in high schools, which is better than not offering them, but high school students need to take classes on a college campus for the full growth experience. Again, it's about observing people, developing new relationships, and learning a new culture—all things that really engage students in learning.

EDITORS: Given the many reasons why students are absent, how can all of their needs be met?

HEDY: Schools need to form strategic alliances to share the work of getting kids back in the classroom. Asking the business community to offer higher-quality apprenticeships is a place to start, but what else can they do? What can local nonprofits do? We need to examine how we partner to address attendance barriers such as healthcare, transportation, and unsafe paths to school.

Community schools make a difference.[14] When you have community partners and give them access to relevant data, they can take on these barriers and offer kids mentors and encouragement.

We have 150 years of a system in which we have assumed that kids miss school because they or their families don't care. We have assumed that if we could just threaten them enough, they would realize the importance of school and show up. But the vast majority of kids aren't missing school because they don't care or don't want to be there. They're missing school because of a wide array of reasons and barriers. Some reasons are internal: they're being bullied or aren't getting the support they need to understand the curriculum. Some are external: they need healthcare and stable housing.

The key to improving attendance is not blaming or punitive responses but instead partnering with students and families to find out why students are missing school so that we can devise reasonable and effective solutions. I hope that we'll start seeing absenteeism as a sign that we need to develop relationships and deepen engagement to understand why, and then use our understanding to forge the partnerships we need to make our schools places where kids can be and want to be. And if lots of kids are frequently missing school, that means we have systemic barriers that require programmatic and policy solutions.

ZEPH: That sings straight to my heart. This is a hugely systemic issue. I don't think that there's ever enough attention paid to how the decisions we make in one area directly impact other areas. Looking at the aversion column of the chart on page 31 reminds me that we don't have anywhere near enough social workers, counselors, psychologists, or healthcare professionals.[15] We're so far off the recommended ratios that it's embarrassing, frankly, and detrimental to kids and families.[16]

In Houston, where I used to be the local union president, the district required that teachers call home for every student who missed three days—but it didn't have a system for follow-up. That type of problem spurred our community schools work in Houston, in which we found community partners to provide wraparound services. We became determined to not only make the phone calls but provide the help that families needed: making sure kids got healthcare, focusing on bullying, working on other causes of absenteeism. We were making progress—one school that embraced this approach was removed from the "failing" list—but then the state took over the district, stripped away the wraparound services, and reinstated test-prep drills.

HEDY: The emphasis on test scores can be detrimental. A study with elementary school teachers,[17] and another with ninth-grade teachers,[18] found it's usually different teachers who increase test scores or who increase attendance. So you can get an increase in test scores, but the cost may be losing students before graduation.

ZEPH: That tracks with what we see and feel on the ground. Unfortunately, the more I see destructive policymaking like what's being imposed in Houston, the more I believe it's being driven by people who want to privatize education. Public education is one of the largest repositories of funds left in the United States that have not yet been financialized and corporatized. By having vouchers* instead of public schools, those funds will be accessible to people who want to make money on the backs of our children.

NAT: All of the obstacles to attendance that Hedy shared with us are relevant, but it still begs the question: Why did we see increases in absenteeism everywhere? Why did we see it in low-achieving and high-achieving districts? Why did we see it in state after state? I don't think it was because the causes of absenteeism are all different now than they were before the pandemic. Rather, I think absenteeism intensified because the permission structure got looser during the pandemic and left students and parents thinking it was more OK to miss school. And if that theory is correct, that's where we should put our attention. How do we make it not OK to miss school?

We need new messaging around attendance, but part of the answer is bringing clear data to the table; states should report on attendance so that everyone knows where we stand. Some states delay their data by 18 months, which is not going to get the job done. We also need folks connected at the school, family, district, and state levels to say, "This is the biggest problem we're facing right now. We cannot fix a lot of the other problems in education until we build new post-pandemic routines and bolster supports that bring kids back to school." But I think we need to do both parts—attendance norms and supports—at the same time.

DENISE: Yes, we need this message coming from all different levels. We need trusted partners in the school and in the community, state leaders, school district leaders, governors, state superintendents, and business leaders all talking about the importance of tackling this issue. We need them talking about the importance of making sure our kids are back in school, learning, and getting the social-emotional supports they need to stay in school—including rigorous, representative, and engaging curriculum.

"We need to examine how we partner to address attendance barriers such as healthcare, transportation, and unsafe paths to school."

–Hedy N. Chang

HEDY: To add to what Denise said: it needs to be all these stakeholders across the community and state as well as a whole-school approach in which we are supporting every teacher in doing this work. When one of Zeph's members sees a kid with a challenge, they need a dedicated colleague—employed by the district or a community partner—who can take on that challenge. Teachers see the kids every day, but they don't have time to solve all of these problems. Someone else needs to be available to check on students and families.

*For a summary of the research on vouchers, watch professor Joshua Cowen's speech at the AFT's 2024 convention: go.aft.org/eb5.

When chronic absence wasn't as big an issue, many schools could have a social worker handle it. Now, in schools with 30 and even 40 percent of students chronically absent, solutions to address it must be built into the fabric of schools. Teachers, other school staff, and stable community partners need time to build relationships and trust with students and families so that they can motivate them to show up every day as well as connect kids and families to supports when needed.

> "Messaging to parents and guardians about coming back to school matters, but so does following the right data and making the right investments."
>
> –Zeph Capo

NAT: One more thing I'll add is that we often don't like to talk about the consequences for students, and there is a whole segment of the country that believes the real problem is truancy. As Hedy said, chronic absence is not all truancy—but part of it is. And so we need to use both carrots and reasonable, supportive sticks to influence behavioral change. Obviously, we don't want to suspend students, but there are common-sense consequences we can give.

We don't need to have suspensions, much less haul people into court, to have reasonable consequences. For example, New Trier High School in Illinois instituted a tiered system of consequences for tardies and excessive absences in response to absenteeism skyrocketing after the pandemic.[19] Repeat unexcused tardies and absences prompted half-hour morning detentions, and more would lead to lost free time, extracurriculars, and potentially course credits. Coupled with positive communication and supports, these common-sense consequences may not have been popular with students, but they communicated that the district was serious about absenteeism, and the district cut its chronic absence rate in half last year.[20] It's not impossible to bring reasonable consequences to bear on this crisis of absenteeism, and I believe it will be necessary.

EDITORS: Will you offer more details on how wraparound services help students reengage?

DENISE: Any solution to chronic absence or student reengagement should start with authentic family engagement: we have to know what students and families need to help ensure regular attendance. One of the ways this can happen is through community schools, which are so powerful because they meet young people and families where they are. If a health issue is the attendance barrier, having a nurse at school can make a huge difference. If the barrier is related to homelessness, children can receive necessities and meals at school, along with a connection to a social worker to find stable housing. No matter what the issue, the partners that make up community schools offer wonderful programming that draws young people to school and provides more opportunities for them to see themselves and their interests reflected at school.

ZEPH: Community schools can make a huge difference. Recently, I attended a meeting with key leaders, including the chair of our state board of education. The most powerful remarks were from a mortgage lender. She spoke of a neighborhood surrounding a school that in the past did not have a good reputation, but because it had become a community school, families were coming to her to buy homes in the neighborhood. And she was contributing to the community school by offering financial literacy and budgeting sessions for families. This type of collective effort is how we can support families and reengage kids.

But for all our focus on the students who are struggling most, it's worth remembering that community schools are good for all students. Done right, the community school will be community driven—the community will say what it needs, what supports it wants—and the partners will offer something for everyone.

The AFT is fighting to expand community schools across the country, but in the meantime we need all schools to be better prepared to address challenges related to chronic absence. At a minimum, each school needs a nurse. If a child has allergies, the nurse can assure other families that the child who seems sick is not contagious and it's safe to send their kids to school. If a child is immunocompromised, the nurse is needed to figure out what would be safe.

Unfortunately, it's hard to stop districts from being penny-wise and pound-foolish. With a school nurse, you can increase attendance and receive more funding; still, many districts won't hire nurses—or won't hire enough of them to build relationships with families and solve attendance problems. So, messaging to parents and guardians about coming back to school matters, but so does following the right data and making the right investments. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/capo_chang_forte_malkus.

Fighting for Safer Social Media

From interacting with friends to sharing news in real time, social media has many benefits. But it also poses serious harms for young people, including learning disruption, mental health decline, addiction, bullying, sexual exploitation, disordered eating, and privacy concerns. We sat down with leaders of Design It For Us, a youth-led coalition advocating for safer social media platforms, to learn how we can protect young people's privacy, safety, and well-being.

Arielle Geismar, co-chair of Design It For Us, is a digital wellness advocate and organizer in mental health, technology ethics, and LGBTQIA+ rights. She was formerly president of George Washington University's Student Association and has traveled the country advocating for laws for young people. Zamaan Qureshi, co-chair of Design It For Us, is an activist and advocate for safer social media for young people with a focus on congressional policy reforms and advancing mental health care access. Frances Haugen, advisory board member of Design It For Us, is an advocate for social media accountability and a former Facebook product manager. Alarmed by Facebook's prioritization of profit over public safety, in 2021 Frances blew the whistle and exposed the company's harmful practices, testifying before Congress and sparking a global conversation about social media accountability.

—EDITORS

EDITORS: What problems do you see with social media for youth?

ARIELLE GEISMAR: In adolescence, young people enter a culture of comparison through social media. The amount of social data collecting that they have been taught to do on themselves and each other—and the way that they're encouraged to see metrics such as likes, follower count, or engagement as reflections of their worth—has really impacted their growth and mental health. It's very difficult for young people to know that social media is not real life when that's all they're exposed to.

I got Instagram for the first time when I was about 11, and it introduced me to a whole world of pro-anorexia and eating disorder content that I don't know if I would've been familiar with otherwise. The more I spent time with that content, which I didn't understand, the more of it I was shown. It started to make its way into my psyche and had a significant impact on me. This shows a much larger problem of social media companies that design products based on what makes them money. These metrics make people more addicted and more anxious. You're comparing yourself more, so you want to spend more time on the app.

ZAMAAN QURESHI: I was 12 when I started using social media, and there were few to no guardrails and minimal understanding of the platforms we were using, who represented them, or what deci-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE SHAFER

sions were being made about the content we were being served or the design features we were using. It's only been recently that many in my generation have been able to reflect critically on the harms of social media. I had a conversation with a friend about addictive algorithms and design features; initially, this person said they didn't have a story, but later they shared, "I did experience an eating disorder, and actually, in retrospect, it was kind of driven by social media."

That was really illuminating because it got me to consider how people think about the harms that they've experienced and what perpetuated them. I know young people who have experienced exploitation on social media. The number of them who have been sent unsolicited intimate images or been contacted by a stranger is quite stark. Yet many never considered this a "harm"—they just accepted these experiences as the status quo because they've grown up with social media, and it's the only thing they know. To me, that's scary.

> **"Algorithms not only determine the content you see on social media but also push it to you, impacting how we view ourselves and each other."**
>
> —ARIELLE GEISMAR

ARIELLE: If kids were routinely exposed on a playground to the same things they are exposed to on their phones, there would be national outrage. Indecent exposure in the presence of a child at, say, a park is a crime. Yet it's become the norm for a young person to receive unsolicited contact from a stranger on their phone through social media. It's not OK.

FRANCES HAUGEN: Troublingly, these harms are increasingly affecting younger and younger children. Approximately a third of the 12- and 13-year-olds I've spoken with began using social media at ages 8 or 9, which is significantly earlier than many people realize. This alarming trend aligns with data showing one-third of kids ages 7–9 nationwide are using social media apps.[1] While this undeniably alters their experience of middle school or high school, we don't yet know the long-term consequences of young children actively trying to go viral on social media and seeking validation through social media metrics.

When I was growing up 30 years ago, most kids did not worry about their personal brands the way they do now. We should be questioning the ways that we're implicitly changing kids' childhoods by exposing them to social media at younger and younger ages and asking them to externalize their source of identity and self-worth.

Zamaan and Arielle both mentioned the risks and harm of intimate image exposure or misuse, which has become far more pervasive and is exacerbated by deepfakes and AI. These incidents don't just harm the victim; they can even traumatize students in otherwise healthy relationships by eroding trust. The consequences can be far-reaching. Consider cancel culture, which floats the idea that young people can mess up at any moment, without any knowledge that they were being filmed, and the ramifications can follow them for years. When I talk to parents about these problems, some of them say, "Well, I'm fortunate that my kids are doing OK." But with so many kids having access to smartphones and the pervasive nature of social media, can parents really guarantee the safety and well-being of their children with confidence?

ARIELLE: In the fall of 2024, Design It For Us did a campaign around explicit AI-generated content. These nonconsensual images depict someone's likeness in a variety of scenarios, often sexually explicit or otherwise inappropriate, all doctored by AI. All a perpetrator needs to create these images or videos is someone's face and the free technology that exists. It's so important that we're having this conversation because, as we get older, there are going to be so many more instances of nonconsensual explicit digital content sharing—deepfake or not. These have the potential to haunt young people beginning their professional careers. I don't think our culture is prepared for the ramifications of what happens when we can't discern the difference between an AI-generated image and a real image. Some think it's relatively harmless because it's just AI; however, studies show that these images have very similar impacts on victims.[2]

EDITORS: Why isn't it reasonable to mitigate these harms by making parents and guardians responsible for their children's social media usage or having young people put down their phones?

ARIELLE: One problem is that algorithms not only determine the content you see on social media but also push it to you, impacting how we view ourselves and each other. The algorithm that pushed pro-anorexia content to my Instagram feed didn't care whether I was viewing it because I was engaged or because I didn't like it and was trying to understand it. Algorithms are designed to make a profit by keeping users on the app (and therefore seeing advertisements) for as long as possible and driving more traffic to the platform, no matter whether the content is positive or damaging

for the user. Even if children put their phones down, it matters what's on their screens when they pick them back up.

It's completely backwards that tech companies often try to shift responsibility for their harms onto parents and guardians. They are using parents as shields to avoid accountability for the problem they created. Who has more time, knowledge, and capacity to remodel a harmful product—the parent of a young user or the creators of the product themselves? Furthermore, which of the two *should be* responsible for a harmful consumer product? I'll give you a hint: it's not the parent.

ZAMAAN: Absent facing any real accountability, tech companies have offered largely ineffective or incomplete solutions. For instance, Meta knows that more than two million users are on its platform who don't meet the minimum age requirement, but they don't meaningfully enforce the restriction—as outlined in the 2023 complaint against Meta brought by a multistate coalition of attorneys general.[3] And while Instagram has touted its parental control tools, less than 10 percent of parents use them because there are significant barriers.[4]

FRANCES: In addition, confiscating phones or simply telling young people to just "put them down" is an unrealistic and potentially harmful approach. Young people can get in a loop where they self-soothe on content that makes them anxious and more likely to need to self-soothe. These devices have such power over kids that confiscating them can be a trigger for suicide.* It's ridiculous and unfair to blame parents or to assume that kids lack the self-control to limit their screen time. The only safe, reasonable approach is for companies to stop pushing harmful content to youth.

EDITORS: Considering all the harms, what benefits of social media do you see?

ZAMAAN: Although you can't ignore the harms and complete lack of guardrails in this space, social media is not all bad. One of the great benefits is that I met Design It For Us co-founder Emma Lembke on Twitter, and that was an excellent place to connect around our shared interest in responsible technology. Many young people have experienced opportunities for connection and community around common interests through social media. It has created new ways of engaging and is one way that we do our activism even today.

ARIELLE: My background is in student social justice organizing. When I was in high school, I used social media to have my peers walk out of high school to protest inaction on gun violence prevention policies. I have also organized on the platform GenZ Girl Gang, a community of Gen Z women and femmes who are sharing professional information about how to show up in this world unapologetically. I've used social media for influencer campaigns on anti-vaping, climate change, and mental health. A lot of the reach that we've achieved as a coalition is because of social media. It's one way that we are able to get young people to not only care and post about issues online but also convert online caring into in-person action. Social media has helped us advocate for legislation, create coalitions, and engage in meaningful conversations online.

FRANCES: Yes, there are certainly those benefits. And yet we need to always be taking a step back and asking what we are trying to accomplish by having any given form of social media. Is it that we want to make new friends? Discover or learn more about a topic? Have spaces for expression? There's no intrinsic conflict for a lot of these needs.

If you design systems proactively on the idea that children are not just small adults, you can make spaces that fulfill those needs while respecting the dignity and autonomy of kids. The problem is that these platforms are only accountable to their shareholders (and in the case of Instagram, one shareholder). As long as we live in a system where there isn't much self-regulation, we cannot expect these companies to voluntarily implement safer practices, even when they know how to do so.

EDITORS: What can we do to end the harms of social media and ensure it promotes youth well-being?

FRANCES: If we want to see a genuine course correction and meaningful change to social media, we need to raise awareness of just how serious and significant its detrimental impacts are on young people today. It's easy to trivialize these concerns when you don't have a teenager at home or don't interact with young people regularly. I tell people that almost no one working at Facebook on the engineering, product, or design teams—the people who actually touch the product every day—has a child over the age of 11. Not even Mark Zuckerberg. So their children are not being impacted by its harms (yet). If they visited schools and talked to teachers, they would be shocked to learn that one of the top disciplinary issues is social media. And if more adults in general would talk to teenagers, they'd be shocked to learn how bad things are—and then they would act.

ZAMAAN: We also need to build awareness for young people who are impacted by these harms and may not even realize it. Young people haven't been given the vocabulary to talk about

*If you or anyone you know needs support, call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

> **"Young people haven't been given the vocabulary to talk about these problems in ways that help us understand our experiences and move forward with solutions."**
>
> **—ZAMAAN QURESHI**

these problems in ways that help us understand our experiences and move forward with solutions. Arielle and I often find that people don't realize the harms until their late teenage or early adult years because they never had someone with an outside perspective explain it to them. I think that's something the movement to end social media's harms can and should address. The AFT could be a great partner in this by helping to equip education professionals to introduce this vocabulary earlier so that young people are more aware of the harms they could be experiencing and can talk about them productively, recognizing what they've experienced and offering solutions within their individual and/or collective contexts.

FRANCES: As a society, we rarely discuss the problems or harms of social media openly. Without a counternarrative, young people may not even recognize that they need help. If all your peers are putting up with it and not talking about it, what's wrong with you that you can't deal with the way things are? I think it's damaging to localize responsibility for that trauma on the victim.

ARIELLE: Schools can be great places to start conversations about social media harms and get help, provided that they have resources in place to support students. The week I graduated high school, I lost one of my best friends to suicide. It's powerful when teachers can reduce some of the shame or stigma of asking for help by having these conversations and making themselves available to us as a trusted person to talk to. They can also provide resources so students know where to go when they need support.* Working with groups like Design It For Us gives young people scalable options to get involved in issues they're passionate about.

FRANCES: There are a lot of different ways to help young people talk about their experiences online, and storytelling is such a powerful tool for driving change. Our stories have consequences that ripple out into the world, and the advertisers, litigators, and state legislators who can put pressure on these companies need to understand why the need for action is so great.

ZAMAAN: At Design It For Us, we have a dedicated space where people can share their stories in the way that's best for them.† And, as Arielle said, educators have tremendous opportunities to gain young people's trust and let them know that it's OK to share experiences—whether it's a personal story or the experience of a family member or a friend—because stories drive this movement forward.

We are using these stories to fight for policy changes that will hold tech companies and social media platforms accountable. Our work shows young people that they can be the agents of change and push for things they believe in—and it shows that we have a lot of power when we work together. We helped pass the Maryland Age-Appropriate Design Code[5] in 2024 because of the groundswell of support from parents, educators, and young people who showed up and told their stories to lawmakers again and again. We beat the tech lobby, which tried hard to water down the bill and stop its passage. Once that bill takes full effect in 2026, it

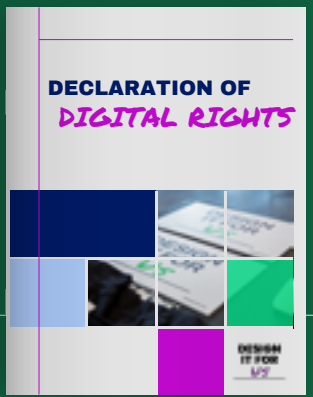
*Again, those in crisis can call or text 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Those trying to help others can also find guidance and support at 988lifeline.org/help-someone-else.

†To share a story of an experience with social media through Design It For Us, visit designitforus.org/stories.

Share My Lesson: Resources for Talking to Students About Social Media

With social media's mix of benefits and harms, in which opportunities to forge connections are embedded in intentionally addictive algorithms, it can be hard to figure out how to help students better understand and reflect on the impact social media is having on them. Share My Lesson has two collections—Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship and K–12 Teaching in the Era of AI and Social Media—filled with tools, lesson plans, blog posts, and webinars that unpack social media. One of those tools is "A Declaration of Digital Rights," a youth-led initiative spearheaded by Design It For Us that empowers youth to make safe, responsible online choices. Another, "AI Literacy: Preparing Students for Digital Spaces" by SML partner Common Sense Education, highlights lessons and strategies for discussing with students the social and ethical impacts of AI—including generative AI such as chatbots—and mitigating its potential harms.

Because educators are often among the first to know when students experience online harms, Share My Lesson also has guidance for offering support. For example, "Lessons on Children's Well-Being and Trauma-Informed Practice," part of SML's new Welcome-to-Teaching Conversation Series, considers five transformative healing gestures—listening, comfort, collaboration, celebration, and inspiration—that can create a classroom culture of compassion, resilience, and growth.



See go.aft.org/kbo for details on these and seven more resources.

–EDITORS

will provide safeguards for all teenagers and young people across Maryland. We're working to replicate that model in all 50 states and develop national standards that technology companies and social media platforms will be required to comply with.

FRANCES: To create meaningful change, school communities need to make intentional choices about the social media platforms they use, demanding transparency and accountability. One of the big things I'm pushing for is mandatory scorecards for social media platforms; they would have 100 core metrics covering the 20 worst problems with social media. Getting access to just 20 metrics—or even 10—about these platforms would allow people to make more informed choices about which platforms align with their values. We could know, for instance, which platforms allow kids to be active on them between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. or what percentage of teenage girls received an unwanted sexual communication in the last seven days (on Instagram, that number is one in eight[6]). Tech companies and platforms could publish these data if they wanted to—and if we came together to demand it. This simple intervention would have a huge impact. It would influence how companies build their products, how advertisers spend their dollars, and how people choose to spend their time.

We also need to advocate for a set of consumer rights for our digital age. We have some sense of the rights we need: to control personal data, to know when your camera is turned on, and to influence or even reset your algorithms so that you don't continue to see harmful content. I've talked to therapists who say they have kids who are trying to do the right thing to manage an eating disorder, but when they go on Instagram, that content follows them. Should those kids have to choose between the friends they've interacted with on the app and the memories they've posted, and an algorithm that wants to pull them further down into physical, mental, and emotional distress? Why should they have to choose when they could instead reset the algorithm and go back to a baseline of innocuous content?

Imagine a world where kids can be on social media and only can receive content that they explicitly ask for. When people aren't presented with an alternative vision of what social media could be, they don't view their current situation as unacceptable, and they don't demand other options.

Another strategy to try is warning labels, which could be quite effective in changing the societal perception that social media is innocuous. They can also help change the conversation for parents about what is behind the significant mental health declines and other impacts of social media. A lot of parents are frustrated. They know they're seeing changes in their kids' well-being, but they don't know who or what is to blame. Warning labels can be effective in communicating that these devices and platforms are meaningfully dangerous.

ZAMAAN: Accountability is also crucial. Instagram recently announced it was rolling out a feature to turn off notifications at night for young people.[7] So if they're going to propose these changes—and they've proposed similar changes in the past—we need to be able to see that they're actually implementing them, and we need access to the data that show whether these changes truly improve the lives of young people.

> **"School communities need to make intentional choices about the social media platforms they use, demanding transparency and accountability."**
>
> **—FRANCES HAUGEN**

ARIELLE: The good news is that young people are leading the way on these and other solutions. Historically, young people have been champions of social justice issues and have made incredible progress. Design It For Us is one example of that, but there are so many young people who are passionate. I encourage young people to get involved. I also encourage parents, guardians, and teachers to empower young people to think critically about these issues and to uplift their voices when young people come to them not only with problems, but also with solutions.

ZAMAAN: I think there's a tendency to look at this issue and think about how bleak it is because of the iron grip these powerful companies have maintained on their status quo. But people have tremendous power when they organize, mobilize, and speak out about what they believe in. That's how we've been able to make inroads in a short amount of time. Last year was the onset of state policy in this area. And more and more people are understanding the harms and deciding to do something about it, so we're having more conversations about safer social media. We've come so far already, and together I think we will continue to see progress. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/geismar_qureshi_haugen.

Preventing the Harms of Social Media

NYSUT Leads the Way

PHOTOS BY EL-WISE NOISETTE, COURTESY OF NYSUT

BY MELINDA PERSON

There is no denying that the current generation of tweens and teens lives in a media-saturated world, and that their media use increased precipitously during the pandemic.[1] As educators, we are more than just witnesses to an emerging trend; we are first responders, forced to reckon with the consequences of this new reality and its profound impact on our young people.

As president of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), I've talked to countless educators who believe that social media is making a giant hole in their students' lives. Even as tech companies claim the purpose of their platforms is to keep students connected, our members report that their students seem to be more disconnected than ever—from one another, from their families, and even from themselves.[2]

Teens and tweens, who are more prone than adults to problematic social media use, are being served up an endless array of toxic and addictive content, and their endless scrolling is taking time away from sleep, studies, hobbies, and in-person engagement.[3] As a result, today's students are confronting high levels of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation.[4] Social media and digital spaces are also giving anonymous predators and bullies unprecedented access to our children,[5] but anguished parents tell us the laws seem designed to protect the platforms that harbor these aggressors.[6]

As a first step in mitigating the harms of social media, former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory in 2023.[7] Then in 2024, he went further, saying that social media platforms should be required to display a surgeon general's warning "stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents."[8]

Compelled by the growing list of harms and stories of loss, our members united behind legislation to protect New York's students from social media's pernicious effects. In October 2023, NYSUT joined Governor Kathy Hochul and New York Attorney General Letitia James to announce new legislation aimed at protecting our children from some of social media's most predatory features.[9]

The Stop Addictive Feeds Exploitation (SAFE) for Kids Act protects kids by banning social media platforms from offering addictive feeds to anyone under the age of 18 without parental consent,[10] and the New York Child Data Protection Act prohibits online platforms from collecting, using, sharing, or selling personal data of anyone under 18 without informed consent and anyone under 13 without parental consent.[11] To enhance enforcement, both bills allow the New York attorney general to seek damages or civil penalties for any violations.

> **Students seem to be more disconnected than ever—from one another, from their families, and even from themselves.**

Our lobbying and advocacy paid off. The bills were signed into law in June 2024.[12]

The bills were an important first step in curbing the power these platforms have over kids, but we aren't done. We are determined to make sure our schools are places where both students and educators are thriving.

Melinda Person is the president of New York State United Teachers. A former sixth-grade teacher, she has also worked for the New York State Assembly and the New York State Division of the Budget.

In school hallways, cellphones are almost as ubiquitous as backpacks, and educators across the country are saying it's a problem.[13] Those of us who are in schools every day see that the constant use of personal electronics—not just phones, but earbuds, watches, and other distractions—is impacting our students' ability to focus, connect with their fellow students, be present in reality, and engage in authentic learning.

In September 2024, NYSUT hosted "Disconnected," a conference to explore the impact that cellphones, social media, and technology are having on schools and learning. During the conference, policymakers, healthcare clinicians, and law enforcement described the perils of being overconnected to devices.[14]

It's not just that devices are detrimental to academics; these devices also get in the way of face-to-face communication, depriving kids of vital opportunities to create community and develop a genuine sense of belonging. Instead, students live in their own bubbles where they are inundated with toxic content, are vulnerable to cyberbullying and exploitation, and hold themselves to unrealistic standards.

After the summit, based on mountains of data as well as real stories of harm inflicted by cellphones and social media, NYSUT's Board of Directors passed a resolution calling for a statewide policy restricting personal devices for the length of the school day.[15]

New York educators have long favored a statewide policy restricting cellphone use. A recent NYSUT survey found that 85 percent of NYSUT members supported restricting the use of cellphones and smart devices for the entire school day, provided there were approved exceptions for health or instructional purposes.

NYSUT's new resolution supports a statewide policy that conforms to those principles, with restrictions on devices from opening to dismissal, and with necessary exceptions allowed for students' health and well-being. Additionally, the resolution specifies that any cellphone plan should be designed locally, with input from families, educators, unions, and other stakeholders.

But what of school safety? We can't have phone-free schools, some parents and guardians say, because we need to be able to reach our kids during a crisis. As a mother, I understand this belief, but on behalf of educators and law enforcement, I tell them they're getting it wrong. Phones are threats to students' learning and well-being during a normal school day—and may be exponentially more dangerous during an emergency.

Devices get in the way of face-to-face communication, depriving kids of opportunities to create community and develop a sense of belonging.

There are a few critical reasons why phones may make students *less* safe at school.[16] If there is a shooting or crisis in the building, students need to be completely focused. They need to pay attention to instructions, get the correct information, and stay aware of their surroundings. With phones in their hands, students have a hard time doing any of those things.

Instead of listening to their teachers, they will be tempted to contact their family and friends. Rather than hearing accurate information from school leaders and safety personnel, students will see rumors and misinformation spreading on social media and messaging apps. They might even take action that will make them, and their peers, less safe.

Worst of all, phones can make kids easier to find by someone who intends them harm. When students are trying to hide from a shooter in the building, a phone can make noise and emit light, giving away their location and making them a target.

In January 2025, Governor Hochul called for statewide standards on student cellphone use during the school day. The proposed legislation, which Hochul said was the result of countless conversations with educators and families, calls for "bell to bell" cellphone restrictions.[17] NYSUT members made their voices heard when it came to getting the two social media bills passed in 2024, and we are prepared to do what it takes to get school cellphone legislation passed too.

NYSUT will always advocate for what is best for kids and our school communities, and that means restricting these devices to prioritize students' mental and physical health. It means protecting our students from online predators and exploitation. It means promoting distraction-free learning environments and creating more opportunities for positive interactions with peers and educators.

Importantly, we have heard nothing but positive feedback from members who work at schools where limits have been set and responsibly enforced. They say restricting cellphones and related devices improved the climate of their schools, promoted student engagement, and reduced stress and anxiety. They described transformed environments, where students' heads are lifted, their hands raised in greeting, ready to meet the day.[18]

That's the vision we have for all New York students. ❐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/person.

Legislating Safeguards

States' Role in Mitigating the Harm of Social Media

AP PHOTO / SUSAN WALSH

BY MARISA SHEA

The national conversation around students' use of social media seems almost inescapable—and rightly so. Ninety-five percent of youth ages 13–17 report using a social media platform, with more than a third of them using social media "almost constantly."[1] According to a recent advisory from former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, use of these platforms can be detrimental to young people's health, potentially leading to tech addiction, sleep deficits, and increased levels of stress, among other harms.[2] The American public is becoming increasingly aware of how the platforms have disguised addiction as "engagement" to justify their deliberate designs. Now, more than ever, families, educators, and advocates are clamoring for solutions to hold social media platforms accountable.

Over the past two legislative sessions, state and local governments have taken a variety of approaches to keep children safe and hold social media platforms accountable for their dangerous designs. Legislative strategies range from limiting use of cellphones in schools* and redesigning tech products and social media platforms, to increasing requirements for parental controls and even banning social media platform use by young people. Read on for a brief overview of these efforts, and some of the pros and cons of these differing approaches.

Cellphones and Schools

At first glance, removing cellphones from schools seems like an immediate fix. In theory, if young people have several hours of mandatory phone-free time during the school day, the impact of these devices will be lessened.

In May 2023, Florida enacted a law that required all school districts to develop and implement rules barring students' use of cellphones during class time.[3] Eight other states have since taken similar actions, with many school districts or local governments across the country instituting phone policies as well.[4] These state-level laws and local policies vary greatly. Some prohibit use of cellphones for the entirety of the school day, while others limit their use only during instruction.[5]

One thing every phone-free school policy has in common is the creation of additional burdens on educators, who are required to enforce the policy and take action to ensure students comply. The policies also do not address the underlying risks associated with social media since the focus is on when students have access, rather than the addictive design features of the products and the documented harms associated with their use.

Because this is an emerging trend, little is known about the impact that cellphone policies are having in schools and whether there's evidence of disparate impact or enforcement. Reporting suggests that cellphone bans or limits during the school day reduce distraction in the classroom and that prohibiting the use of phones during non-learning time increases social interactions between students at lunch.[6] Where phone use has been tied to bullying or fighting during the school day, there seems to be a sense that restricting phone use has a positive impact. Now, questions are emerging about addressing the use of smartwatches and other related devices.

More data need to be gathered on parents' and caregivers' perspectives, but there seems to be some division. A 2024 survey found that 66 percent of parents believe stu-

Marisa Shea is a lawyer who advocates for policy reform at the state level. She's a former policy committee staffer for the California State Senate, where she focused on policy work aimed at creating better resourced, more equitable communities.

*If you would like to get involved in reducing phone use among children, see the resources developed for families, educators, and advocates by The Anxious Generation coalition at anxiousgeneration.com/resources.

dents should be allowed to have cellphones in school, but only 30 percent feel phones should be allowed in the classroom. This seems to stem from some parents wanting to be able to contact students during the school day on their personal devices in case of emergency.[7] Students also report mixed feelings about the policies, with some finding bans infantilizing and others appreciating what they see as a positive impact on their in-person interactions with peers.[8]

Design-Focused Legislation

State legislatures have been looking at various opportunities to address the risks that social media poses to children and teens.[9] Another trend that has emerged is regulating the design of online services, products, and features to increase safety for youth. Some states, like California,[10] Maryland,[11] and Vermont,[12] have explored versions of age-appropriate design codes that limit how tech companies may collect, retain, and use the personal data of minors; require privacy settings be heightened by default; and prohibit companies from employing design features such as manipulative practices and profiling. These requirements would result in social media—and other online spaces such as video games—being redesigned to limit the ways companies manipulate a minor's personal data to create addictive online experiences that draw them in and keep them scrolling longer than they might have intended.

State legislatures took their inspiration from the Age Appropriate Design Code passed in 2020 in the United Kingdom. Since that time, companies have made hundreds of changes in the UK to their platforms that have enhanced youths' online experiences by mitigating the impact of notifications, prohibiting direct messaging from strangers, creating options for chronological feeds, and pushing screen time reminders.[13] In fact, some of the largest social media platforms rolled out large campaigns this past fall focused on such changes, as well as increased parental control options, in an effort to assure families of their products' safety. But as the Q&A participants note (see page 35), these self-imposed changes do not go far enough and can be difficult for parents and caregivers to use—so stricter legislation is still needed.

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AP PHOTO/RICK BOWMER, FILE

Some states, such as New York,[14] have prohibited social media's use of nighttime notifications and algorithmic feeds without parent or caregiver consent. This model is specifically targeting social media feeds and notifications because of their potential to create addiction-like behaviors in young people.[15]

The goal of both legislative approaches is to negate the ways the products manipulate users by requiring that companies take responsibility for their intentional product designs. Reducing addictive design elements can potentially make students less distracted and sleep-deprived by the apps on their cellphones.

> **Reducing addictive design elements can potentially make students less distracted and sleep-deprived.**

Design-focused legislation attempts to avoid addressing behaviors typically considered speech and thus avoid the First Amendment arguments that social media platforms use to fight regulatory efforts; yet, tech trade associations continue to file lawsuits against regulation.[16] For example, a lawsuit is currently preventing implementation of the California Age-Appropriate Design Code.[17] As a result, versions of that law introduced in other states, like Maryland, were amended, and the Maryland Kids Code went into effect in October 2024.[18]

The Impact of Ban Bills and Parental Controls

Some states have sought to outright prohibit children's and teens' use of social media platforms. This model of regulation began in Utah in 2023 and would have resulted in children and teens being unable to create a social media account without parental consent.[19] The law would also have given parents extensive access to their child's account, along with some other platform design changes. Ohio quickly followed in Utah's footsteps, but both states' laws were effectively blocked through litigation by a tech trade association. Utah then repealed its law and replaced it with legislation focused more on parental supervision of minors' accounts. Ohio allowed the court's stay to stand. It is evident that reliance on bans or parental controls will not correct the underlying problem. Tech companies will continue to intentionally design addictive products and foist all responsibility for addressing harms inherent to their product design onto families.

Each of the above efforts highlights the need for action. As noted by Surgeon General Murthy, in times of crisis we do not have the luxury to wait for perfect information; we must assess the available facts, use our best judgment, and act quickly to respond.[20] Educators, families, school district leaders, and local, state, and federal lawmakers are facing a growing crisis related to adolescent mental health and the impact of tech overuse. Together, we must respond based on the available facts and our best judgment. There are no easy solutions, but rather a multitude of tools we must use to try to forge a better tomorrow. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/shea.

Learning to Verify

Teaching students to sort fact from fiction, op-ed from advertorial, is crucial. Mike Caulfield, the manager of academic and collaborative technologies at the University of Washington Bothell, and Sam Wineburg, a co-founder of the Digital Inquiry Group and professor emeritus at Stanford University, have been testing out strategies for more than a decade, and they've figured out some effective methods that even middle schoolers can learn. Here, we share an excerpt from their 2023 book, Verified, *and links to their free resources for educators.*

—EDITORS

BY MIKE CAULFIELD AND SAM WINEBURG

The video is shocking. Two women approach a historic painting in London's National Gallery and seemingly destroy it. As orange goop streaks down the painting, they read a statement about climate change and glue themselves to the gallery wall. Tweeting the video to his 18,000 followers, British journalist Damien Gayle reveals that the activists "have thrown tomato soup"[1] on Vincent van Gogh's beloved *Sunflowers*. Within 24 hours, the video racked up 40 million views.

Reaction was swift. For a rare moment, the political left and the political right found common cause. Destruction of art, as one tweeter summarized, "represents a repudiation of civilisation and the achievements of humanity."[2] The sentiment received about 10,000 retweets. Replies and retweets advocated long prison sentences for the women or, van Gogh–like, cutting off their ears.

All this outrage and concern missed a crucial fact: *Sunflowers* was behind glass.

Apart from minimal damage to the frame, the painting emerged unscathed. The soup had splashed harmlessly on the painting's protective case—a fact the protesters knew, many bystanders knew, and the gallery knew.

Skillfully navigating the internet requires conceptions of critical thinking tailored to a digital environment. In over a decade of research, we set out to distill a small set of flexible techniques that would allow users to resolve easy questions quickly and inform difficult ones in not much more time.

Along with teams of fellow researchers, we field-tested our approach with students in middle school, high school, and college, as well as with adults, in the United States, Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. To date, 13 separate studies involving nearly 10,000 participants have shown the effectiveness of our approach in helping people make better choices online.[3] And in one of the most recent studies, students showed a sixfold increase in use of fact-checking techniques and a fivefold increase in citations of appropriate context after only seven hours of instruction.[4] Today, Mike's SIFT methods (discussed below) have become a mainstay of information literacy workshops, while the Digital Inquiry Group's "Civic Online Reasoning" curriculum developed at Stanford is used in high schools and universities all over the country.[5] While we can only share a handful of methods here, our instructional materials are available for free online (see "Free Resources for Educators" on page 45).

The Three Contexts

Over the past decade, we've looked at how students and the general public judge information that reaches them through the web. Our first finding will not surprise you, given both the state of the world and your social media feeds: on the internet, people reason quite poorly.[6]

The second finding is more surprising. Many so-called experts assumed that the mistakes people made on the web resulted

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EGLE PLYTNIKAITE

from a lack of critical thinking. But when we looked at why people got confused, we found it wasn't their thinking that malfunctioned. In fact, people were thinking quite hard, asking themselves: Does this seem plausible? Does this match how I think the world works?

Those are not bad questions. However, in areas where people have little expertise, or lack direct experience, asking such questions isn't the first order of business. The first task when confronted with the unfamiliar is not analysis. It is the gathering of context. Let's consider three crucial contexts that ground reasoning on the web and elsewhere:

- The context of the *source*. What's the reputation of the source of information that you arrive at, whether through a social feed, a shared link, or a Google search result?
- The context of the *claim*. What have others said about the claim? If it's a story, what's the larger story? If a statistic, what's the larger context?
- Finally, the context of *you*. What is your level of expertise in the area? What is your interest in the claim? What makes such a claim or source compelling to you, and what could change that?[7]

We found that when students attended to these contexts, spending as little as 30 seconds reflecting and seeking basic information on the web, something stunning happened. Supposedly weak "critical thinkers" became strong critical thinkers, without any additional training in logic or analysis. They made better decisions, leaned less on faulty presuppositions, and were fooled less by deceptive appearances and dirty tricks. They often showed greater nuance and stronger logical argument.

How could 30 seconds of simple web techniques, applied consistently, result in such transformation? People who don't seek context find themselves devoting a lot of thought to the issue. Their thinking, however, is not a whole lot more advanced than mere playground speculation.

We see this in the *Sunflowers* story. While mistakes initially appear to be related to a deficit of *thinking*, they are much more related to a lack of *doing*. Once students engaged in context-seeking, the thinking often sorted itself out. With a dose of context, they were able to solve simple problems quickly, and they grounded deeper investigations in better sources, assumptions, and data.

Introducing SIFT

It's one thing to know the context you need. It's another to build a habit of seeking it out. In our scholarly work, we've often pretested participants on examples, telling them that they should assess the credibility of a claim by whatever means might help, including leaving a site and searching the web. We've gotten a variety of responses. Some participants remained glued to the original website, descending into "plausibility analysis"—that is, given what I know, do I think this thing is likely to have happened? Does it "sound" right? Never mind that the issue at hand is about cell biology and one's experience consists solely of having watched the TV show *House, M.D.*

More perplexing is the response of a smaller number of participants, often formulated as "I'd have to know." For example, a student might say, "To know if this was credible, I'd have to know more about the author." That's true, of course, but misses the bigger question: What's stopping the student from finding out more? It's a simple act of opening another tab and starting the search. Still, for some students, the gap between thought and action proves too large.

For this reason, the main tool we give students is formulated not as a set of questions to ask but as a set of things to do before they start reasoning about a specific piece of content that reaches them through the web. We've put them in an easy-to-remember acronym: SIFT.

- *Stop*. Ask yourself what you really know about the claim and the source that's sharing it. For the moment, forget about questions of truth or falsehood. Do you really know what you're looking at? Are you sure? If you find it upsetting or surprising, why?
- *Investigate the source*. Do a quick check to see if the source is trustworthy for this purpose. In a lot of cases, for simple claims, you can stop here if the source is good.
- *Find other coverage*. Whether you are looking at a news report or a research claim, take a second to zoom out and see what other sources say. Engage in "lateral reading" by opening up new tabs in your browser and using the internet to check the internet.[8] If the story or claim is not being picked up by other reputable sources, proceed cautiously.
- *Trace the claim, quote, or media to the original context*. Sometimes the first source you encountered isn't great, but it links to where it got its information. Go to that original source and judge (a) whether it's reputable, and (b) whether it actually supports the assertion.

We can't promise that if you follow this advice, you'll never again forward a celebrity death hoax or cite a sketchy publication in your health policy paper. What we can guarantee is that those errors will be fewer and farther between. Just as important, you'll become more confident sharing things that matter to you.

The main tool we give students is a set of things to do before they start reasoning.

Takeaways

- When we encounter something online, our first question shouldn't be "Is this true?" but rather "Do we know what we're looking at?"
- Knowing what we're looking at requires getting quick context. This requires leaving the original source and reading laterally.
- SIFT is a way to help you get the sort of quick context that is essential to knowing what you're looking at.
- Practicing the moves of SIFT can help you answer simple questions quickly and ground your understanding before moving on to more nuanced investigations. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/caulfield_wineburg.

Free Resources for Educators

For the SIFT methods, start with this brief introduction: go.aft.org/h26. Then, for a 2.5- to 3-hour course that can be adapted for high school students or assigned to college students, see go.aft.org/lcx.

For the "Civic Online Reasoning" curriculum, which includes free lesson plans, videos, and professional development opportunities for educators, go to the website of the Digital Inquiry Group (DIG). And, be sure to check out DIG's "Reading Like a Historian" curriculum and other free resources at inquirygroup.org.

ASK THE COGNITIVE SCIENTIST

Understanding Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom

How does the mind work—and especially how does it learn? Teachers' instructional decisions are based on a mix of theories learned in teacher education, trial and error, craft knowledge, and gut instinct. Such knowledge often serves us well, but is there anything sturdier to rely on?

Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary field of researchers from psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and anthropology who seek to understand the mind. In this regular *American Educator* column, we consider findings from this field that are strong and clear enough to merit classroom application.

By R. J. R. Blair and Daniel T. Willingham

QUESTION: How can we better understand and support children who are highly aggressive?

ANSWER: Aggression has multiple causes and is part of the typical human's behavioral repertoire. However, a small percentage of children engage in more severe and more frequent aggressive behavior than is typical, and these children may have differences in several mental processes (rooted in genetics and/or their environment) that require treatment. The good news is that most of these children can be helped—if they have access to therapeutic interventions. In this article, our aim is to increase understanding of these differences so that educators can become stronger advocates for connecting these children to mental health services.

Student aggression causes considerable disruption for both peers and teachers. Aggressive students make it harder for their classmates to learn, diminish teacher job satisfaction, and contribute to educator burnout over time.[1] This is not just a US problem. A 2019 report examined data from students ages 9 to 17 from 144 countries and found that, on average, one-third of students reported an incident of peer aggression within the previous month.[2] Teachers at a school in the United Kingdom actually went on strike due to concerns that their school was unsafe for staff due to pupil violence.[3]

Psychologists' definition of *aggression* matches its everyday usage: aggression is intentional behavior meant to cause either physical or psychological pain.[4] Thus, a student who spreads a rumor about another child on social media with the intention of

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embarrassing her is acting aggressively. That's true even if the plan backfires, with the aggressor ending up shunned and the target suffering no consequences. But if a student carelessly bumps another child who then falls and breaks his ankle, no aggression has taken place. Intent, not outcome, is everything for defining aggression (though outcome still matters for students and for educators creating a safe, caring environment).

Of course, there is a multitude of reasons why a child might act aggressively. Even though many of us wish this were not true, aggression is a standard human response—in many situations, it's perfectly normal. Aggression can be used to achieve dominance, be used to acquire resources in situations where they might not otherwise be readily available, and be seen in response to frustration, a threat, or social provocation. So it's no surprise that many social variables, such as economic deprivation and a high-stress home environment, can increase the risk for aggression.[5] But this type of "normal" aggression—and all the potential systemic, historical, environmental, economic, and political causes—is outside the scope of this article. As cognitive scientists, we're only focusing on how the risk for aggression can also be increased by *neuro-cognitive difficulties*—and what we can do about those difficulties. Neuro-cognitive difficulties are mental processes mediated by known brain systems that are not working as well as would be expected for a child of a given age. In this article, we'll discuss four such processes. At the same time, we acknowledge that the divide between systemic, historical, etc., causes of aggression and neuro-cognitive ones is not as clean as our introduction sounds. Neuro-cognitive difficulties can arise from genetics and from the conditions in which a child is living—often both are involved. Regardless of the cause, the core message of our article remains: most highly aggressive children can be helped, especially if the adults around them know about and advocate for therapeutic interventions.

Two indications of the presence of neuro-cognitive difficulties are the severity and the frequency of the aggression (a fight that ends with bruises is very different from a string of fights that end with several people hospitalized). Of course, severe and frequent aggression may indicate a neuro-cognitive difficulty but not a diagnosis—and even these indicators can be ambiguous because they are open to interpretation and have historically been applied with bias. It's well documented that in our communities and schools, misbehaviors are judged as more serious if they are committed by a Black child rather than a white child.[6]

Despite the difficulty in interpretation, it is important not to ignore potential neuro-cognitive difficulties. Unfortunately, biases occur here too, as there are strong indications that Black people are far less likely than non-Hispanic white people to receive the mental health services they need.[7]

The goal of this article is to provide insight into some of the difficulties faced by some children who show high levels of aggression. Our goal is not to explain the aggression of every child or even of the majority of children who show aggression—as noted, there are myriad social and contextual reasons why an individual might be aggressive. Instead, our goal is to help educators understand those individuals—estimated at perhaps 1 to 2 percent of children—who show aggression regularly and whose aggression is more likely to result in significant harm to victims. We hope that increased understanding will lead to better management, including providing the interventions these children need and deserve, and to a calmer and more productive classroom environment.

How Do Psychologists Understand Aggression?

Psychologists distinguish between two types of aggression: instrumental and reactive. Instrumental aggression is chosen to achieve a particular goal. For example, a preschooler might punch a peer to make him relinquish a swing on the playground. Reactive aggression, in contrast, is associated with anger and occurs in response to provocation, a threat, or frustration. Causes of frustration can be varied—from a sense of the injustice of a particular situation to the experience of a classroom computer not turning on.

Both forms of aggression can be within the scope of "healthy" social interactions. We see instrumental aggression when football players try to physically hurt opposing players, or when basketball players seek psychological damage through trash-talking. These are accepted by all involved as part of the games. Moreover, all mammals show reactive aggression if provoked by a strong enough threat (and again, this may be within socially accepted norms). For example, US President Andrew Jackson faced an assassination attempt in 1835 as he left the US Capitol. When the assassin's gun misfired, Jackson attacked the man with his cane (and survived because the assassin's second gun also misfired). Many Americans today would likely see that instance of reactive aggression as understandable.

But instrumental or reactive aggression may not be within social norms—that is, either may be out of proportion to the context. Hitting someone with your cane is proportionate if your target just tried to kill you, but not if your target merely criticized your hat.

Is This Typical or Clinical Aggression?

Educators and researchers alike are much more concerned about acts of disproportionate aggression than typical aggression, and isolated acts are not likely to be cause for long-term concern. But when such acts are part of a persistent pattern, they may be a sign of a child in need of significant support. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR), published by the American Psychiatric Association, is the widely accepted authority on definitions and diagnostic criteria for mental disorders.[8] It lists two diagnoses specifically associated with aggression during childhood: oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder.

Oppositional defiant disorder is seen primarily before age 10, and the symptoms are a combination of angry/irritable mood, vindictiveness, and defiant behavior, all lasting at least six months. Children with this disorder often don't comply with requests from authority figures, deliberately annoy others, and blame others for their mistakes or misdeeds.

Conduct disorder usually applies to children ages 10 to 18 and is defined by the commission of aggressive acts toward people and animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness, and the violation of community rules (e.g., skipping school or running away from home). These behaviors demonstrate a persistent tendency to violate the rights of others and to flout the rules of society.

A third diagnosis worth mentioning is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (difficulty to focus), hyperactivity (excess movement that is not appropriate for the setting), and impulsivity (actions engaged in without thought). Children with ADHD are at increased risk for aggression[9] and often also meet criteria for conduct disorder. Up to 70 percent of children with conduct disorder also receive diagnoses of ADHD.

Most highly aggressive children can be helped, especially if the adults around them advocate for therapeutic interventions.

The criteria we listed for oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and ADHD are categories of behavior, and the DSM-5-TR provides guidance about how to interpret everyday behaviors to judge whether they fit any categories. Still, in many respects, these diagnoses are not terribly helpful. Both conduct disorder and oppositional disorder have been used to guide interventions, but neither diagnosis is successful in predicting whether an individual will benefit from any specific intervention. Moreover, possession of a diagnosis does not inevitably mean the individual has neuro-cognitive difficulties. Contextual reasons for aggression—such as being exposed to aggression among peers and/or family members or enduring long-term poverty—can lead to diagnoses in the absence of neuro-cognitive risk. Moreover, many other diagnoses, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and forms of anxiety disorder, are also associated with at least some increased risk for aggression.

The benefit of a diagnosis is that it increases the chance that the individual will receive the help of mental health professionals. And yet, we must be mindful of the well-established problems of inappropriate diagnosis, particularly of young Black males. For example, compared with their white peers, youth of color are less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD and more likely to be diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder, even after controlling for confounding variables (like prior juvenile offenses or adverse experiences). This is problematic because misdiagnosed youth may not have access to needed medications, in-school accommodations, or community-based therapies.[10]

What Underlies Clinical Aggression?

Because the diagnoses don't provide much help with respect to guiding interventions, we believe that greater attention should be paid to the range of underlying mental processes that can give rise to an increased risk for aggression rather than the diagnoses *per se*. A more detailed understanding of these underlying processes offers the promise of more individualized interventions.

Behavioral and neuroscientific data point to four mental processes that, if operating atypically, can lead to aggression. We describe each in turn. Children with heightened levels of aggression most often do not show problems in all four of these processes. Indeed, some may show none. But many clinically aggressive children do show at least one. Just what causes dysfunction in these mental processes is not well understood, although both genetics and the conditions in which a child is living are implicated.

1. Acute threat response. There is a brain system that organizes the basic mammalian response to threat: freezing for mild threats, fleeing for more serious threats, and reactive aggression for strong threats. If all is going well, reactive aggression will only occur in response to extreme threats (perhaps a human attacker or a rabid animal). But there are factors that can increase the responsiveness of this system, making reactive aggression more likely in response to threats that would prompt most people to freeze or flee. These factors can be genetic but also environmental; in particular, exposure to a threatening environment or to abuse.[11] Of course, one may then ask what level of exposure is sufficiently toxic to impact brain function? This is a complex issue and is different for each individual. More severe and frequent exposure increase risk, but resilience factors—within the individual, such as their ability to self-regulate their emotions, and within their social environment, such as the availability of supportive family or friends—reduce risk. In the classroom, over-responsiveness of the acute threat response brain system might manifest as explosive rage in response to what for other children would feel like a mild threat, such as being frustrated (perhaps following the denial of a toy or, in an older child, a phone) or being socially challenged by a peer or teacher.

2. Response control/behavioral disinhibition. Considerable evidence points toward the role of the several brain regions in control of behavior.[12] This control is necessary when, for example, a child knows she should be attentive to the teacher, but a cute dog is visible outside the classroom window. Problems with response control may increase the risk for aggression,[13] but the increase will probably show only if there is already some propensity to be aggressive. For instance, if the child felt the urge to rage or grab another child's belongings, difficulties in response control make it more likely that the child will actually do those things.

3. Reward- and punishment-based decision-making. Several brain regions are important for reward-based decision-making; these regions allow us to anticipate what a reward or punishment will feel like and respond to rewards or punishments once received. That's crucial to allow us to make good decisions—that

is, to choose the behaviors that will give us the most reward. If these systems are not working well, the individual will make poorer decisions—choosing, for example, a small reward now rather than a much larger reward in the future (like playing truant for the day as opposed to attending school regularly to ensure graduation). Such poorer decision-making increases the risk the individual will engage in aggression and also increases the risk for future substance abuse.[14] These problems in judgment may occur over a long period (being truant rather than trying to excel) or a short period (taking a drum from the school band room to play with for the afternoon, even though it's likely you'll get caught and face consequences).

4. Empathy. The brain regions important for empathy—specifically, for responding to the distress of other individuals—together with those involved in decision-making, reduce the probability that we will harm others. If these systems are not working well, the individual will be more willing to harm others to achieve their goals.[15] They may be more likely to use weapons at school (rather than simply threaten to use them) and continue to attack another child even when that child is attempting to disengage.

What Makes Children Prone to Clinical Aggression?

There are genetic contributions to the risk for aggression,[16] which presumably prevent typical functioning of the four mental processes described above.[17] However, the details of these contributions—which specific sets of genes play a role and how they influence development—remain mostly unknown.[18]

There are also many social and environmental variables—including home and community variables (many with systemic, historical, etc., causes) as well as environmental toxins such as lead exposure—that influence brain development and increase the risk for aggression. While there are too many variables to review here, educators should be aware of the potential impact of abuse and neglect. Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse all increase sensitivity of the acute threat response, particularly if the abuse is persistent and severe.[19] Neglect (physical and emotional) appears to reduce the brain response to reward.[20]

How Can We Reduce Clinical Aggression?

When people hear that there is a genetic influence on a propensity to behave aggressively, they sometimes conclude that nothing can be done. The word "genetic" is equated with inevitability. But that's inaccurate. Consider that there are genetic risk factors for depression and for obesity, but that doesn't mean children suffering from these health issues cannot be helped.

A number of different interventions may reduce children's clinical aggression, and they are usefully divided into psychosocial and pharmacological interventions. Note that the ones we describe below were designed by mental health professionals for use by psychologists and/or psychiatrists. Our purpose in describing a few of the more commonly used interventions is to give educators a better understanding of how clinically aggressive children—no matter what the underlying causes are—can be helped.*

Psychosocial interventions. Two main psychosocial interventions used for aggression, as well as anger/irritability, are cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent management training.[21] Cognitive-behavioral therapy targets deficits in emotion regulation and social problem-solving skills that are associated with aggressive behavior.[22] Interventions are conducted with the child and use structured strategies to produce changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.[23] Common techniques include helping the child learn to identify the antecedents and consequences of their aggressive behavior, learning strategies for recognizing angry feelings and regulating expressions of anger, generating new ways of thinking about things that trigger aggression, and modeling and rehearsing socially appropriate behaviors that can replace angry and aggressive reactions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy has been successful in helping children who have experienced abuse; it seems most effective for children who have difficulty managing the acute threat response.[24]

Parent management training aims to change family interactions, specifically to reduce parenting behaviors that prompt the child's irritability and aggression. It assumes that some forms of irritable behavior and aggression are reinforcing for the child. For example, a child who doesn't want to go to school (perhaps because another child has been teasing him) may throw a violent tantrum. The parent concludes, "We can't send him to school like *this*," and allows him to stay home—and the child learns that a violent tantrum allows an escape.

During parent management training, parents (or the primary caregivers) are taught to identify the function of maladaptive behavior, to give praise for appropriate behavior, to communicate directions effectively, to ignore maladaptive attention-seeking behavior, and to use consistent consequences for disruptive behaviors. Parent management training is conducted with parents, though sometimes in conjunction with their children.[25] It primarily targets aggression the child learned through previous less-than-optimal social interactions. It is not specifically designed to address the mental process difficulties described above (acute threat response, disinhibition, decision-making, and empathy). However, by reducing some particularly maladaptive parenting strategies (e.g., harsh and inconsistent discipline, such as excessive scolding and corporal punishment), it may reduce environmentally induced hyper-responsiveness to acute threats (and thus reduce irritability and/or rage-based aggression).

Considerable research indicates that cognitive-behavioral therapy and parent management training reduce irritability

*Yet another topic that is outside the scope of this article, but educators should be aware of, is that sometimes the best intervention is targeting the root cause of aggression—such as trauma, abuse, neglect, and/or depression—with the hope that the aggression will fade once its catalyst has been addressed.

and aggression.[26] These improvements in child behavior can be stable over time and prevent antisocial behavior in adulthood.[27] However, they do not benefit all children equally. This may reflect that these interventions have yet to be optimized to address other difficulties that some aggressive children struggle with. Recent work demonstrated that children who did not benefit from one of the most successful forms of parent management training showed particular difficulty in their empathic responding to the distress of others.[28] Interventions will need to be adjusted individually to help all children.

Pharmacological interventions. The most commonly used pharmacological medications for reducing children's risk for aggression are neuroleptic (antipsychotic) medications. These are reported to have some impact on reducing aggression.[29] However, the mechanism by which they have an impact remains unclear. Far more research needs to be done. Currently, it is not certain whether neuroleptic medication beneficially impacts any of the mental processes outlined above.

Stimulants, like Adderall, are another pharmacological intervention that has been shown to reduce aggression risk, in particular in youth with ADHD.[30] Mechanistically, this might occur via reducing general response control problems; this is seen in at least some youth diagnosed with ADHD.[31] Because of how stimulants affect the brain,[32] they might make the aggressive child more responsive to the distress of others and, in turn, better able to restrain themselves. There have been provocative data indicating that for children with reduced empathy, stimulant medication can amplify the effects of psychosocial interventions.[33] But individuals whose increased aggression risk might relate to enhanced acute threat responsiveness are unlikely to benefit from stimulant intervention—they may actually become more aggressive.

What Can Educators Do?

So, what does all this information imply for educators? There are three points we'd emphasize.

First, when you have a student who shows aggressive behavior, your instinct may be to try to work with the student—for example, to talk with and observe the student—in an effort to discern what triggers their aggression. That's of course appropriate, but it's also essential to remember that every public school district is required by federal law to have a process in place to identify students who need additional support. We recommend that you contact the school administrator who is in charge of that process the *first* time you are suspicious the child may need help. Even though many school systems do not have enough staff for this process to operate as well as it should, it is still crucial to start the process. That way you can get information about how you can best support the child and ensure they get the services they need as soon as possible.* In addition, that first moment of concern should also lead to record-keeping on your part: document the frequency, timing, duration, apparent trigger, and specific actions of each aggressive episode. It makes sense to start this record-keeping even before you are certain about the seriousness of the problem, because the formal process will require documentation. If you wait to initiate the process until you're sure you can't handle the child's behavior on your own, you'll be frustrated by the delay.

Second, even if aggression reaches clinical levels—that is, it requires mental health support—it's important to keep in mind that the majority of aggressive children can be helped. There are no "bad kids" who are beyond help. In particular, the stereotype about boys of color from lower-income families as being violent and beyond help is incorrect.[34] Many children showing aggression can be helped—and early intervention is always better.

Genetic and other biological factors can affect one's propensity to act aggressively, but this is the case for all health problems—whether heart disease, asthma, diabetes, or aggression. Any identified biological factors provide us with treatment targets, even though we do not yet have the scientific understanding or ability to act on all of them (that too is the case for many health problems).

For this reason, clinically aggressive children should not be excluded from regular school settings unless absolutely necessary to protect themselves or others from harm. Many show emotional difficulties, and their reactive aggression can be helped by psychosocial interventions. These same interventions can also help some of the more generally or typically aggressive children. Those whose aggression is a byproduct of ADHD may be helped by stimulant medication. But there are some—in particular, those children who lack empathy—for whom we really need to develop better treatments.

There should be no blanket responses—each child with aggression is an individual with their own strengths and weaknesses.

The third thing we suggest educators keep in mind is that minimizing the problem helps no one. We've seen educators and families shrink from the suggestion that a child's aggression might be a symptom of mental illness. This shrinking away fosters the stigmatization of mental illness and prevents the child from receiving needed help. There should be no shame in a mental health diagnosis, whether it is depression, anxiety, or conduct disorder. Recognizing problems for what they are is the first necessary step to addressing them, and in many districts, for accessing the services that will help the child thrive in school.

In short, additional resources and interventions are needed. But there should be no blanket responses—each child with aggression is an individual with their own strengths and weaknesses. Teachers are in a great position to try to understand these children—and to help connect them and their families with resources, including clinical care. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/blair_willingham.

*When the process is operating slowly, educators may be tempted to tell families that their children need therapy or medication. Such conclusions can only be reached by mental health professionals. However, educators may be able to help families learn about community-based supports.

Bucking Burnout

How AFT Locals Are Meaningfully Improving Educator Well-Being

By Harriet B. Fox, Laura Andersen, Ashton Fandel, and Katie LaPointe

Just 20 minutes from the Twin Cities are two neighboring school districts: Mounds View and White Bear Lake. Rivals on the field, they are also thought partners, collaborators, and friends. The districts share much in common, including the natural beauty of their neighborhood lakes, strong community support for their school systems, and relatively high staff retention. Some spouses work across district lines; twin brothers lead rival high schools; and leaders, educators, and staff throughout both districts share a commitment to district-union collaboration to reach the best possible outcomes for students.

However, Stacey Vanderport, president of the Mounds View Education Association, and Tiffany Dittrich, president of the White Bear Lake Area Educators, knew that something had shifted for educators since the pandemic. "We had an increasing number of members saying, 'We're tapped out, burned out, and need support,'" said Stacey.[1] Tiffany similarly observed that while her educators' "passion for the students and families they serve was commendable, it was taking a toll on the well-being of many."[2]

When an opportunity to partner with Educators Thriving, an organization dedicated to improving educator well-being, came through an AFT grant, Tiffany jumped in. In the summer of 2022, 40 of her members engaged in a six-part Educators Thriving course to support personal development. By October, participants reported higher levels of positive emotion and significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion compared to nonparticipants. After learning about the work in White Bear at a gathering of AFT leaders in January 2023, Stacey wanted to get started in Mounds View.

"Well-being" efforts are often superficial self-care strategies; Tiffany and Stacey knew that approach would not land well with their members. They were looking to provide educators immediate relief *and* an opportunity to explore, alongside their districts, systems-level changes to create the conditions necessary for all staff and students to thrive.

Educators Thriving offers personal development sessions with empirically based strategies to improve well-being. Topics range from prioritizing and time management to identifying core values and having difficult conversations. Staff can engage in the sessions with districtwide cohorts or school site colleagues. Educators Thriving also works alongside school and system leaders

Harriet B. Fox, a former special education teacher and administrator, leads research and evaluation at Educators Thriving. Laura Andersen, who began her career as a Spanish immersion kindergarten teacher, leads partnerships at Educators Thriving. Ashton Fandel is a project manager for Educators Thriving. Katie LaPointe, a former third-grade teacher, leads partner implementation support for Educators Thriving.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ISD 624 AND MOUNDS VIEW EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

to improve workplace well-being using an educator-generated survey (available at go.aft.org/li5) developed with AFT members nationwide. The survey asks research-backed questions to measure six key factors associated with well-being: responsive leadership and supportive culture, acceptance, adaptability, personal well-being, growth, and depletion. The majority of survey items relate to school site leadership and culture; the rest address individual mindsets or dispositions that are strongly correlated with well-being and job satisfaction.[3]

Approaching the Districts

For both Tiffany and Stacey, this research-based approach was compelling. In White Bear, Tiffany explained, "the survey came to our attention at a fortuitous time when the leadership survey we were preparing to launch had major technical difficulties. Not only was the [Educators Thriving] survey ready, the research behind its development was compelling; the ability to customize through partnership with the [Educators Thriving] team was a perk."

Stacey's district had faced similar hurdles, creating a survey that "wasn't well-received due in large part to staff coming out of the pandemic with higher levels of stress." The internal survey led to "awareness by both the district and the union that we needed something sustainable, on a yearly basis, building by building." Having a research-based measure lent credibility and trust to the process for the district and the union.

In White Bear, Educators Thriving met numerous times with union and district leaders to establish clear parameters for data sharing. Everyone wanted to ensure that the survey would not be used punitively—its purpose was to inform leadership development. Site-level responsive leadership and school culture results would be accessible only by the district leadership and the relevant school site principal as part of the administrative feedback and coaching process. Only broad district-level data around leadership and culture, and trends related to educator dispositions and well-being, would be shared with the union. According to Tiffany, it was important to her and her co-leader of this effort in the district, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Alison Gillespie, that "we were fully transparent around why this tool had grabbed our attention, how it had been developed, and how the data would be used to support our ongoing collaborative work around school culture and continuous improvement."

Stacey similarly worked with Mounds View's district leaders to ensure this process was well-received across all levels of the system. Through bargaining, they agreed to explore adult well-being; working with Educators Thriving and using the survey was a financial and verbal commitment from both sides. Stacey has since paired up with the head of Human Resources, Julie Coffey, to facilitate the rollout of the survey and the personal development. Julie shared, "We have a talented team of educators who give a tremendous amount of effort to helping their students be successful. That effort also contributes to staff feeling overwhelmed. It was clear to us that we should put some systems in place to measure and improve well-being districtwide."[4] The two worked alongside the principals association to determine how to message the survey to school site leaders and staff. They mutually determined that to realize meaningful improvements, they needed at least a three-year commitment to this work.

Launching the Survey

For the survey to be a success, educators and administrators in White Bear and Mounds View needed to understand its development, purpose, and use. Having Educators Thriving, a neutral organization, facilitate the process eased concerns about data manipulation and increased trust.

In White Bear, Tiffany and Alison shared the survey with principals and the union's executive committee to make necessary adjustments and include a few customized items, including questions about district-leader support. Next, they coauthored a statement about the survey launch and sent communications districtwide. Everyone in White Bear knew that improving educator well-being was a joint effort. While Tiffany met with building representatives to encourage participation, Alison worked with principals to carve out time in staff meetings for taking the survey. Fliers were posted in staff rooms and common spaces, and frequent reminders were sent with participation updates. Their hard work paid off: during their first year of administering the survey, they had nearly 80 percent participation across all buildings. It was harder to reach classified staff, but the high response rate of certified educators was encouraging.

When it was time to share White Bear's results, Educators Thriving met with district leaders first to review themes that emerged districtwide. Following their data-sharing agreements, only Alison and the superintendent had access to all schools' data; principals had access to their staff's data. Tiffany and the union

Educators Thriving works alongside school and system leaders to improve workplace well-being using an educator-generated survey developed with AFT members.

> The data have helped "interrogate our assumptions and combat false narratives around how everyone is feeling."
>
> –Tiffany Dittrich

leadership team had access to broad trends and more detailed data related to educator mindsets and dispositions, which gave them ideas for how to better support members' mental health.

Mounds View followed suit one year later, in the spring of 2024. Stacey and Julie carved out time for their respective teams to learn about the survey and make recommendations about additional questions, such as feedback about onboarding. Principals were briefed, with an understanding that they would see their own data first, then share results with their staff in the fall. Many staff felt that previous surveys had gathered dust since results were never shared with participants to inform action; therefore, closing the loop on communication was critical. Stacey and Julie leveraged building reps and staff meeting time to ensure a high response rate. As a result, Mounds View had nearly 80 percent of their certified staff complete the survey (it plans to work with other bargaining units in years to come).

Unpacking Results

With such high participation rates, leaders across Mounds View and White Bear were confident that their results were meaningful.

In Mounds View, which prides itself on collaboration and shared decision making, Stacey was surprised that this emerged as an area of need: "We have a structure that supports continuous instructional improvement, and seeing that there are gaps in this was telling and definitely a focus area to rebuild," particularly since the pandemic. In contrast, seeing that multilingual and special education teachers' workload was leading to higher depletion for these staff members was unsurprising, but Stacey was "grateful to have solid data confirming it." Mentoring was another area that indicated the need for system-wide improvement, but Stacey was confident that having the data would "help us move forward in the bargaining process."

Mounds View district and union leaders saw the data first, followed by school site administrators, then building leadership teams, and ultimately each school site's staff. Having multiple opportunities to process the results and then the chance to bring in other staff helped leaders (principals in particular) trust the data and internalize the feedback. This process wasn't entirely smooth—some staff reported that the administrators hid data, and the depth of data-based conversations varied across campuses—but this was just year one.

White Bear, which was in year two of survey implementation during the spring of 2024, was starting to build the system-wide knowledge base to understand, share, and act on the data. Tiffany shared that the data have helped "interrogate our assumptions and combat false narratives around how everyone is feeling" by eliminating "guesswork when it comes to identifying areas of support and assessing whether or not what we've tried is working." Sometimes what is offered and how people receive it are different; gathering feedback has helped with considering alternatives and eliciting changes.

Although Tiffany often hears about workload stress, she was surprised to see that educators with the most experience reported higher levels of depletion than those with the least, especially since the district has relatively high retention compared to other districts. Focus groups confirmed that career educators were experiencing great overwhelm stemming from a variety of new initiatives in Minnesota, such as the READ Act,[5] which requires extensive professional development for all elementary educators. Other district changes—such as the unification of two high schools, school site relocations, and a shift to standards-based grading—also contributed. Figuring out how to alleviate member depletion and honor necessary changes districtwide is an ongoing challenge, but the data helped identify possible first steps.

Interestingly, White Bear educators who reported the most collaboration time per week also reported higher well-being than their colleagues who reported less collaboration time. "It's ironic that education, a profession so focused on students and interaction, allows very little time for practitioners to connect," said Tiffany. Figuring out how to build in this time is one of the things she and her district leaders are exploring. Simply allocating more hours isn't going to work if staff aren't equipped to use their time well or if it requires forgoing other core responsibilities.

In both districts, the data have helped union, school, and district leaders prioritize. Tiffany believes the survey has "helped distill a really complex problem into more manageable components." It helps "identify where people are," said Stacey. "We always say we're data-driven and use data for the good of the system, and now we finally have that data to use."

Turning Data to Action

Survey results in both districts indicated there were three areas to address: districtwide shifts, school site leadership and culture, and member-directed work.

Districtwide Shifts

At the district level, certain trends emerged in Mounds View and White Bear related to communication, decision making, and student policies and procedures. However, change takes time, even given both districts' long-term commitments to continuous improvement.

As Stacey said, "We knew we really needed to commit to at least three years of dedicated well-being work as a starting point for long-term systemic change." It is "one of the many important ways we've partnered with our district, and yet another example of the way we align our union-district work to support adults and students in our system."

In White Bear, Alison has also taken the opportunity for feedback seriously. In 2024, she asked school principals to take the survey to identify ways she and her team could improve. She and Tiffany have worked together to consistently send the message that, as she put it, "*of course* we continue to attack systemic elements that contribute to depletion, *and* there are things educators can do individually, and immediately, to combat depletion."[6] Systemic changes are complex, often slow, and rarely within the locus of control of only one person. Thankfully, there were factors that district leaders could unite around and focus on, particularly improvements in communication and visibility.

School Site Support

Of the six factors that predict educator well-being (and thus are measured by the survey), responsive leadership and supportive culture is the most significant. Educators Thriving found, during the 2022 pilot study to develop the survey, that over 50 percent of the variance in individual well-being was predicted by perceptions of school site leadership.[7] Similar research has found that principals have an outsized impact on staff culture, morale, and retention.[8] For that reason, Mounds View and White Bear built in principal development opportunities to complement the well-being survey process. So often, leaders are trained on instruction, compliance, and budgets but not on how to lead for well-being.

In 2023, during its first year with the survey, White Bear offered school leaders at the secondary level an opportunity to work with Educators Thriving and district coaches to enhance their responsive leadership. Since then, Tiffany has seen "site-level administrators lean into the data and work with their teacher-leader teams to problem-solve around supports." Additional school-level support includes monthly principal or leadership team check-ins about staff well-being, principal cohort gatherings to share common strategies and reflect on both personal and professional well-being, and professional development seminars for school site staff based on site-specific data. Elementary principals have since been invited to participate, and many jumped at the opportunity.

At one school, educators reported overwhelmingly positive perceptions of their school leader but also unusually high levels of depletion and difficulty with their personal well-being. In response, Educators Thriving led a 90-minute session for staff on prioritization. Staff reflected on important but not urgent actions that would enhance their well-being, conducted individual time audits, and learned a research-based strategy related to goal completion. During the session, many realized that they shared similar objectives; a walking club and book club formed organically among staff.

At another site with a more turbulent staff culture, data suggested a need to improve communication amid conflict. Educators Thriving delivered a professional development session in which staff reflected on their personal conflict style and role-played new communication techniques using realistic school-based scenarios.

Two years in, Tiffany was hearing positive feedback from members and administrators: "We are seeing the data inform site-level conversations around culture and the kind of support educators need from their leaders. Further, members have grown less reticent and more excited when they see that an Educators Thriving seminar is part of the plan for professional learning." Year-to-year survey results confirmed that, slowly but surely, shifts are happening. Members reported slightly higher levels of responsive leadership and supportive culture from 2023 to 2024 and lower levels of depletion.

Mounds View only recently started offering this level of school-site support. With 15 schools across the district, they opted to deepen the work in five schools per year over the next three years, ensuring that everyone will have a chance to participate in site-based professional learning.

Direct-to-Educator Supports

While system and school site change can take time, there are ways to support individual member well-being and offer imme-

> "We … needed to commit to at least three years of dedicated well-being work as a starting point for long-term systemic change."
>
> –Stacey Vanderport

diate relief from stress and depletion. Tiffany has found an innovative way to support her members quickly. This school year, the union offered a wellness app designed by and for educators called VioletCares. Who participates is entirely anonymous, but so far 65 educators in White Bear are using it regularly.

Mounds View is offering the complete Educators Thriving program to members who opt in. Participants join one of two cohorts and meet for two-hour sessions on Zoom every few weeks with other educators across the district. Stacey and Julie worked hard on the program launch to ensure members felt that their time spent on personal well-being was valuable and recognized. Those who complete the program and required assignments can earn three credits (the equivalent of 45 hours of learning), which can help move them up the salary scale.

Working together, Stacey and Julie created a scope and sequence to meet the needs of educators, largely based on the survey results. Participants start by learning about the five common pitfalls of the educator experience: overwhelm, personal neglect, fixed mindset, unexpected challenges, and isolation. Then they learn about goal and priority setting, conflict and communication, apology, habits, time management, and boundaries. The core focus is individual, research-based strategies that can help educators understand and focus on their own well-being.

Setting Boundaries

It is no surprise that when asked to select topics they would like to learn more about, participants often request boundaries. Educators tend to be givers, and they care deeply about instructional efficacy and making an impact on students' lives. Unfortunately, this can lead to neglecting personal needs and can contribute to burnout.[1]

In the boundaries session, participants start by building awareness of their current work-related boundaries. They learn about four common types of people in workplaces—takers, matchers, self-protective givers, and selfless (boundaryless) givers—and how educators who are selfless givers end up with higher burnout and lower student achievement.[2] Participants then reflect on where they tend to fall on this spectrum and how their identity, including their situational power and context, informs their default stance.

Next, Educators Thriving introduces a research-based framework for boundary setting that suggests people tend to fall on a spectrum from highly segmented to highly integrated workers.[3] Segmented workers have very clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives; integrated workers have more fluidity and less contrast between personal and professional roles. The research is clear that neither integrating nor segmenting is inherently better; what matters is "the interaction between the individual and the workplace."[4] Participants then take a self-assessment to identify the extent to which they segment or integrate. After reviewing the self-assessment, they reflect on the extent to which their current (enacted) boundaries reflect their aspirational (preferred) boundaries. For many, this is an "aha" moment that their current reality is not enabling long-term sustainability.

Moving toward intended action, Educators Thriving shares framing inspired by the book *The Power of a Positive No*.[5] Educators reflect on which priorities related to well-being domains (physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual) they want to protect and what they need to say "no" to in order to say "yes" to their personal priorities. For example, an educator prioritizing time with family may turn down an afterschool volunteer event in order to say "yes" to attending their child's soccer game. Another educator who wants to complete a master's degree may decline serving on their school's instructional leadership team for a year.

To wrap up, educators learn about the benefits of "micro-transitions" between personal and professional roles.[6] Too often, we come home ruminating on the day's tasks and do not feel done. Micro-transitions can help ease the exit from one role (leader, educator) to another (friend, parent, spouse, caretaker, etc.). Small "rites of transition" can be as simple as meditating for five minutes, listening to a soundtrack for the drive home, riding a bike to and from work, or calling a friend—something to signal leaving work and preparing to enter a new role. Participants identify ways they can build micro-transitions into their day to create mental and physical boundaries between roles.

As an application activity after the session, participants clarify the boundaries they want to set, make a plan, try it out, and reflect on how it went. They are also given resources to read more research related to boundaries.

–H. B. F., L. A., A. F., and K. L.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/fox_andersen_fandel_lapointe_sb1.

Survey results in both districts indicated there were three areas to address: districtwide shifts, school site leadership and culture, and member-directed work.

The first cohort launched in August and the second in November 2024, with more than 100 educators participating. The online interactive sessions begin with a check-in and use a mood meter to help participants consider *"How am I doing after a full day?"* By identifying our emotions and putting words to feelings, we lower our level of stress and dysregulation.[9] Participants have begun using the mood meter with fellow educators and students alike.

Next, participants reflect on the previous session and the extent to which they've used the strategies learned. They share in small groups, which remain consistent throughout the course. This gives people a chance to get comfortable and increases commitment to one another as well as a safe space to connect.

After personal reflection and small-group discussion, sessions turn to applying a new strategy. The goal is that people walk away with something they can use immediately. One participant shared, "I liked how we had concrete steps to support us with the topic; very practical and helpful tools that are applicable to personal and workplace life." (For an in-depth example of a session, see "Setting Boundaries" on page 55.)

Each session is grounded in research, helping build trust and confidence even among those who are skeptical of devoting time to well-being. This has been a compelling component of the work: "I love discussing concepts that resonate and seeing them tied to data; that speaks volumes!" shared one Mounds View educator.

The Educators Thriving team frequently reviews participant feedback and monitors impact through pre- and post-program evaluations. Typically, Educators Thriving sees statistically significant reductions in emotional exhaustion (a key indicator of burnout) and anxiety and improvements in well-being indicators such as positive emotion.[10] In the 2023–24 school year, 92 percent of participants nationwide reported that "the program made my job feel more sustainable" and 94 percent agreed that it "helped to improve my well-being." Session by session, feedback has been similarly positive among Mounds View participants; 95 percent agreed the program improved their well-being and 85 percent agreed it has made their job feel more sustainable.

Key Learnings (So Far)

For White Bear and Mounds View, the road to increased educator well-being did not start with the survey or partnership with Educators Thriving, but with years of intentional collaboration. Labor-management partnerships in these neighboring districts created the foundation for well-being work to fully take root. Tiffany said about White Bear, "We share a mutual belief that our students and staff benefit immensely from our shared commitment to problem-solving. We also know that when our educators are well, their students thrive." And Julie from Mounds View shared, "The job of an educator is more demanding than ever, and educators everywhere deserve support for their well-being. When districts and unions come together to provide this support, it shows staff that we're all in this together."

In both cases, starting with districtwide measurement and in-depth support at just a few sites built trust over time, and the focus on well-being didn't get lost amid other system-wide initiatives. Well-being work can be quite personal, and not everyone feels they have the professional bandwidth to jump in. Allowing educators to opt in to a cohort and offering support like the VioletCares app helped these educator-facing well-being opportunities grow organically. And, the annual well-being survey indicates whether they are on the right track.

It took work to get everyone on board and to figure out an approach that would serve the needs of multiple stakeholders. Building capacity and sustaining focus among district leaders and school administrators, educators, and staff takes time and effort. Educators Thriving intends to be a catalyst so that ultimately each district can sustain measurement and supports internally.

For anyone wondering if they are ready to embark on this kind of work, Tiffany shares this advice:

> Don't allow the complexities of this problem keep you from getting started. What works at this time may or may not work for all, and/or it may or may not work in all situations. Communicate closely throughout the process and be intentional about your goals and the path toward getting there. Educators Thriving offers educators a channel for communicating their needs, which creates opportunities to work together on the problem. That channel amplifies the voice of educators and helps educators and school leaders identify concrete issues to address and a process by which they can monitor progress.

By elevating educator voice and well-being, Tiffany and Stacey are strengthening their school and district communities one step—and one survey—at a time. ❑

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/fox_andersen_fandel_lapointe.

A Historic Contract in Cleveland

When Cleveland Teachers Union (CTU) President Shari Obrenski headed into negotiations in January 2024, she and her leadership team had big goals. Although they had a pretty good idea about what problems they sought to solve through negotiations, they needed strong evidence to back it up. "We wanted members to be able to say 'Yes, I'm frustrated with this,' and have a space to articulate their concerns.... And we wanted to make sure that we were on track" to address those challenges, she shared.[1]

Shari learned about the educator well-being survey in the summer of 2022, when CTU members participated in well-being professional development with Educators Thriving through an AFT grant. The promise of this work led to encouraging conversations with district leaders about expanding efforts. Unfortunately, those conversations were halted due to an abrupt leadership transition at the district level. Labor-management relationships that had once been promising became tenuous. "We've had an extremely hard time getting this administration to make decisions with us, so ultimately, we made the decision to do it ourselves," Shari said.

Leveraging Member Voice

Using the survey was a powerful way to gather member voices and elevate top priorities. The process created an opportunity for "our members to be actively involved in negotiations and give us their opinions so that we could better understand their experiences," says Shari.

For that to happen, and for the district to view the data as representative, CTU strove for 80 percent participation. As Shari said, "If 80 percent of the people in your building said this, and it's not just two or three people, you have to take that seriously." CTU leaders and organizers galvanized members, ensuring they understood the purpose of the survey. They mailed fliers, crafted personalized emails, and encouraged site reps to get everyone to take the survey. The survey closed with 79 percent participation, representing well over 3,000 responses from all bargaining units and school sites. Some schools even reached 100 percent participation.

Educators Thriving also hosted focus groups with CTU members across sites and roles to better understand their experiences and priorities. Over 260 members volunteered to participate. Mary Moore, CTU 3rd vice president, K–8, and director of negotiations, shared that "the focus groups were really helpful to give members a chance to talk to somebody neutral" and to "help find solutions for us as a negotiations team."[2]

The survey results confirmed much of what CTU leaders already knew and pointed the team in surprising directions. Although there were many schools with very low levels of trust and responsiveness, some sites reported positive perceptions of their administration that were well above nationwide averages. Those bright spots were a relief. On the other hand, Shari and Mary didn't anticipate that trust across roles had eroded so much. "I didn't think it was possible for it to be that bad, so really getting a grip on how much our members distrust the central office was good for us to know," said Shari.

While the results showed there were certain issues where members had conflicting priorities and even polarized perspectives, the survey data and focus groups also led to some solutions. Safety and security were priorities for the negotiations team, for example, but they were stuck on what ideas to bring to the district. In the focus groups, a theme started to emerge around cellphones. Many of the issues members faced around conflict, engagement, or challenges with families and administration came back to lack of alignment about cellphone use. Tying safety and security to cellphones ended up being a win. And so far, the new districtwide policy has been beneficial. By mid-September 2023, there were at least 80 safety and security incidents, but by the same time in 2024—after the cellphone policy was in place—there were fewer than 10.

The Outcome

In May 2024, after months of negotiations bolstered by robust data, CTU brought back "one of the best contracts" in its negotiating history. "We were clear-eyed about what we needed and had the data to back that up. This level of transparency with membership, our team, with the district—we wouldn't have been able to do it and to that degree without this resource," said Shari.

As a union leader and career educator, Shari reflected, "I feel seen here; [the survey] gets at the core challenges people are feeling" and "helps us move from feeling depleted." To others considering using the survey for negotiations, Mary shared: "Have a good understanding of the tool, how it works, and the data you'll get from it—be clear-eyed about the problem you are trying to solve." The district still isn't in a highly collaborative place with the union, but in future years, CTU hopes new opportunities may allow for a more growth-oriented approach.

Statewide Efforts in Ohio

Melissa Cropper, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT), got wind of Shari's efforts in Cleveland and was inspired. Given her concerns about teacher morale and turnover, she wanted to offer this opportunity to locals across OFT and identify ways to support members statewide. OFT sponsored survey work for 15 locals in the spring of 2024 and recruited a range of urban, suburban, and rural districts. Thousands of members participated in the survey and over 100 joined focus groups throughout the summer.

Melissa shared, "We're using the data at three different levels." At the local level, "we are using the data to talk with administrators about teacher morale … and retention."[3] At a state implementation level, "we are connecting locals to share best practices and contract language that address teacher retention. For example, locals are sharing around professional development, planning time, and ways to increase teacher voice in decision making." Finally, at a state policy level, she said, "we are using the data to identify policy areas we can address through legislation, including asking for money in the budget for educator wellness programs."

Leaders from each of the local affiliates gathered at the annual Union Leadership Institute outside Columbus in June 2024 with Educators Thriving. They dove into data trends, experienced personal well-being sessions, identified priority areas, and strategized around complex challenges. While each local context is different, they affirmed that there is a clear need to address widespread feelings of burnout and workload overwhelm.

–H. B. F., L. A., A. F., and K. L.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/fox_andersen_fandel_lapointe_sb2.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CTU

New Haven's Direct-to-Member Relief

Like the White Bear Lake Area Educators (see page 51) and Cleveland Teachers Union (see page 57), the New Haven Federation of Teachers (NHFT) received an AFT grant to support educator well-being in the summer of 2022. Participants in that initial cohort reported decreasing levels of burnout, increased levels of resilience, and a renewed sense of professional possibility.[1] Leslie Blatteau, president of the NHFT, was impressed with the results and saw an opportunity to collaborate with her district around teacher retention and well-being.

New Haven, like many districts, was losing teachers to stress and overwhelm. Leslie explained that teachers "didn't have a clear sense of how to move forward" coming out of the pandemic, and "our immediate goal was to do something about the hemorrhaging of teachers."[2] The trial program had "really good data to show how much this impacted the participants.... This was really meaningful and helped them navigate teaching in this new era." She initially brought the work to Keisha Redd-Hannans, the assistant superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; together, they shared it with the Teaching and Learning Committee of the Board of Education. With increased funding for professional learning in the district thanks to the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, "this was a no-brainer," said Leslie.

New Haven opted for a weekly cohort model offered twice over the course of the 2023–24 school year. Those who completed the six-session program and required assignments were offered a stipend to acknowledge their time. Session topics included the five pitfalls of the educator experience (overwhelm, personal neglect, fixed mindset, unexpected challenges, and isolation) and listening, core values, prioritizing, strengths, habits, and mindfulness. Participants from the summer pilot and the first fall course were so engaged that the NHFT and Educators Thriving offered a sequel series, ET 2.0, that addressed vision and goals, boundaries, time management, difficult conversations, relationships, and appreciation.

Educators across the district logged on to these evening sessions and worked in small groups that remained consistent week to week so participants got to know each other. The model created a "space for people to be in community with each other," and was "far more than individual self-help," Leslie said. She added, "We really value the synchronous cohort model" because "it created the opportunity for educators to connect with one another in meaningful ways and ... [was a] win for individuals and for unionism because people started to talk more about their identity not just as teachers, but as members of something bigger."

The impact on personal and professional well-being for both cohorts was also strong; participants reported a significant decline in emotional exhaustion and anxiety, increased workplace well-being, and increased job satisfaction over time, with the strongest results for those in the ET 2.0 track. Ninety-six percent of participants reported that it helped improve their well-being and made their job feel more sustainable. One participant shared, "In 27 years, this was one of the only workshops/professional developments that [was] worthwhile and actually focused on us as human beings and our well-being instead of focusing on overplayed teaching strategies." Others shared that a key element was being recognized for their time: "Being paid to do this work is very important. This is part of our job, and improving the mental health and sustainability of staff is incredibly important."

Rather than just "give, give, give," said Leslie, the program "reminded members of the need for boundaries, and this is aligned with our values as a union. 'Give, give, give' isn't pro-kid when you have a teacher who's burned out and going to quit.... Holding the line for ourselves in a professional way makes sure our students have a teacher two years from now." Investing in well-being, to Leslie, is a recruitment *and* retention strategy. If a high school student sees teachers who love their work and have high levels of well-being and good working conditions, they might think, "Hey it's a great job—there are good benefits, meaningful work, a clear sense of purpose, and a sense of belonging to a community," and they might want to become a teacher themselves.

Leslie is hopeful for future opportunities to support educators in this way but knows we need to have a federal government "that believes in investing in public schools," with a goal of "teaching being a lifelong profession.... Teaching many siblings in a family, being able to see a child of a former student before they retire—those are things that bring great joy to career educators, and our members deserve to have those experiences without the crisis of burnout."

–H. B. F., L. A., A. F., and K. L.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/fox_andersen_fandel_lapointe_sb3.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NEW HAVEN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

Betrayed No More

How Morally Centered Schools Reduce Educators' and Students' Distress

By Wendy Dean and Rachel Schaffer

For too many educators, the idea of a morally centered school may seem like a fantasy—or be so novel a concept that it is hard to grasp. In this article, we describe such schools, which truly serve students' best interests by following a set of shared professional values, and how educators and their unions can help create them. But first, let's take a look at how things currently stand. The following four scenarios are drawn from interviews we conducted with 13 educators in five states. Although we have changed individuals' names and some key details, the fundamental truth of each educator's predicament remains clear.

Betrayal of Trust

One fall day at a Midwestern elementary school, Jane threatened to use a sharp object as a weapon against another student, Sally, as they were standing in line before school. Other students saw the incident and reported to their teachers that they felt unsafe.

Terry, a midcareer teacher, followed the district protocol: they accompanied Jane to the office, reported the incident, and expected that (per the policy) Jane's parents would be contacted and the school counselor would engage Jane in a series of sessions to help her apologize to Sally and change her behavior (along with determining if there were any underlying issues to address). Terry assured Sally that Jane would face consequences and that she and the other students were safe. Terry made those promises based on the clear district policies and procedures that were in place to maintain a safe environment in exactly this situation.

That day, though, all administrators and counselors were busy: addressing more severe behavior issues, gathering reading data for district meetings, filling out forms for state funding requirements, and addressing that day's substitute shortages. Because the school is under-staffed, no one called either Jane's or Sally's parents or rendered any consequences. Describing the situation, Terry cringed as they recalled their inadvertent "betrayal of [Sally's] trust because the principal was too busy."[1] They had assured Sally that Jane would be held accountable for her actions, and yet Jane returned to class within an hour. Terry summed up their despair: "Public education is falling apart, or it's being torn apart. I don't know what to hope for except maybe that we can piece it back together."[2]

Wendy Dean is a psychiatrist and cofounder of Moral Injury of Healthcare. She has published widely on occupational distress in healthcare and its impact on patients and is a coauthor of If I Betray These Words: Moral Injury in Medicine and Why It's So Hard for Clinicians to Put Patients First. *Rachel Schaffer has taught elementary school since 2014. She is a teacher leader working to elevate educators' voices and enhance public education for all students.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABY D'ALESSANDRO

Moral injury stems from broken trust, values conflicts, and unresolved miscommunications—like devoting time to test prep instead of joyful learning.

Partisan Polarization

Alex, a teacher in the Deep South, has felt in recent years as if his state school board has been working against educators. After adopting partisan state school board elections several years ago, voters have seemed to care more about the candidate's party than their expertise in education. As Alex explained, "I was a state delegate at the party convention a few years ago. Candidates for the state school board called me daily. I remember when one of them launched into talking about their platform: getting groomers out of education, supporting vouchers, parents' rights.… The usual extremist conservative talking points. When I shared that I am, in fact, a teacher, the candidate hesitated for only a moment before continuing to bash my profession. I asked for any proof of her claims, and she could not offer anything. Just 'I hear from people.' That's it. And she won the race."[3]

Before partisan school board elections, Alex believes candidates were held more accountable for their claims, agendas, and disparaging comments. Now, there are extremists who have become accustomed to questioning the morality of educators. "I am working day in and day out to help students succeed," Alex said. To "have a member of the school board echo some talking point from conservative rhetoric, it feels like I am swimming upstream. Constantly. Against a waterfall. It's exhausting."[4]

Scores Before Students

An elementary educator in the Mountain West, Blake, calculated that she had lost at least 24 instructional hours each year to administering tests and that students had lost dozens of hours of developmentally necessary play time (recess) in their district's push to meet benchmarks. Students may not be ready to learn certain material, but instead of taking time to build foundational knowledge, teachers must adhere to the district pacing guide. When this happens, Blake says, "students lose trust in you. I think students come in hopeful, with all this [implicit] trust in you. You build your [classroom] culture, you say, 'Oh, we're going to do this this year and you do this and then…!' But when they fail on an interim test and you have no time to help them, I think that they lose faith in grown-ups being there to help them succeed. I see it in their eyes—they just stop engaging. That's real."[5]

Structural Determinants of Education

Jalen worked for many years at an elementary school in a historically redlined* part of her district that was still severely under-resourced. She constantly felt pressure to get higher test scores, but her young students regularly came to school unprepared to learn because they were hungry and felt unsafe due to passing gang members in the neighborhood on the way to school. In addition, most were English language learners. The district pressured Jalen to increase student performance, particularly in math, but she knew that the curriculum was simply inaccessible to many of her students. When students performed poorly, they became anxious. Administrators, heedless of underlying challenges or Jalen's keen awareness of test scores, consistently reminded her how few of her students were proficient in math. Jalen said, "I can't do this to kids anymore. I can't teach a curriculum that doesn't meet their needs and then test them and tell them they're failing."[6]

After years of feeling like she was failing her students, Jalen moved to one of the highest socioeconomic status schools in the same district. Her first year, she won a district award for students' high scores in math—not because her teaching was different, but because the students came to school well prepared and were growing up in a safe, supportive neighborhood.

* * *

What do these examples have in common? They are all situations that contribute to not only burnout but also moral injury. Burnout is no doubt familiar to all educators, but moral injury may not be. Let's examine each—and how they are related.

Burnout

Occupational distress, including educator distress, has been characterized as burnout for the last half century. Burnout often refers to that feeling of being overwhelmed and exhausted—and unable to do or be enough, no matter how hard one tries. But the concept of burnout is fraught with problems, beginning with a lack of definition discipline. One 2018 study reviewed 182 research papers and found at least 142 definitions for meeting overall burnout or burnout subscale criteria.[7] So, although there is much discussion of "burnout," it may not all be about the same thing. Secondly, many scholars and people in the workforce object to the label, rejecting its implication of individual frailty. And finally, there is often a qualitative dissonance with what workers feel.

It is time to rethink teacher distress to get to better solutions. As one workplace expert recently pointed out, "We tend to think of burnout as an individual problem, solvable by 'learning to say no,' more yoga, better breathing techniques, practicing resilience—the self-help list goes on. But … applying personal, band-aid solutions to an epic and rapidly evolving workplace phenomenon may be harming, not helping, the battle."[8]

Moral Injury

Moral injury was first defined by a psychiatrist working with combat veterans from the Vietnam War. Originally conceived as "betrayal by a legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation,"[9] it was later expanded to connote a transgression of one's deeply held moral beliefs[10]—for example, that all children deserve to feel safe and welcome at school, even if they are undocumented migrants or don't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. These two elements—betrayal and transgression—are often viewed as the external and internal sources of moral injury, respectively, but it may be more helpful to view them as having a stimulus and

*To learn about redlining, see "Suppressed History: The Intentional Segregation of America's Cities" in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/spring2021/rothstein.

response relationship: a betrayal to which one acquiesces, resulting in transgression of one's moral beliefs. In teaching, those beliefs are grounded in a commitment to meeting students' needs.[11] As the opening vignettes make clear, teachers are deeply committed to their students—but as constraints increase on their ability to teach in ways that will help their students thrive, the situation is becoming untenable. For one educator, "Becoming a teacher to help students, only to be forced to participate in a system that fails them at every turn, creates moral injury."[12] Another teacher said that he "could not participate in a system that requires me to ignore student needs (recess and play) in the name of better scores."[13]

Distinguishing moral injury from burnout helps us better understand each. Burnout arises from demand-resource mismatches or operational challenges—like excessive class size, too much administrative burden, or too little lesson prep time. Moral injury stems from relational ruptures of broken trust, values conflicts, and unresolved miscommunications—like devoting instructional time to test preparation instead of joyful learning. Burnout and moral injury are best viewed as independent drivers of distress, though they often co-occur.[14] Early data suggest they occur concurrently often enough that when one is present, the other should be queried.[15]

Moral injury is not an easily compartmentalized experience—making it difficult to study—and research on job impacts is embryonic (even within the military, where the phenomenon has been studied for three decades). Based on our understanding of this limited literature and our experience studying moral injury in healthcare and education, we posit that impacts on students and teacher job performance may include disengagement, errors of judgment with student discipline or curriculum, reduced effectiveness in the classroom and in collaborative work, and lower perceived agency. This is an area in urgent need of empirical study.

But even without a clear understanding of the impact of moral injury, awareness of moral injury and how it differs from other conditions is crucial. In discussions of workplace well-being, concerning trends have emerged related to (1) folding distress of all types into the encompassing category of "mental health" and then (2) "reducing the stigma" of that mental health issue. We find this concerning because pathologizing a normal response (frustration, anger, withdrawal) to an abnormal situation (betrayal) harms individuals and weakens systems. Labeling educators' appropriate distress a "mental health" issue, rather than a workplace issue that causes moral injury, fragilizes the professional workforce. Similarly, focusing on "reducing the stigma" of what is actually moral injury effectively lets education systems off the hook for creating the conditions that elicit these normal—albeit unideal—responses to problematic environments. "Stigma" shifts the problem and the responsibility for fixing it onto society, rather than holding the systems that created those conditions responsible for improving them. While mental health care and supportive well-being programs should be viewed as baseline conditions for the difficult work of being an educator, moral injury won't be fully addressed or solved in a therapist's office; it depends on reshaping education systems into supportive, empowering, resilient environments and reshaping our society to value working families.

The Roots of Teacher Distress

Teaching in the United States has always been very hard work for too little pay. Today's teaching crisis is about more than these longstanding problems, though. Some of today's distress has roots in the financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting state budget shortfalls, pink slips, unfilled positions, larger class sizes, and student distress. As of the 2020–21 school year, most state education budgets had not recovered: 39 states still devoted "a smaller share of their economies to their K–12 schools than they did before the 2007–09 recession."[16] Not surprisingly, college students have been shying away from the profession in part because of instability and low wages.[17]

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Similar to what happened in healthcare, the pandemic highlighted and magnified challenges in the US education system. At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, 36 percent of K–12 workers reported feeling burned out, compared with 28 percent of other workers.[18] When education pivoted to online learning, most schools "lacked teacher training, appropriate software, laptops, [and] universal internet access and, in many cases, students lacked stability and a supportive adult at home to help."[19] In the 2021–22 school year, teachers were scrambling to make up missed learning while juggling the challenges of hybrid learning. By 2022, 44 percent of K–12 workers—and 52 percent of teachers[†]—felt burned out, compared with 30 percent of all workers.[21]

Across the country, the stressors of the pandemic—illness, deaths, job loss, economic insecurity, rising inequality, frustration with mitigation strategies, and fear of the unknown—led to dissatisfaction with public services and created conditions for social unrest.[22] Public schools are among the most proximate and accessible representations of government in communities, and they are

[†]Another study found a similar gap but higher overall percentages in 2022, with 59 percent of teachers and 44 percent of working adults feeling burned out.[20]

Moral injury won't be solved in a therapist's office; it depends on reshaping education systems into supportive, empowering, resilient environments.

often the most immediate arena in which tensions play out. As Alex's story highlighted, local and state school boards became a flashpoint as parents unleashed their frustrations about pandemic fallout in a barrage of partisan politics and occasional threats of violence.[23] Book bans and attacks on mask mandates, teaching honest history, social and emotional learning, and equity policies all filtered into the classroom—pulling educators' energy and attention from meeting students' needs. What already felt like an imperfect compromise about what and how they were teaching became a nearly impossible minefield of obstacles (many entirely fabricated, like claims of teaching the law school concept of critical race theory to children), promulgated by those without education expertise. And all of this piled on top of the longstanding lack of action on real problems regarding school and neighborhood safety, instructional time stolen for high-stakes testing (and general disregard for teachers' expertise), and families' needs for affordable, good-quality housing, healthcare, childcare, and nutritious food.

The United States is at an education crossroads. As of July 2024, just over 400,000 teaching positions—one in eight nationally—either were filled by teachers who are not fully certified or were unfilled.[24] And as of February 2025 (as this article went to press), the future of the US Department of Education—and, more importantly, its many funding streams—was in doubt, and teachers across the country were deeply concerned about their immigrant and refugee students. Appropriately, effectively, and quickly addressing teacher distress is essential.

Solutions

Getting solutions right is what professional workforces deserve. But a word of caution is required. Frequently, organizational leaders are themselves overwhelmed by obligations and suffering from moral injury and burnout. Less frequently, they think no one will notice a half-hearted effort if they message it just right. In either case, they may *carewash* (a derivative of the term *whitewash*) by dissembling their words or actions, trying to put a positive spin on a broken promise, stated claim, or unmet standard. The workforce quickly parses such discrepancies, eroding psychological safety and inciting cynicism. As one author put it, "carewashing, whether it's used to create a falsely positive brand for the employer or is simply the result of tone-deaf leaders, inevitably leads to erosion of trust in leadership as well as a reduction in employee engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being—and eventually, to employee turnover."[25] One teacher in the Mountain West stated, "They'll send out a weekly email saying 'Have a Coke' or 'Make sure you're taking walks' and 'just take a break.' ... My version of self-care would be for you to listen to me and for you to collaborate with me."[26]

Instead of carewashing, educators deserve *morally centered organizations*. A year ago, 50 moral injury scholars and leaders shared what they believed represents a "non-morally injurious" workplace.[27] Those experts recommended organizations with cultures predominated by a values-based framework that balances compliance-centric rules with an internalized set of shared professional values, encouraging intuitive decisions that are "right" for serving students' best interests. Organizations with cultures that inspire people to excel at teaching, and operational environments that facilitate their doing so, are places where educators thrive. In such settings, teachers are free to exercise their accumulated training and wisdom as recognized professionals in their areas of expertise.

Morally centered organizations, moreover, accept their role in managing and mitigating the risks of moral harm. Leadership recognizes that human activities will at times result in unavoidable moral challenges and accepts that they can—and must—minimize avoidable moral challenges, like administrative encroachment on teachers' decision-making (such as whether to spend additional time building foundational skills rather than adhering to district pacing, or how to conduct classroom debates and to define the scope of content to be considered).

Finally, morally healthy organizations welcome internal feedback as essential to continued, aligned growth and have the courage to stand up to external pressures from boards, legislators, or regulators that threaten to increase the risk of moral injury to their workforce.

Union Voice

Teaching has long been a heavily unionized profession, which helps give a collective voice to a predominantly female workforce[28] at risk for disempowerment. That's crucial for mitigating moral injury because "betrayal by a legitimate authority" puts the individual seeking mitigation in the difficult position of calling out the missteps of those in power. It takes rare courage to do that; for most, the stakes are too high, so they stay quiet. In contrast, adding to a collective voice empowers teachers. While unions typically have the strongest protections for worker voices and the most leverage at the workplace, additional formalized bodies for speaking collectively include professional societies (like associations dedicated to subject-matter teaching and institutional leadership groups such as the faculty senate).

Ideally, all groups representing educators would band together to win the resources and conditions their students need.

How does one advocate for mitigating moral injury at the bargaining table? The following points may be useful to consider or adapt.

1. The organization must conduct audits of key performance metrics related to working conditions, such as job satisfaction surveys, retention interviews, exit interviews, and absenteeism and turnover data. Whether or not the organization conducts such audits, the union should also conduct retention and exit interviews and gather information on educator job satisfaction.
   - Yearly updates to action plans addressing the findings should be developed in collaboration with workforce representatives.
2. The organization must invest in measuring not only burnout but also moral injury.[29] The results must be shared with the workforce in a timely way. With or without the organization's support, the union can measure burnout and moral injury and share its findings with staff and management.
   - Risk and management strategies for moral injury must be communicated freely with the workforce and must be informed by input from educators and staff.
3. Related to moral injury is the workforce's physical and psychological safety, which the organization must assess, also sharing results in a timely way. Again, the union can do this with or without the organization's help.
   - In school environments that educators and staff deem safe, plans to review safety could be developed annually. In unsafe environments, collaboratively developing, acting on, and updating safety plans should be a top priority. As an extension of psychological safety, and to ensure whistleblowers have appropriate support and recourse in the event of retaliation, the union should inquire about whistleblower experiences when speaking up and ensure adequate resources are available for educators. (In states or districts that are not union friendly, the union may also want to involve a disinterested third party.)
4. The organization must ensure adequate mechanisms are in place to empower workers at all levels to discuss moral and ethical dilemmas in the workplace. This, of course, is another key duty the union can take on when the organization does not (yet) recognize its importance.
   - The union may want to establish a committee to determine what mechanisms make the workforce comfortable with such discussions, then bring its recommendations to management.
5. Processes for developing solutions to prevent avoidable moral injury risks and mitigate unavoidable risks must have meaningful engagement from all levels of the workforce (e.g., through labor-management partnerships or other similar mechanisms). Solutions development must be appropriately resourced to support strategy development, implementation, and sustainment.
   - Ideally, the community would also be fully engaged in addressing moral injury. Whether creating a community school,* voting to increase funding for schools, or advocating for legislative changes, the community is essential for meeting students' needs and thus addressing educators' challenges.

The occupational distress described by the teachers whose concerns open this article, sadly, reflects the moral injury that is all too common in education. These educators knew what their students needed. They had the education, experience, and expertise to provide it. But constraints outside their control prevented them from teaching in their students' best interests. This was more than being asked to do too much with too little. It was breaking their promise to the students entrusted to them every day.

Educators deserve to have their voices heard, their calls for adequate resources heeded, their expertise respected, and their safety protected.

We can and must do better. Our students deserve excellent schools where they learn joyfully, solve problems collaboratively, and experience the wonders of the world—and their local communities—through a rich, well-rounded curriculum. And our teachers and school staff deserve to have their voices heard, their calls for adequate resources heeded, their expertise respected, and their safety protected. Together, we can fight for morally centered organizations where all these conditions are met—giving students, families, and educators the freedom to thrive. ☐

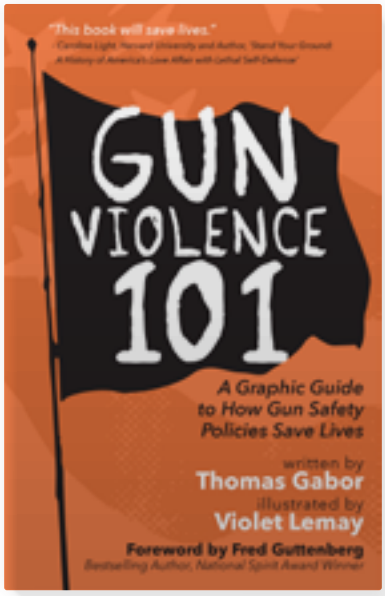
For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2025/dean_schaffer.

*For several articles on community schools, see *American Educator*'s subject index: aft.org/ae/subject-index#community-schools.

Get the Facts on Gun Violence

Gun violence is a terrible and growing problem throughout the United States. As gun manufacturers and other advocates promote false narratives about guns saving lives, educators, students, and families need trustworthy, accessible information. Thomas Gabor, coauthor of *American Carnage: Shattering the Myths That Fuel Gun Violence*, partnered with artist and author Violet Lemay to produce an illustrated guide to gun facts that's engaging for youth and adults alike. Here, we share an excerpt from the preface plus two pages to show the compelling graphics.

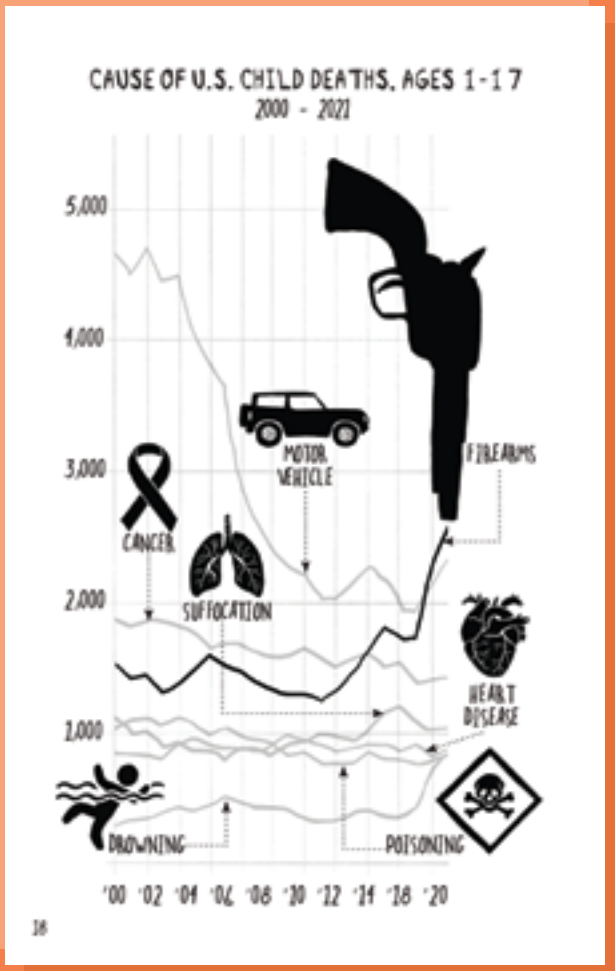
–EDITORS

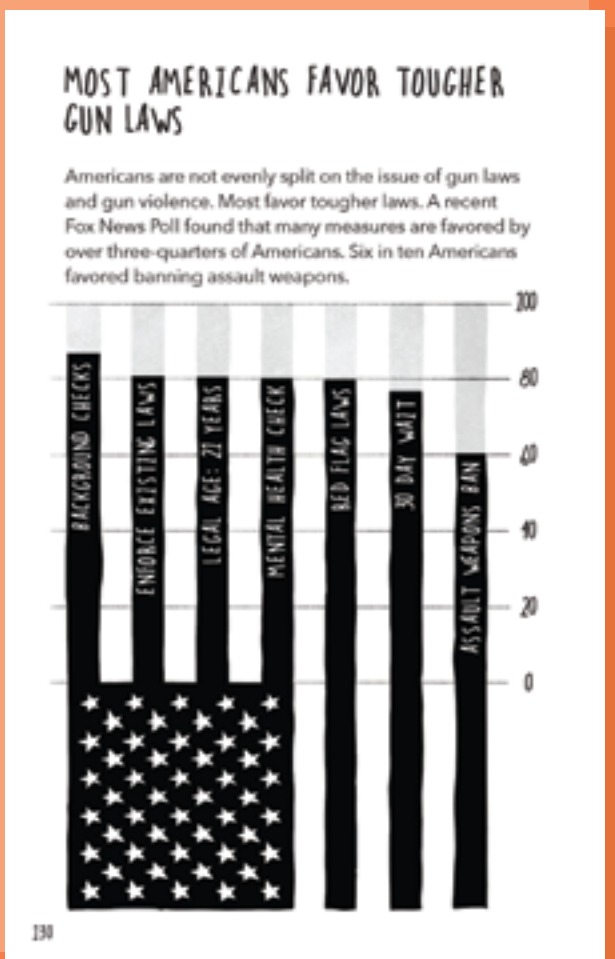


America is beset with unprecedented levels of gun violence. Gunfire now accounts for nearly 50,000 fatalities a year, and the number of mass shootings has doubled over what they were in the 2010s, with an average of nearly two per day. Over half of all Americans have been personally touched by gun violence, and close to a third avoid certain public settings due to the fear of getting shot.

Misinformation on gun violence, much of it promoted by the gun lobby and its allies, poses a major challenge to gun law reform, as some Americans have been influenced by their campaign to convince the public that guns in the home, gun carrying, and permissive laws, such as those allowing gun carrying without a permit, will make the country safer. There are real-world consequences to this campaign, as more Americans are carrying guns on a daily basis, many more are purchasing assault weapons today, and more gun owners are keeping their firearms loaded and accessible in the home. These trends have had a catastrophic effect on American society. The misinformation spread by those who stand to profit from the chaos must be challenged with facts based on the most recent, credible research.

Through nontechnical language and illustrations, this book is intended for students, activists, and the general public who need to become better acquainted with all the myths surrounding gun violence and exposed to the promising strategies available to combat the scourge. A key aim of this book is to provide memorable visuals that will promote debate and discussion out in the world.





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