

2017 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

# Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

## ◆ Illinois Education Association ◆

### Rosena J. Willis Memorial Award (State Affiliate)



The Illinois Education Association (IEA) has carried the issue of brain trauma to the forefront of public education. Partnering with the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, IEA launched a pioneering program to inform school leaders, parents, communities, and educators about the impact of trauma on students.

One in four students will witness or experience a traumatic event before the age of 4, and more than two-thirds by age 16. These children do not—they cannot—simply close their eyes to what they’ve seen or experienced. With each forced eviction, each arrest of an adult in their home, each adult-on-adult action of violence, each abuse to their own bodies, an instinctive reaction to “fight or flee” is triggered time and time again.

Over time, a child’s developing brain is changed by these repeated traumatic experiences. Areas that govern the retention of memory, the regulation of emotion, and the development of language skills are affected. The result is a brain that has structurally adapted for survival under the most stressful circumstances—but not for success in school. Eventually, they become the students who get suspended too often, feeding the school-to-prison pipeline. “Many educators know intuitively that no matter how hard they work, or all the different things that they try, they are still some children that they struggle to reach,” says Audrey Soglin, Executive Director of the IEA. “Now we know the science of why.”

Today IEA’s trauma-informed trainings have reached thousands of educators. These trainings help educators create cool, calm classrooms, with a mixture of empathy, flexibility, and brain-based strategies.

IEA’s innovative program started by a conversation with Audrey Soglin. It continued with IEA-sponsored film screenings of *Paper Tigers*, a school-based documentary from Walla Walla, Washington, that shows the impact of “one caring adult” in the lives of traumatized teens. IEA hosted screenings of the film to 500 participants at a time, IEA educators, parents and community members were mesmerized by each showing. More than one teacher said that it changed their entire thinking about what they do.

With help from the NEA Foundation, IEA developed three pilot programs in districts south of Chicago, providing members with the professional development they need to be ready to teach all children. Now IEA has established a train-the-trainers campaign to extend its trauma education reach across the state and engage all members in becoming trauma-informed.

IEA sees advocating for fewer disciplinary consequences and more mental health treatment for traumatized students as a social justice issue because students who live in poor underserved neighborhoods are more likely to suffer from trauma and less likely to have access to treatment.