CONTENTS

2
PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

3
YEAR IN REVIEW

12
NEA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES—118TH CONGRESS
A FOX NEWS POLL FOUND THAT 87% OF AMERICANS FAVOR UNIVERSAL BACKGROUND CHECKS, 81% SUPPORT RAISING THE MINIMUM PURCHASE AGE TO 21, AND 61% WANT AN ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN.
Six months after the 2022 NEA annual meeting and Representative Assembly, the GOP took control of the U.S. House of Representatives and set a course that underscores the fundamental differences in the two parties’ agendas and the outlook for public education.

Shortly before the November elections, NEA conducted a nationwide survey that asked likely voters about today’s most serious education issues. They identified school shootings; funding for basics like teacher pay and how it affects the recruitment; and the need for practical, skills-based education. An overwhelming 84 percent of respondents said they most trust teachers’ opinions on what schools should teach.

Conversely, NEA’s survey found that most American parents have different—very different—priorities. They trust teachers’ opinions about what schools should teach, and do not want Congress to decide what students can or should learn. As we saw with No Child Left Behind, one size does not fit all!

Most parents are also against bringing culture wars into public school classrooms. Their biggest concern—one that is shared by educators—is ensuring that students get the instruction, resources, and support they need to succeed.

Survey after survey finds that parents’ number one worry is school shootings. They strongly oppose book bans, and they don’t believe our nation’s history should be censored. Seventy-seven percent of American parents are extremely or very concerned about book banning by local school boards—an 11-point increase in just a year, according to a nationwide Fox News poll released in April 2023.

In communities nationwide, parents and educators continue to partner so that every student—no matter their race or background—has a chance to succeed. That is what our students need and deserve—not Washington politicians trying to score points at our children’s expense.

Help NEA fight for what is right before the U.S. Congress. If you haven’t already, go to nea.org/action center and sign up for EdAction in Congress, our weekly update and call to action. The more emails we send—and the more of us who send them—the greater our impact!

In solidarity,

Rebecca S. Pringle
President
National Education Association
In the run-up to the November mid-term elections, pundits across the political spectrum predicted that Republicans would win control of both chambers of the 118th Congress of the United States—maybe even win by a landslide.

That didn’t happen.

In the 118th Congress, Democrats advanced from a 50-50 split to a 51-49 majority in the Senate. The GOP has a five-vote majority in the House of Representatives—about the same razor-thin margin Democrats had in the 117th Congress.
117TH CONGRESS ENDS WITH BURST OF ACTION

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, enacted last June, is the most significant gun safety package in almost 30 years. It enhances background checks for gun purchasers under age 21 and broadens access to mental-health services, especially school-based programs. It also encourages states to implement red flag laws that temporarily keep individuals at elevated risk of harming themselves, or others, from gaining access to guns.

The Inflation Reduction Act, enacted in August, aims to reduce planet-warming emissions with tax rebates and credits that encourage consumers to buy electric cars and install solar panels, heat pumps, and energy-efficient appliances. To make healthcare more affordable, it allows Medicare—for the first time—to negotiate the price of prescription drugs and continues subsidies that lower Affordable Care Act premiums. It also requires the largest corporations to pay a minimum tax of 15 percent—roughly the same rate as the average taxpayer.

The Respect for Marriage Act, enacted in December, ensures couples in same-sex and interracial marriages the same legal protections that other couples enjoy. It is an explicit response to the concurring opinion of Justice Clarence Thomas in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, in which he wrote that the court “should reconsider” and “correct the error” of previous rulings establishing rights to same-sex marriage, contraception, and same-sex consensual relations.

The Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act, incorporated in the December year-end spending bill, seeks to prevent a repeat of the effort on January 6, 2021, to overturn a presidential election in Congress. It ensures that the electoral votes tallied by Congress accurately reflect the people’s vote in each state and clarifies that the vice president’s role in counting electoral votes is “solely ministerial.”

The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, also incorporated in the December year-end funding bill, aims to prevent pregnant women from being pushed out of their jobs or forced to risk their health to continue earning a paycheck. It will lead to a uniform, national standard for reasonable accommodations for pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions.

Earlier, the 117th Congress enacted the American Rescue Plan Act, the largest investment ever in public education; the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act to help protect Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders from attacks spurred by the pandemic; the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act; and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that includes funding for electric school buses and rural schools.
118TH CONGRESS STARTS SLOWLY

On Tuesday, January 3, as mandated by the Constitution, members-elect of the 118th Congress gathered to be sworn into office by their newly elected leaders—the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader. All went smoothly in the Senate, but not in the House.

To become Speaker, a candidate needs a majority of votes from those present and voting—218 if all 435 members are present. Representative Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) had no serious competition, yet it took him 15 rounds—the most since the Civil War. He did not seal the deal until early Saturday morning.

To win votes, McCarthy made significant concessions to MAGA Republicans, including allowing a single member to make a motion to vote on toppling him as Speaker. Those concessions complicated efforts to advance legislation initially in the House, let alone negotiate with the Senate and White House over must-pass measures like raising the debt ceiling to avoid a catastrophic default.

Congress created the debt ceiling in 1917 to facilitate funding World War I and raised it routinely, with bipartisan support, for over 90 years. Then, some Washington politicians began holding it hostage to policy demands, leading to a near-default in 2011 and budget caps—in reality, cuts—with damaging consequences that endure to this day.

McCarthy has run that playbook again, presenting the nation with a false choice: the first default in our country’s 246-year history or cruel, devastating cuts that target the most vulnerable while asking nothing of corporations or the wealthiest among us.

Not a serious plan

In April, The House passed the Limit, Save, and Grow Act of 2023 (H.R. 2811) by the narrowest of margins: 217-215. Every Democrat present voted “no,” along with four Republicans.

H.R. 2811 would make everyday life more difficult and more expensive—everything from college to childcare, healthcare, and putting food on the table. In exchange for raising the debt ceiling for about a year, it slashes education funding by $130 billion in FY2024. Essential programs could be cut by 22 percent—even more if certain areas, like defense, were exempted. For Title I and IDEA, a 22 percent cut is equivalent to removing 108,000 educators from classrooms, and would affect more than 32 million of our most vulnerable kids.

MAGA Republicans also pushed for students to resume debt payments and for more stringent work requirements for Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Yet they wouldn’t even consider modifying tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy, enacted during the previous administration, that have already increased the national debt by $7.8 trillion—the third biggest increase, relative to the size of the economy, of any presidential administration.

EDUCATION FUNDING IS $13.6 BILLION LOWER THAN 12 YEARS AGO

Adjusted for inflation
Any plan to address our nation’s long-term debt that completely avoids the revenue side of the ledger is not a serious plan—especially when it eliminates funding for tax enforcement that more than pays for itself. To modernize, improve service, and ensure that corporations and the wealthiest among us pay their fair share of taxes, the 2022 year-end spending bill invested $80 billion in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). MAGA Republicans want to take it all back, which would cost the Treasury more than $200 billion, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) called H.R. 2811 the Default on America Act and pronounced it dead on arrival in his chamber. President Biden announced that he would veto it. Speaker McCarthy admitted it was a negotiating tactic.

### Congress barely avoids default

With the nation’s first-ever default looming on June 5, President Biden and Speaker McCarthy finally reached a deal. Officially called the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, it easily passed the Senate and the House by wide bipartisan margins. President Biden signed it into law on June 3.

The product of divided government—like the U.S. Congress since January—the bill is replete with compromises.

The debt ceiling is suspended until January 2025, preventing another MAGA-manufactured default crisis before the next election. Education and other nondefense discretionary funding will be close to flat for two years, a likely outcome in this Congress anyway given the sharp differences among the majorities in each chamber. The pause in student loan payments will end in September, as the administration planned. While unspent COVID funds are being rescinded, the impact on us will be minimal—99 percent of education funding has already been obligated.

The bill also tightens work requirements for some SNAP beneficiaries—a disturbing change—but loosens them for others, including veterans. CBO estimates that in their entirety, the changes will add 78,000 beneficiaries and increase spending by $2 billion.

Overall, CBO estimates, the bill will lower the national debt by $1.5 trillion over a decade. That’s half the savings produced by President Biden’s proposed budget, which called for corporations and the wealthy to pay their fair share in taxes.
Education legislation

In March, the House narrowly passed the Parents Bill of Rights Act (H.R. 5). Every Democrat present and five Republicans voted against it.

H.R. 5 would facilitate censorship and book bans, undermine local control, and cast the federal government as a national school board deciding what students can read and learn. We defeated extreme amendments to provide vouchers for private schools, abolish the Department of Education, and reduce funding by replacing education programs with block grants.

In April, the House narrowly passed the Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act (H.R. 734), which would target and stigmatize transgender students. Every Republican present voted for it and every Democrat present voted against it.

"Speaker McCarthy and his allies continue to push hatred and division into our classrooms instead of addressing the real issues our students face, including gun violence and a shortage of educators," said NEA President Becky Pringle. "No one should be denied the experience to play in sports simply because of who they are."

Until recently, literary classics were the main target of book bans. According to the American Library Association, the top five targeted books of all times (in order) are To Kill a Mockingbird, The Catcher in the Rye, The Grapes of Wrath, 1984, and Brave New World.

Now, the most targeted books are by and about Black and LGBTQ people. A perennial favorite is The Bluest Eye by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison. Set in the 1940s, it describes the traumatic life of a young, Black girl and her longing for a traditional symbol of beauty: blue eyes.
Retirement security

Educators from all 15 states affected by the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) flew to Washington in May to lobby for their repeal via legislation such as the Social Security Fairness Act (S. 597/H.R. 82). The bill has wide bipartisan support with 277 cosponsors in the House and 44 in the Senate (as of May 31).

After a briefing at NEA headquarters, Representatives Garret Graves (R-LA) and John Larson (D-CT) addressed the group on Capitol Hill. NEA retired members then held nearly 100 meetings with lawmakers and their staffs, including face-to-face discussions with Representatives Pete Aguilar (D-CA), John Larson (D-CT), Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), and Joe Courtney (D-CT), among others.

The GPO and WEP deprive more than 2.5 million hard-working Americans, including many educators, of Social Security benefits they have earned.

The WEP reduces the Social Security benefits of people who work in jobs covered by Social Security and jobs NOT covered by Social Security over the course of their careers—for example, educators compelled to take part-time or summer jobs to make ends meet. Some people receiving foreign pensions are also subject to the WEP.

The GPO reduces—and for 70 percent, eliminates entirely—the Social Security spousal or survivor benefits of people who also get a pension based on federal, state, or local government employment NOT covered by Social Security. Two-thirds of the pension amount is deducted from the Social Security benefit—for someone getting a $1,500 pension, for example, the Social Security benefit is lowered by $1,000.

In February, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, held a town hall to discuss raising educators’ compensation—an important element of solving the educator shortage and elevating the profession. NEA President Becky Pringle, AFT President Randi Weingarten, and educators from around the country participated. Legislation has been introduced to make the minimum salary for teachers $60,000 a year.
Gun violence prevention

Gun violence has replaced car accidents as the leading cause of death among our children. In the last three years alone, the number of children killed by firearms has risen by 50 percent, according to the Pew Research Center.

In March, six innocent victims—three just nine years old—died in Nashville, Tennessee, in the 39th incident this year involving gunfire on school grounds, according to the K-12 School Shooting Database. By May, the number of school shootings had tripled, rising to more than 130 with seven months of the year still to come.

After Nashville, U.S. Senate chaplain Barry C. Black said, “When babies die at a church school, it is time for us to move beyond thoughts and prayers. Remind our lawmakers of the words of the British statesman Edmund Burke: ‘All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.’”

Congressman Tim Burchett (R-TN), who represents the district where the shootings occurred, had a different take: “It’s a horrible, horrible situation. And we’re not gonna fix it. Criminals are gonna be criminals.”

Voters want Congress to take action and strongly support common-sense measures like those advocated by NEA.

According to a recent poll by Fox News, 87 percent of Americans favor universal background checks, 81 percent support raising the minimum purchase age to 21, 80 percent support removing guns from people who are at-risk, 77 percent want a 30-day waiting period to buy a gun, and 61 percent want an assault weapons ban.
Through administrative action, the Biden administration has made major strides in fixing the broken Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program under which educators and staff working in public schools and colleges are eligible for forgiveness of federal loans after making 120 on-time payments.

The Department of Education's yearlong **Limited PSLF Waiver**, in effect from October 2021 to October 2022, gave eligible borrowers credit for periods of repayment that previously failed to satisfy the program's byzantine requirements. To date, 175,000 public-service workers have received more than $10 billion in loan forgiveness—many times the 16,000 who received it before the waiver. Legislation pending in Congress would make the waiver permanent.

To fulfill a promise to provide relief for struggling low- to middle-income borrowers, President Biden announced last summer that the Department of Education would **cancel federal student debt**—up to $20,000 for individuals earning less than $125,000, or $250,000 per household. As many as 40 million Americans could benefit if the plan survives GOP challenges in the courts and in Congress.

President Biden's plan to cancel student debt was suspended shortly after it was announced. Six Republican-dominated states—Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Carolina—sued to stop it, along with two individuals. The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in both cases in February. The court’s decision is expected to be announced by July.

In an amicus brief, NEA argued that the Biden administration's student debt relief plan is valid, saying, "Educators today are under an unprecedented level of strain because of the pandemic, its attendant economic upheaval, and an increasingly dire staffing shortage affecting over half of American schools. Nearly half of educators have outstanding student loan debt, owing, on average, $58,700."

In the weeks before the debt relief program was challenged in court, nearly 26 million borrowers applied or were deemed automatically eligible for a chance at debt relief; the Department of Education formally approved 16 million applications.

In June, President Biden vetoed a **Congressional Review Act resolution** that would block his plan to cancel student loan debt for people of modest means—90 percent of those who would benefit earn less than $75,000 a year.

### Child health and nutrition benefits

As educators know from firsthand experience, hungry students cannot focus on learning. Yet more of them are going hungry as the COVID public health emergency officially ends—and with it, the temporary expansion of safety net benefits.

School meals are no longer free for all students. Emergency allotments are expiring under SNAP, our first line of defense against childhood hunger.
SNAP benefits are approximately 80 percent of Farm Bill spending, and have become a political lighting rod—in both Farm Bill negotiations and the debt ceiling debate. Some members of the GOP are pushing to shred the safety net further by tightening eligibility for SNAP and making already strict work requirements even stricter.

The expiration of the Medicaid/CHIP continuous coverage requirement enacted during the public health emergency could deprive nearly 7 million children of access to healthcare for sustained periods, according to Georgetown University’s Health Policy Center. The loss of those benefits could not come at a worse time for already struggling students and families.

Judicial and other nominees

Federal judges are appointed for life and make decisions that can have major consequences for every American—a reality that resounded across America last summer, when the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.

The number of judges confirmed in the first year of the Biden administration was the largest during a president’s first year in office since Ronald Reagan in 1981.

The pace slowed in the 118th Congress, in part because Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and John Fetterman (D-PA) were absent for prolonged periods for medical reasons. (The Democrats’ razor-thin Senate majority means a single senator’s absence can halt a nominee’s advancement.)

Three out of every four judges tapped by Biden and confirmed by the Senate are women. About two-thirds are people of color. The list includes 11 Black women nominated to the powerful circuit courts, more than those installed under all previous presidents combined. Eleven former public defenders have been named to the circuit courts, also more than all of Biden’s predecessors combined.

NEA’s advocacy helped achieve confirmation of Nancy Abudu to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit—the first Black woman to serve there. She has spent her career defending our democracy, protecting the right to vote, fighting against unlawful discrimination, and ensuring that students have access to a quality public school education.

We also advocated for Julie Su as Secretary of Labor. Currently Acting Secretary of Labor, she previously served as California's Labor Secretary and Commissioner. Su has a record of advocating for workers' rights, protecting the most vulnerable workers, and supporting employers who prioritize workplace safety and fair treatment of workers.
IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR ALL OUR STUDENTS TO HAVE THE INSTRUCTION, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT THEY NEED TO SUCCEED.
Build thriving and just learning communities

• **Student success.** What the Supreme Court said in *Brown v. Board of Education* is still true: “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.” It is essential for ALL our students to have the instruction, resources, and support they need to succeed. That includes well-qualified educators, nourishing food, and adequate health care—mental as well as physical.

• **Educator shortages.** Even before the pandemic, educator shortages denied many students the support they need. To recruit and retain more educators, invest in grow-your-own and residency-based programs. Give educators the respect, working conditions, and compensation they deserve, including paid sick leave and access to affordable housing. Many education support professionals are among the 1 in 5 working Americans without paid sick leave, forcing them to choose between their health and their paycheck—a choice no one should have to make.

• **Education funding.** Target the students most in need through Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Invest in Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act state grants and the Full-Service Community Schools Program. Oppose budget caps and efforts to defund schools.

• **Community schools.** Expand the Full-Service Community Schools Program that supports schools providing neighborhood-driven services focused on what students need to succeed: strong academics, free healthy meals, health care, tutoring, mental health services, and more.

• **Voucher schemes.** Whether they’re called vouchers, education savings accounts, tuition tax credits, or opportunity scholarships, the impact is the same: taking public funds from public schools and weakening public education. Oppose vouchers in any form.

• **Child nutrition.** As pandemic supports disappear, more children are going hungry. Enhance and improve access to food aid in the Farm Bill, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for families—over 40 percent of SNAP recipients are children—and individuals experiencing food insecurity. Restore the USDA waivers that gave all students free school meals.

• **Higher education.** Protect, preserve, and continue to improve Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), which has now provided $10 billion in loan forgiveness for 175,000 educators and other public-service workers. To help create an educator workforce truly representative of today’s student population, increase funding for Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Increase Pell grants to reflect today’s cost of higher education.
Fight for racial and social justice

• **Honest education.** Culture wars do not belong in classrooms. Protect the ability of educators to teach the full sweep of U.S. history in an honest way—everything from the Constitution to slavery and Jim Crow. Allow LGBTQ+ students and educators to be their authentic selves.

• **Gun violence prevention.** Advance sensible policies to prevent gun violence and get weapons of war out of our schools and off our streets. Protect learning facilities, but don't harden them. Keep students and educators safe while preserving the freedom they need to thrive.

• **Child poverty.** Restore the enhanced child tax credit (CTC) that cut child poverty dramatically in 2021—nearly in half, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This sharp reduction was temporary, but restoring the CTC could make it permanent.

• **Rural education.** Address the unique needs of our 9.3 million rural students, families, and communities. Strengthen the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) Program, the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), and other federal programs that support rural students, families, and communities—specifically, the broadband necessary for success in today's interconnected society and opportunities not just to survive, but thrive.

• **Immigration reform.** Provide legal status and pathways to citizenship for Dreamers—people brought to the United States as minors who know no other country as home—and others allowed to remain here for humanitarian reasons.

• **Retirement security.** Protect Medicare, preserve Social Security, and repeal the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) that deprive public-service workers of Social Security benefits they have earned.

Protect and strengthen democracy

• **Judicial nominations and court reform.** Federal court cases determine what happens in our schools and communities, who has access to the ballot box, health care, workers' rights and more. We need an expanded judiciary that reflects America today—fair-minded people with varied backgrounds, personal and professional, who share our commitment to equal justice for all.

• **Voting rights.** Ensure access to the ballot box—our most fundamental right as citizens—by making it easier, safer, and more secure to vote. Restore protections eliminated by the Supreme Court's decisions in *Shelby v. Holder* and *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*. Make the District of Columbia the 51st state to give residents of our nation's capital full representation.

• **Workers' rights.** Guarantee all workers paid sick leave. Ensure that our nation's 20 million public-service workers have the right to organize and bargain collectively by passing the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act.
In January, the GOP took control of the House of Representatives and set a course that underscores the fundamental differences in the two parties’ agendas.
NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

The National Education Association is the nation’s largest professional employee organization, representing more than 3 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.

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