

neaToday

7 WAYS TO MAKE THIS A GREAT SCHOOL YEAR!

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To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

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These principles guide our work and define our mission:

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We believe public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character.

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We believe public education is vital to building respect for the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our diverse society.

DEMOCRACY.
We believe public education is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

PROFESSIONALISM.
We believe that the expertise and judgment of education professionals are critical to student success. We maintain the highest professional standards, and we expect the status, compensation, and respect due to all professionals.

PARTNERSHIP.
We believe partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to quality public education and student success.

COLLECTIVE ACTION.
We believe individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As education professionals, we improve both our professional status and the quality of public education when we unite and advocate collectively.

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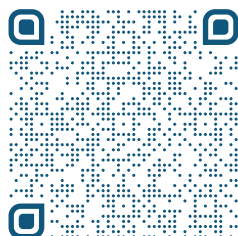
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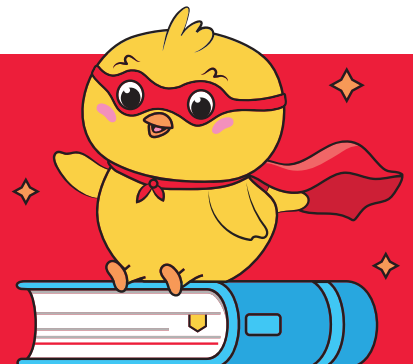


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Associate Publisher and Director **Anitrá Speight**

Tools to Supercharge Your School Year

Welcome back, educators! A new school year is here, with all of the excitement, optimism, and uncertainty that comes with it. Hopefully, this summer provided some time for relaxation and reflection, and you are feeling excited about new classes and new ideas for the upcoming school year.

In this issue, we give back-to-school a boost in “7 Ways to Make This a Great School Year!” (Page 36), where fellow educators offer creative tips for organizing classrooms, building relationships, staying energized throughout the year, and more.

NEA Today has also launched an exciting new digital experience to help you save time this school year. Now *NEA Today* is at your fingertips whenever you need it. In a quiet moment in the break room or as your work day winds down, you can pull out your mobile device and get *NEA Today* magazine and news online, enriched with exclusive digital content. You’ll continue to receive your quarterly print magazine, but you’ll also get online extras. For example, in this issue:

Take a video classroom tour with Delaware teacher Alison Tingle, who has superpowered organizational skills! She has more ideas for setting up a classroom than we could even fit into the print magazine. In the future, you’ll see more video, hear educator voices, and engage with interactive features.

Share far and wide. If an article inspires you or can help a colleague with a problem, you can share it right now with a click. When you want to send an article to administrators or the school board, you can share it with colleagues to rally support or send it straight to the source.

Know you are not alone. Being an educator can be incredibly fulfilling and also frustrating. *NEA Today* can deliver help straight to your inbox. Sign up at nea.org/signup, and scan the QR code at right to check out the new digital *NEA Today*.

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Joy, Justice, and Excellence

**Dear NEA members,
I am honored to serve as
your president.**

United, we will reclaim public education as a common good and transform it into a racially and socially just system that actually prepares every student—not one, not some, but every single student—to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. **Onward!**

**Becky Pringle
NEA President**



“

“We know our students’ ability to achieve [depends on] their freedom to live, to learn, to read, and to thrive. We cannot and will not allow politicians to grasp and hold on to fear, limiting our students’ access to an honest and complete education.”

—Becky, in the NEA webinar, “The Power of Truth,” April 19

Face to Face With NEA Members

“There’s a party goin’ on right here! A celebration ... ” of you! This spring, and at the NEA Representative Assembly, in July, we honored the NEA Education Support Professional of the Year and the 2023 Teacher of the Year. Pamella Johnson and Rebecka Peterson are the best of us, but they are also all of us. They’re smart—like you. They’re focused—like you. But what I love most of all, they’re also joyful—as I hope we all can be. Even in the face of our relentless challenges, Pamella and Rebecka find joy in their work and in their relationships with students and colleagues. For years, Rebecka has blogged daily about “one good thing” that has happened in her classroom. I am inspired by this. Our collective work as educators is important and hard. But we must not forget that this work is also full of joy—and it’s that daily joy that focuses and sustains us. So, like the man said, “Bring your good times and your laughter, too.” Congratulations to Pamella and Rebecka—and to all of you!



(Top) Congratulations to NEA ESP of the Year Pamella Johnson; (bottom) I was thrilled to visit the White House (home of NEA member Jill Biden) with Teacher of the Year Rebecka Peterson and NEA Secretary-Treasurer Noel Candelaria.

In the News

“EDUCATORS WHO DEDICATE THEIR LIVES TO STUDENTS SHOULDN’T BE STRUGGLING TO SUPPORT THEIR OWN FAMILIES. A CAREER IN EDUCATION MUST NOT BE A LIFETIME SENTENCE OF FINANCIAL WORRY. WHO WILL CHOOSE TO TEACH UNDER THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES?”

—Becky, in *Education Week*, April 24, 2023

JOIN ME

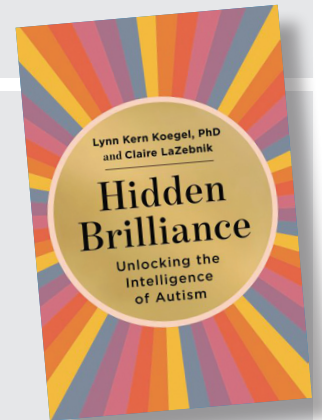
3 Things to Do For Yourself and Your Union

1. **Learn how to be an EdActivist.** We have a new way to fight for public schools. And it doesn’t involve much more than your phone—and your time. Learn more at educationvotes.nea.org/take-action.
2. **Meet your new colleagues.** And tell them about NEA! Our union is only as strong as our relationships with each other. During the first days of school, introduce yourself to the new person in the office or down the hall. Tell your new colleague that you—and our union—are here to support them.
3. **Make a self-care plan.** Maybe you like to read. (I love it!) Maybe you like to craft. (Make me something! I love other people’s crafts.) Whatever it is, before the school year gets underway, put time on your schedule to regularly do that thing that calms you and makes you feel whole. Check out more good advice on this topic from Ohio counselor Taraja Shephard Allen, in our article, “7 Ways to Make This a Great School Year” (Page 36).

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

What I’m Reading

When I began teaching, an estimated 1 in 5,000 students were thought to have autism. Today, it’s 1 in 54. We can debate the reasons why, but I don’t think we have time for that. The urgent question is: How do we support students with autism, and do our systems work for all children? For answers, I recommend the new book, *Hidden Brilliance: Unlocking the Intelligence of Autism*, co-authored by Stanford professor Lynn Kern Koegel and Claire LaZebnik. It’s full of practical advice for parents and educators, rooted in solid child development research. I especially appreciated the chapter on how standardized tests are failing autistic children. Of course, they are! Educators have long understood that standardized tests are inaccurate and unfair and don’t measure what students know. (To learn more about building better alternatives for students, check out nea.org/testing.)



Stay connected with me through Twitter @BeckyPringle.



NEA Grants Support Educators

In spring, NEA awarded \$6.7 million in Great Public Schools Fund grants to 11 state and local affiliates to launch innovative projects. These grants will help thousands of educators improve student success and strengthen the education profession. Two of the many projects include:

- **A leadership mentoring program** for Massachusetts education support professionals that nurtures the next generation of union advocates.
- **An initiative to support Indigenous educators and teachers of color** in California in earning National Board Certification.

Learn how your affiliate can apply at nea.org/GPSFundGrants. Next application deadline: September 15, 2023.

NEA has awarded **\$63.7** million in Great Public Schools Fund grants to **96** state and local affiliates since the program began, in 2013.

NEA is a Voting Powerhouse

When NEA flexes its muscle to support pro-public education and pro-union candidates, like Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, educators win. Here's how Biden has delivered for public schools:



1. \$170 billion in funding to raise educator pay, save jobs, address educator shortages, fix crumbling school buildings, and more.

2. Big steps toward safer schools with bipartisan gun safety legislation—passed largely as a result of NEA advocacy—that expands background checks, targets interstate gun trafficking, and supports state “red flag” laws, which can prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.

3. Appointments of people who have walked in our shoes, including Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. As a former educator, he understands what it takes to lead a public school classroom.

NEA PROTECTS YOUR RIGHTS



Worried about your rights as an activist? NEA has you covered. Check out our guide, “Educator Rights: Speaking Up for Public Education & Our Students,” which explains what kind of activism is protected in and out of school—and what can land you in trouble. Download the report at nea.org/advocacy-rights.

NEA Helps Members Get Loans Forgiven

NEA student debt experts have assisted nearly 40,000 educators in the student debt forgiveness process through its online student debt navigator tool, Savi. This benefit is free to NEA

members. How much have NEA members saved?

\$731,190,450
Total projected forgiveness

\$36,491
Average amount of debt per person that's eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness

\$54,438,505

Total projected savings

\$2,000

Average annual savings per person

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NEEDED:
**MORE CIVICS AND U.S. HISTORY
EDUCATION**

Students' scores for U.S. history are the worst since 1994, and scores on civics declined for the first time, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Known as "The Nation's Report Card," the NAEP assesses history and civics proficiency for eighth-grade students in a nationally representative sampling given every four years.

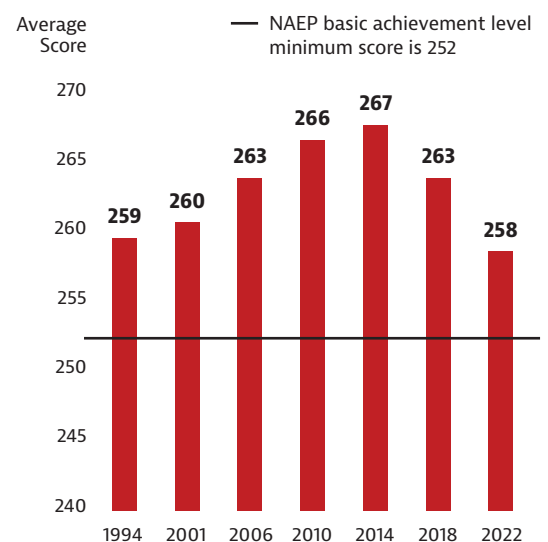
In 2022, only 13 percent of students scored proficient in history and only 22 percent scored proficient in civics. Forty percent of students scored below the basic level of knowledge in U.S. history—compared with 34 percent in 2018.

While it is tempting to blame this decline entirely on learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, experts are quick to note that U.S. history scores fell by a similar amount between 2014 and 2018. The larger problem is more likely the diminished presence of history and civics—and social studies in general—in America's classrooms for the last two decades.

A civics comeback in schools enjoys bipartisan support. A poll by Cygnal of more than 3,000 voters, conducted just before the 2022 midterm elections, showed that nearly 80 percent of respondents—Republicans and Democrats alike—believe that civics education is more important now than it was just 5 years ago, and 65 percent said they would support more funding for civics.

Eighth-grade U.S. history scores are at an all-time low

Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called "The Nation's Report Card," show that average scores have dropped five points since the test was last administered in 2018. The test's score scale ranges from 0 to 500.



QUOTED

"Racism and discrimination are not just artifacts of American history but continue to persist in our society, including our schools, colleges, and universities When we ensure the many talents and experiences of students of color aren't overlooked in admissions processes that tend to be biased against them, we create schools, a country and a future that includes us all. NEA remains committed to that work."

—NEA President Becky Pringle responding to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in June 2023 to end affirmative action in college admissions.





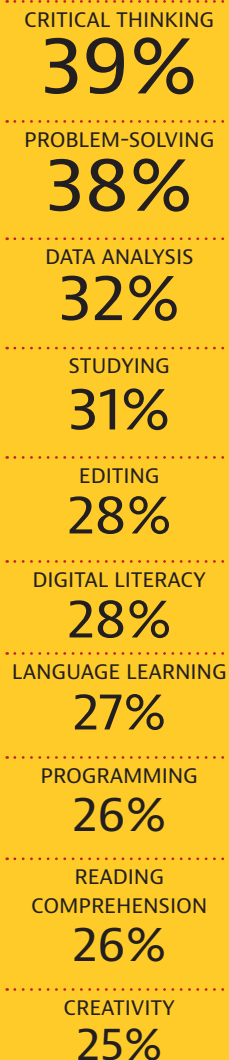
TEACHERS' VIEWS ON CHATGPT IN THE CLASSROOM

OpenAI, an artificial intelligence (AI) research laboratory, launched ChatGPT in November 2022. Since then, the AI program has been the epicenter of heated debate, especially in education. While many teachers are enthusiastic about how the tool could transform their classrooms, others fear the program encourages a new form of cheating and plagiarism.

Because of the program's simplicity, accessibility, and convenience, many students are using it to generate answers to homework questions and even write entire essays, claiming the chatbot's writing as their own. Now many educators are adding a new task to their already overloaded plates: checking for AI plagiarism and revamping lesson plans to be "AI-proof."

A recent survey, conducted by the online learning platform Study.com, underscored educators' mixed feelings about the program. Forty-three percent of educators feel the program will make their jobs more difficult. The others, nearly 6 in 10, predict it will make their lives easier.

Teachers think ChatGPT could help students improve the following skills:



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A New Blueprint for Parent and Community Engagement

Despite efforts by politicians to divide parents and educators, these partners in the school community remain strong allies. That was the message and sentiment at a family and community engagement symposium held at NEA headquarters in March.

“We know policies in some states do not support our students and work against what we know must be a collaborative spirit,” said NEA President Becky Pringle at the meeting. “But we will not be separated from our parents and communities.”

The symposium marked the release of an educator-family partnership framework created by the National Association of Family Support and Community Engagement (NAFSCE).

According to the group’s research, 84 percent of educators would choose a school with more engaged parents over

one offering a higher salary, but 73 percent identify engaging with parents and the community as challenging. Additionally, 61 percent say that state teaching standards don’t address building relationships and trust with families.

The vision offered in the NAFSCE framework is for the education system to honor and value the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of families and communities; to build trusting, reciprocal relationships; and to co-lead with families on equitable school systems.

The framework, Pringle said, “is one more tool to help us build the strong and fruitful relationships we must have between students, families, and educators.”

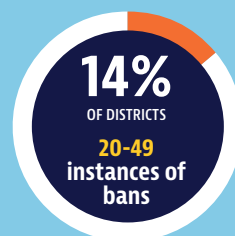
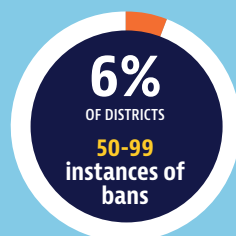
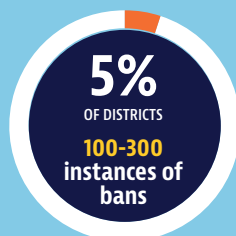


Learn more at nea.org/parent-community-engagement.

WHO IS BANNING BOOKS?

Although the growing number of book bans in libraries and schools is a disturbing and ominous trend, the banning activity is not spread evenly across the nation. Far from it. According to an analysis by PEN America, most book bans tend to be concentrated in a small number of school districts in politically conservative areas. During the 2022 – 2023 school year, book bans were most prevalent in districts in Texas, Florida, Missouri, Utah, and South Carolina. This handful of states, however, have established a model that could be duplicated in other parts of the country.

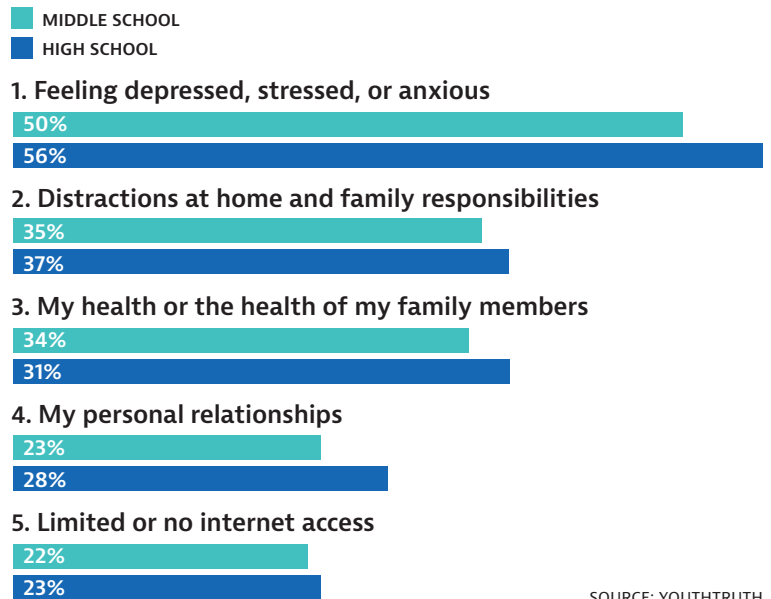
A small number of districts are responsible for banning the most books.



STUDENTS SPEAK OUT ABOUT BARRIERS TO LEARNING

The depression and anxiety that gripped so many students during the pandemic is showing few signs of fading away. That's the main finding of a national YouthTruth survey of students in 845 schools across 20 states. For students in grades 6–12, depression, stress, and anxiety were the most frequently cited obstacles to learning. These problems were felt most acutely by high school students. Over 50 percent of high school students cited these mental health concerns as an obstacle. The survey report concludes that this distress is "ubiquitous in the culture of American teenagers."

Five most-cited obstacles to learning



SOURCE: YOUTHTRUTH

Student loan debt has ballooned to **\$1.7 TRILLION.**

SUPREME COURT

STUDENT DEBT RULING FAILS EDUCATORS

In a decision that undermines the future of countless Americans burdened by crushing student loan debt, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Biden administration's Student Debt Relief Plan in the case of *Biden v. Nebraska*, on June 30.

"The court's decision ... reflects a failure to recognize the realities faced by student loan borrowers today," said NEA President Becky Pringle, when the ruling was announced. "Student debt has reached astronomical levels, hindering the economic progress of individuals, families, and our nation as a whole."

Student loan debt has ballooned to \$1.7 trillion, and the burden falls disproportionately on communities of color and marginalized groups. The Supreme Court's decision further exacerbates the existing inequalities in our education system.

The same day as the court's decision, the Biden administration announced plans to create alternate pathways to provide debt relief for student loan borrowers. Learn more at bit.ly/BidenDebtRelief.

LEARN MORE

Many educators are still eligible for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. NEA has already assisted 40,000 members in the PSLF process and can help you, too. Get started with NEA's debt navigator tool at nea.org/savi.

HOW STATES ARE SPENDING SCHOOL RESCUE FUNDS—AND WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT

By Amanda Litvinov

President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan (ARP), passed in March 2021, set aside nearly \$170 billion in School Rescue Funds for public schools. This single-largest investment in the nation's schools was designed to address pandemic recovery, with a focus on addressing historical inequities in public education.

The law—which requires all remaining funds to be spent or allocated by September 2024—mandates that educators unions are included in discussions about how the School Rescue Funds can be best used.

So how have districts used the funds so far, and what difference has this investment made in the lives of students and educators?

Mitigating needs

The federal money stabilized state education budgets and school districts. Early on, many districts used the funds to support virtual learning with new technology and broadband access. Later, the funds helped schools safely resume in-person learning with personal protective equipment, new cleaning protocols, and COVID-19 testing, among many other necessities. Subsequent funds have largely supported academic recovery and mental health needs.

NEA's state and local affiliates had a hand in making sure the resources

were put to good use. For example, the Michigan Education Association advocated for School Rescue Funds to be used to expand its Resilient Schools Project, originally launched in 2018.

The program promotes restorative practices, such as calming corners in every classroom. A behavior support team trains staff, models strategies, develops intervention plans, and conducts home visits. The project has led to a drastic increase in test scores and a decrease in violent incidents.

"We really do focus on the whole child, making sure to meet their social and emotional needs, and just making sure that every student is comfortable in the classroom and ready to learn," says Sarah Jasso, an English teacher at Lincoln Park High School, one of the state's resilient schools.



Sarah Jasso

Next steps

Rescue funds can also be used to address issues that predate the pandemic, such as educator shortages.

Some states and districts have dedicated the funds to retention and recruitment efforts and to diversifying the teaching workforce. But while one-time bonuses may have had a positive short-term impact, they will not solve the educator shortage. Providing competitive career pay and improving benefits like health insurance and paid family leave will. 🗝️

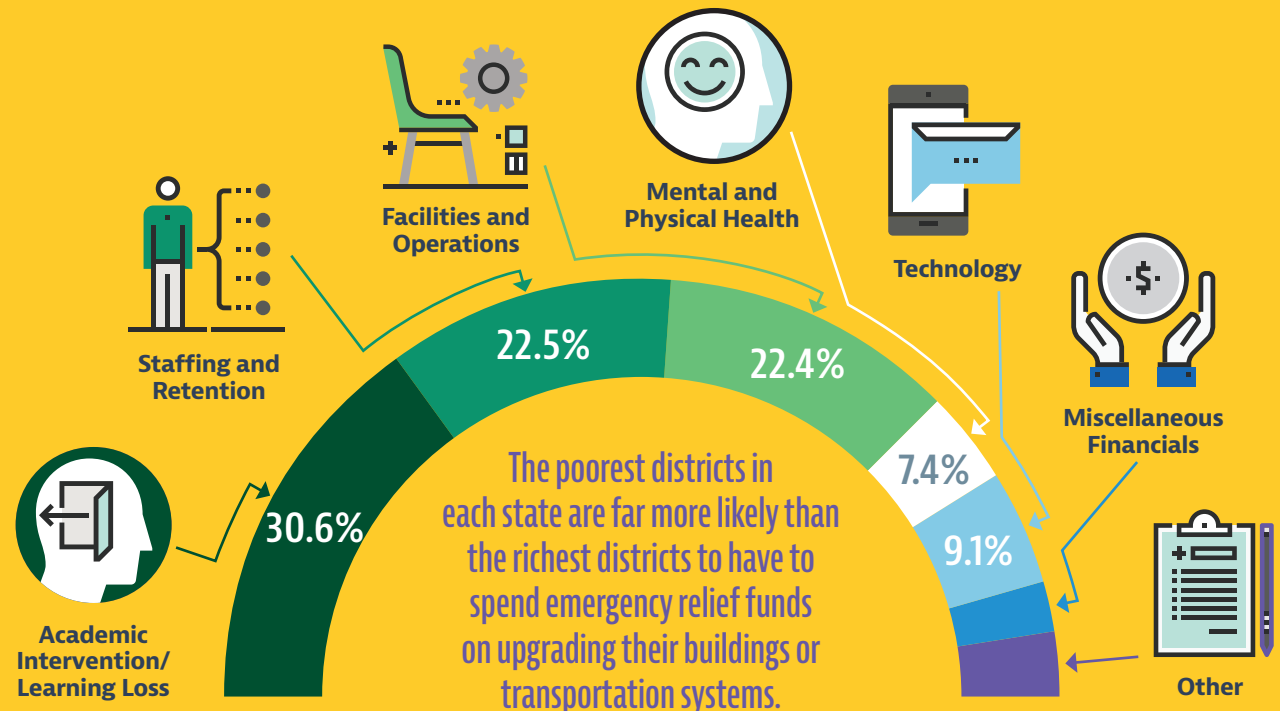
TAKE
ACTION

Find out more about the School Rescue Funds, and how to advocate for their good use: nea.org/arp-uses.

How have school districts and states spent School Rescue Funds so far?

Districts and local education agencies control 90 percent of School Rescue Fund spending. The most comprehensive data available covers 7,000 school districts, accounting for \$93 billion. Remaining funds must be spent or allocated by September 2024.

CREDIT: BURBIO



SOURCE: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ten percent of School Rescue Funds have been set aside for state-level spending. Here's how states have allocated the money so far:

10%

- \$4 billion:** Tutoring and accelerated learning programs.
- \$2.4 billion:** Enrichment programs before school, after school, and during the summer.
- \$1.4 billion:** Teacher recruitment and retention initiatives; support for statewide communities of practice; and leadership development programs.
- \$1.4 billion:** Efforts to improve students' access to high-quality remote learning opportunities.
- \$1 billion:** Initiatives to improve students' and educators' mental health, support social and emotional development, and provide wraparound support services to students.

SOURCE: COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS



ESP LEADERS ARE CREATING CHANGE—AND YOU CAN, TOO

By Cindy Long

What makes a good leader? Just ask these four support professionals who have answered the call to advocate for public education.

Enrique Farrera
**ACADEMIC ADVISOR AND
CAREER COACH**
OREGON CITY, OREGON

Farrera began his union leadership journey as a building representative, in 2012. That's when he first witnessed the inequities that school support staff experience. And low pay was not the only problem.

"We are oftentimes seen as second class," says Farrera, who works at Clackamas Community College. "But schools do not function without us."

Now, as vice president of the Oregon Education Association, Farrera continues to focus on equity.

That work began when he was president of the Oregon City Education Association. Through his leadership, support staff who were required to be bilingual started receiving additional pay.

In his current role, he created a seat on the state budget committee for the racial equity director, ensuring that equity would be a consideration in the budget process.

"We're currently working on a state-wide wage campaign," he says. "The goal is a livable, competitive salary. People can work at In-N-Out Burger for \$17 an hour, while our ESPs make less than that. We need to raise their salaries."

He also encourages support staff to get more involved.

"Find a field you feel comfortable in and begin to advocate for support staff, but also for every educator across the organization," he suggests. "When we build a bond among educators and learn how the system is interconnected, we have a stronger voice."

Tameka Mays
PARAPROFESSIONAL
NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

Mays was recently elected vice president of the Delaware Education Association. She worked her way up through the leadership ranks, serving as a building representative at George Read Middle School, as vice president of her union's collaborative bargaining team, and as president of the Colonial Paraprofessional Association, among other positions.

"Listening to members' stories inspires me to continue this work," Mays says. "I want them to know that they have value, that they have a voice, and



that together we can make real change for public education.”

Mays’ goal? “Leave public education in Delaware better than I found it,” she says.

She’s worked on big issues, such as increasing pay for paraprofessionals who cover classrooms, and small changes with major impact, like providing adult-size chairs for staff in pre-K classrooms.

Mays also wants to give voice to support professionals and encourage them to step into leadership roles.

“Find a mentor who can help you avoid pitfalls, encourage you when you are struggling, and tell you when you need to do better,” she advises.

Audrey Nichols
BOOKKEEPER
PULASKI COUNTY, ARKANSAS

“I am one of the brothers and sisters in the cause trying to better myself and others by being a staunch advocate for all educators and for everyone to be in the union,” says Nichols of her role as secretary-treasurer of the Arkansas Education Association (AEA).



Nichols, who works at Landmark Elementary School, says her advocacy grew out of being a mother of four children. Her oldest has Down syndrome, and she had to fight with the school and school board to ensure that her son was included in school activities—an experience that taught her how to speak up in the system.

She joined the union on her first day on the job, in 1996. Later, when her local went on strike, she was the strike secretary and took notes on the process from start to finish.

Her colleagues took notice of her and encouraged her to stay involved.

“It took somebody pulling me along and telling me, ‘I see something in you,’” Nichols says. “AEA and NEA afforded me opportunities to be in leadership, and it makes me understand more clearly the workings of what’s going on.”

Attending NEA’s ESP Leadership Institute, she says, “just opened up my world. ... I went in as a mom and a preacher’s wife, and I came out a leader with a voice for myself.

“When you find your passion, you find your voice,” she adds. “You are capable of standing and being heard, and you have a story to tell.”



Linda Estrada
CAMPUS SECRETARY
DONNA, TEXAS

“I am all about fairness and will speak up, whether it’s about our students or our educators,” says Estrada, who is vice president of the Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) and works at Dora M. Saucedo Middle School. “I will ... help organize the members to make sure issues are being addressed.”

Earlier in Estrada’s career, state and local leaders saw her potential and invested in sending her to trainings, such as the TSTA Ambassador Academy and NEA’s ESP Leadership Institute. The trainings, she says, were pivotal in preparing her to be an effective leader.

Among her many achievements, she is most proud of getting due process language implemented as president of her local, Donna TSTA, which assured that ESPs would not be fired without just cause.

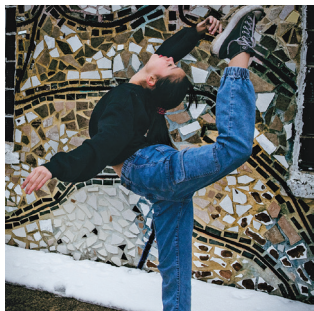
Her advice to other support professionals? “Ask questions! Reach out to your local president or state affiliate for leadership trainings. Don’t let anyone stop you from getting the support you need.” 🦋



You can be a leader, too. Sign up for the NEA ESP Leadership Institute at nea.org/espli.

OUR VOICES

close-up



Students from Jerome I. Case High School, in Racine, Wis., shared their passions through a photo exhibit. (From top, left to right) Jude Smith, theater; Sofia Badillo, swimming; Cindy Casco, art; Alonso Echeverria, music; Jesus Perez, art; Naisbert (Nez) Nyamatutu, soccer; Leah Starks, performing; Ya'Niece Giovanni, fashion; Lydia Taft, reading; and Kaleah Williams, robotics.



DIVERSITY ON DISPLAY IN WISCONSIN

“When you see people engaged in their passion, you no longer see how they are different. You see a way to connect.”

—Heidi Wagner, art activist and photographer

Racine Educators United (REU), in Wisconsin, collaborated with nationally recognized photographer and art activist Heidi Wagner to capture portraits of 10 students at Jerome I. Case High School. Called “The Passions Project: Racial and Social Justice,” the effort was funded through an NEA Community Advocacy and Partnership Engagement (CAPE) grant.

The goal? Uplift the voices of students from historically marginalized groups, celebrate them, and help increase community awareness, connection, inclusion, and the visibility of the city’s People of Color, Indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ residents.

The students, recruited from the school’s affinity groups, were the principal organizers of the project, too. They formed a committee, which was supported by REU educators, to seek student participation, promote their work, and help organize a community event.

In May, the students held a photo exhibit that included a community conversation about racial and social justice and safe and inclusive schools.

The project is intended to flip the script on politicians who ban books and restrict classroom instruction around gender and race.

“Our students are the ones impacted by the nonsense that some adults can get wrapped up in when it comes to what schools can teach about race, racism, and gender,” says Angelina Cruz, president of



Angelina Cruz

REU. “We wanted to humanize our kids and show their full, vibrant, intersectional, and diverse selves.”

Says Wagner:

“When you see people engaged in their passion, you no longer see how they are different from you. You see a way to connect.”

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ

LEARN MORE

To learn more about “The Passions Project,” visit the passionsmovement.com.

WHAT'S YOUR BEST ADVICE FOR NEW EDUCATORS?



“Join your union!”

—James Fedderman, Virginia

“Best advice I received from my mentor, ... keep a folder in your desk for any nice notes from students, parents, etc., so that on days you're struggling, you can pull them out and remember why you're doing this.”

—Alysia R.

“Focus on relationships first. Learning will follow.”
—Mandy M.

“MAKE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY; YOU CAN'T POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP.”

—Katelyn D.



“YOU WILL HAVE UPS AND DOWNS, BUT THAT MOMENT WILL COME!”

—Shyya Combs, Delaware

“ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT THE MOST DIFFICULT STUDENT HAS THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS GOING ON BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, SO SHOW THEM KINDNESS AND CARING.”

—Heather M.

“FIND A GOOD MENTOR!”

—Farrell V.

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OUR VOICES

member spotlight

A Little Help Along the Way

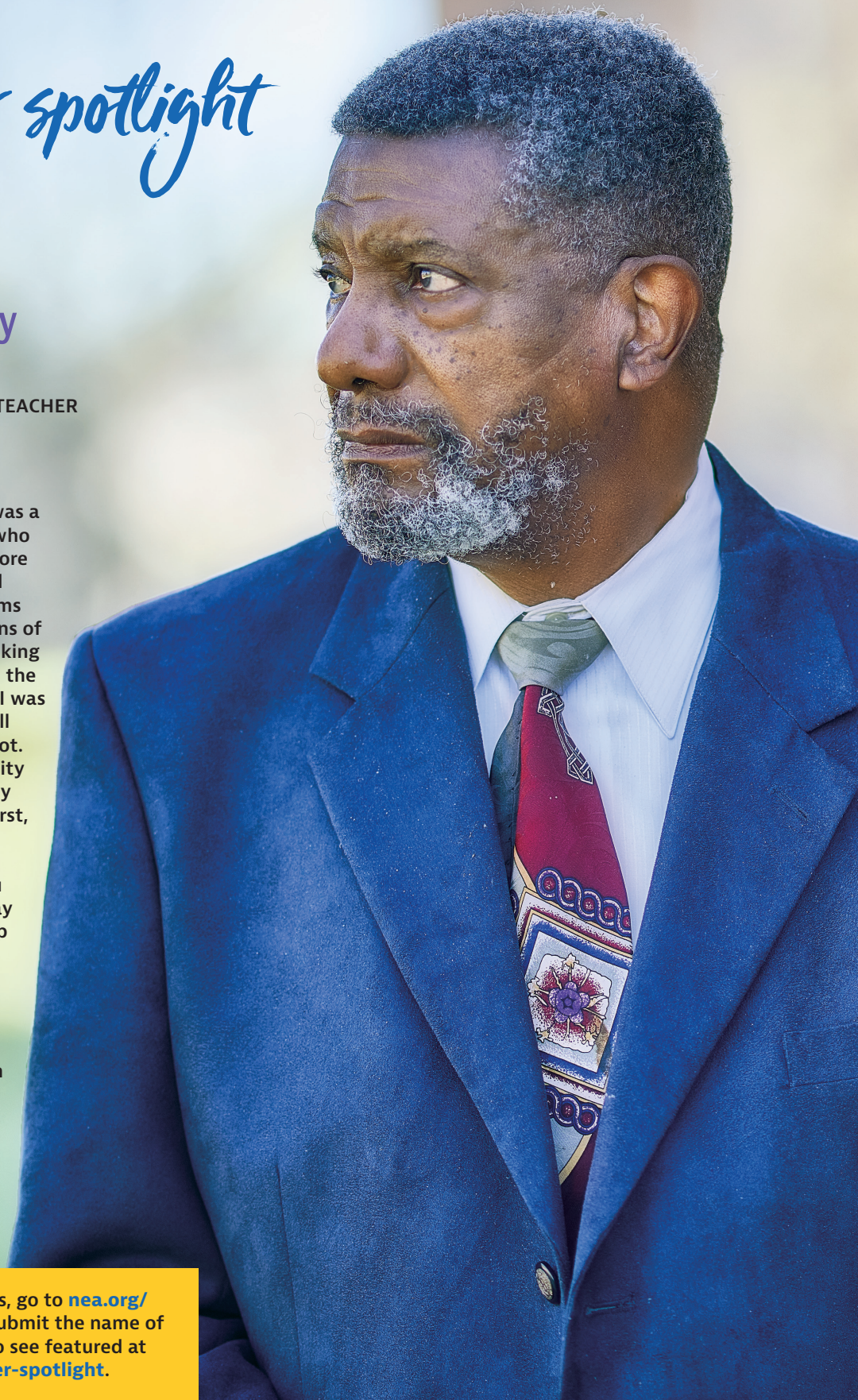
Roscoe McCormick
MIDDLE SCHOOL MATH TEACHER
AUSTIN, TEXAS

When I was a child in Fayetteville, N.C., there was a man named Ed Newton who owned a small grocery store near my house. He would have me do math problems by giving me combinations of grocery purchases and asking what they'd cost or what the change should be. When I was right, he'd give me a small prize—and I was right a lot.

Mr. Newton's generosity gave me two lessons early on that stuck with me. First, I learned to love math. But I also learned that you never know who you might meet along the way who will influence or help you. ... I hope in my role in education I can be one of those people, perhaps providing guidance or assistance to a student or a member of my union that will help them on their journey.

LEARN MORE

For more member stories, go to nea.org/member-spotlight, or submit the name of an educator you'd like to see featured at nea.org/submit-member-spotlight.





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TRY
THIS

engage

BOARD GAMES BOOST CREATIVITY, COOPERATION, AND CURRICULUM

By Cindy Long



Alyssa Tong is a gamer. A board gamer, that is. She plays board games with her friends on Friday nights and regularly reads reviews of new games to try out.

"I love all of them!" she says.

Tong shares her enthusiasm for board games with her students at Crispell Middle School, in Pine Bush, N.Y., where she teaches English as a new language.

"Board games are great ways to build vocabulary for English language learners [ELLs] and they also offer opportunities to build SEL skills," she says.

Tong is a member of the Tabletop Alliance, a volunteer-run nonprofit with a mission to promote and advance education and communities through the incorporation of games into programs and institutions like libraries and schools. Through the organization, she and her school have received free board games, like Just One, a word association game, and NMBR 9, a puzzle game that builds math skills.

In Tong's classroom, students play Just One together to guess as many mystery words as possible.

"The mystery word might be 'cupcake,' and kids might say small, sweet, dessert, while the others put



Alyssa Tong



Bruce Brown

those words together," she says. "Using adjectives and word association for ELLs in a game allows them to learn new words in a fun way."

Just One can support learning about science, too.

"Our students learn about cells in seventh grade, and they can play the game and come up with adjectives that describe parts of a cell," Tong explains.

Playing NMBR 9, she adds, helps students hone multiplication skills and spatial awareness, with some friendly competition to egg them on.

"The sky is the limit in how you can use games to support curriculum," Tong says.

Games can match teachers' needs

Bruce Brown is the founder of the Tabletop Alliance. He's also the assistant

(Left) Students play board games provided by the Tabletop Alliance; (below) Alyssa Tong, far right, plays Votes for Women, which is part of her eighth-grade curriculum. To meet the game's creator, visit nea.org/votesforwomen.



director for leadership education at Texas A&M University and host of the "Board Game Impact" podcast.

He and his team at Tabletop select games that have the best results for students and also match teachers' needs.

Research shows that games can be used to enhance a variety of learning outcomes, Brown says, such as teaching explicit lessons, fostering team building, increasing creativity, building confidence, and fostering resilience and good sportsmanship.

"Some teachers might want games to demonstrate economic principles or historical lessons, others to align with social emotional learning," Brown says. "We call each educator we send games to [and] find what will best align with the desired outcomes."

Tong's Tabletop Alliance Game Collection



Just One
by Repos
Production



King of Tokyo
by IELLO



Onitama
by Arcane
Wonders



NMBR 9
by Z-Man
Games



Sushi Go
by Gamewright

All of the recommended games can be set up, played, and taken down within an hour. They are easy to learn, appeal to a range of interests, and can be played repeatedly with more discovery each time. Many have helpful YouTube tutorials, too.

Brown says board games can help meet SEL needs by addressing social and self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

"The research shows that this is especially true when educators use intentional dialogue and reflection on actions to reinforce the learning for future applications," he says.

Do not pass go without setting expectations

Before the students grab game pieces and dive in, Tong recommends establishing some classroom norms.

"Define expectations for set up and clean up, behavior, and sportsmanship," she says. "Otherwise, it's easy for students to get excited and forget all of those things, and then it's the teacher who is cleaning up and setting up."

It's hard for students, especially those who are younger or neuro-divergent, to find the language to express their emotions in a constructive way, Tong says.

"But when a student who is easily frustrated is able to lose, but still say good game and not have a meltdown, everyone wins."

Move Over Monopoly

Today's board games are deep dives into unique themes and user experiences. Bruce Brown, founder of the Tabletop Alliance, recommends some of his favorites for classrooms:



Wingspan by Stone-Island Games

Players become researchers, bird watchers, ornithologists, and collectors, all seeking

to discover and attract the best birds to their network of wildlife preserves. Each card includes detailed information about a specific bird, such as wingspan, nest type, region of the world, and even a fun fact.



Food Chain Magnate by Splotter

In this strategy game, players build a fast-food chain by aligning suppliers, marketing, and selling to customers. Players also design an organizational chart during each round, from CEO to frontline employees.



Canvas by R2i

You have to be "in the know" to play this game. The name does not appear on the cover of the box—which doubles as art, complete with a notch on the back for hanging on the wall. This innovative game embraces the principles of art, with each player pretending to be a painter in an art competition. The goal is to collect art cards and artistically layer paintings to create a "masterpiece" and win best in show.

TRY
THIS

technology



APPS CAN HELP YOU COMMUNICATE WITH FAMILIES

By Abreanna Blöse

Educators know that good communication between schools, families, and communities fosters students' success.

"I can't do this alone," says Johanna Amaro, an English as a second language teacher in Plainfield, N.J. "The way I see it is, we're a team. Getting the parents involved—students feel supported, and I feel supported at the same time."

Decades of research shows that the more families and teachers share information with each other, the better they can support students' academic and social achievement. Technology can help educators develop these authentic relationships from day one, especially for non-English speakers and other hard-to-reach families.

Make parents comfortable

At the beginning of the school year, try these tips to determine how families prefer to communicate.

- **Establish a connection** the "old-fashioned way." Send home a letter,



Johanna Amaro

make a phone call, or talk with parents in person. For Amaro, this first interaction takes place through a newsletter. She encourages parents to come to back-to-school night or to schedule a parent-teacher conference.

- **Ask families** what methods of communication they are most likely to respond to, what languages are spoken at home, and even what holidays they celebrate, if they are willing to share.
- **Keep a record** of families' communication preferences and needs. This will help you understand the best way to reach families, know when a translation tool is necessary—or create a multi-cultural calendar.

Neglecting to adapt to these communication preferences can break lines of communication between parents and teachers, ultimately harming the student's progress.

Use language apps properly

English language learners are the fastest growing group of students in the nation, making up 10 percent of the K–12 school population, according to the

NEA guide “All In! How Educators Can Advocate for English Language Learners.” When educators learn to navigate these language and cultural differences, more families feel welcome in the school community. Nothing can take the place of one-on-one communication, but here are a few ways that technology can help get the conversation started:

- **Adopt translation tools.** Curriculum and technology coach Michael Carvella suggests that educators and school districts use messaging apps with built-in translation tools, such as Seesaw and Clever.

“The fact that [apps] will translate into native languages for our parents is phenomenal. I never had that when I was in the classroom,” says Carvella,



Michael Carvella



Gabriel Tanglao

who taught elementary school in Oak Ridge Schools for 15 years before serving in his current role there. “If I had a Spanish-speaking family, I had to go find somebody to translate for us.”

- **Understand the limitations.** These apps are helpful tools, Carvella notes, but they are not a perfected mode of translation. Many concepts or words cannot be translated perfectly, so be aware that there may be some confusion.
- **Communicate authentically.** It is essential to engage with parents without abusing translation tools, cautions Gabriel Tanglao, the associate director of the Office of

Human and Civil Rights, Equity and Governance at the New Jersey Education Association. Instead of relying on the translation tool for every parent-teacher interaction, use the technology to learn how to say hello and “How are you?” in native languages.

“Try your best to learn the cultures and languages, even if it’s in basic communication,” Tanglao says. “Everything from [storytelling] skills to humor to dramatic pauses to different ways we all communicate—those are forms of linguistic capital, which is why it’s valuable that we recognize those assets and embrace them in our classrooms.”

After all, communication is double-sided. When teachers are willing to adapt to parents’ needs, parents are willing to adapt to a teachers’ needs. Working together, educators, parents, and students all feel supported.

As Amaro says, “We are all working towards the same goal—the success of their child.” 🌟



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Boost Engagement to Boost Achievement

By Cindy Long

RETHINKING
STUDENT
AND FAMILY
ENGAGEMENT
IS THE FIRST
STEP IN
CLOSING
POST-
PANDEMIC
LEARNING
GAPS

In the first 25 years of Jody Murphy's career, her students never answered a phone call in the middle of chemistry class. Then the pandemic happened.

"The students I have today are not the same students they were pre-COVID," says Murphy, who teaches at North High School, in St. Paul, Minn.

Vexing, yes. But surprising? Not at all.

"Given all of the challenges of the pandemic, it's no wonder kids aren't engaged the way they were," she says. "We need to find new ways to reengage them by recognizing where they are now."

After attending NEA's Accelerated Learning Program convening last February, Murphy feels like she has a road map to follow to get her students back on track.

She admits that feelings of defeat have plagued her and her colleagues, but after the meeting, she says, "[I feel] super-excited about education again. ... I'm ready to jump in with both feet!"

As schools look at student learning post-pandemic and communities react to standardized test scores, NEA members are leading the conversation about how to boost student learning. Teams of education stakeholders—including educators, district leaders,

and a parent or community representative—gathered for three days, in Los Angeles, last winter to explore best practices to accelerate student learning and offset learning delays.

NEA leaders invited 10 district teams to collaborate and share their experiences. They left the event with action plans grounded in education improvement science—meaning the application of small, measurable, and individualized changes that address specific issues in an educational setting and help uncover the

root causes of problems. Each team developed local plans for 30, 60, and 90 days from conception to implementation.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to accelerating student learning. The goal of the convening was to provide teams with ideas, insights, and planning time to develop multiple models that can be tailored to meet the academic and societal needs of individual communities across the country.

Murphy was part of the School District 622 North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale Education Association team. Their first priority is to amplify student voices as a way to reengage them.

As a first step, Murphy has distributed surveys to students asking about changes they would like to see.



Jody Murphy



“Given all of the challenges of the pandemic, it’s no wonder kids aren’t engaged the way they were. We need to find new ways to reengage them by recognizing where they are now.”

—Jody Murphy, high school chemistry teacher, Minnesota



“One of the first questions I asked is what can I do to make [students] feel more supported,” she says. “If we want them to buy in, we have to change. This is the first generation of students who’ve lived with this kind of upheaval. If teachers don’t acknowledge that and change how they teach, we’re not going to make a difference.”

Fellow team member Jana Hedlund agrees. “We’ve experienced some of the most challenging years in teaching,” says Hedlund, who teaches high school special education. “Our kids need

Jody Murphy surveys her students to find out what will help them succeed in chemistry class. (Left) Teacher Jana Hedlund says we need to rethink how we engage students.

a new way of framing education and new ways of supporting them so they can get reconnected and be successful in school.”

The Accelerated Learning Program offers problem-solving around those issues.

The rush to return to in-person teaching and get “back to normal” was what everyone wanted, but there was little time to reflect, Hedlund adds.

“We forged ahead so quickly we didn’t have time to work with our district and have the conversations to learn from what we went through,” she says. “The Accelerated Learning Program is an opportunity to take a step back and do that. In collaboration with the district, union, administrators, families, students, and the community, we can adjust what we’re doing moving forward.”

SPECIAL SERIES

How Do We Assess Students and Schools?

LEARN MORE

Reimagining engagement goes hand in hand with reimagining assessment. Learn more at nea.org/testing.

A conversation with team Clifton

Located just outside of New York City, Clifton, N.J., is a culturally and socioeconomically diverse community where 67 different languages are spoken. Some students come from low-income backgrounds, while others are quite affluent.

The tagline of the Clifton Education Association is, “Diversity is our strength.”

The team is determined to build on that strength as part of their work in NEA’s Accelerated Learning Program. They are

stakeholders with a voice in how their schools are run and how students are taught. Here’s how members plan to achieve their top priority—increasing community engagement.



The team of Clifton educators, reenergized by NEA’s Accelerated Learning Program convening, in Los Angeles, are now getting to work on engaging families at school.

Lori Lalama, computer teacher at Christopher Columbus Middle School, Clifton Education Association president

“One Clifton” is our goal. We want more ideas from the community, we want to know what they need and what we can provide. We will build on our FAST program—Families and Schools Work Together—to provide homework help, so parents have tools to help their children. This includes game nights with parents and children to support math curriculum, bilingual parenting meetings, and events that celebrate the many foods and cultures of our community.

Martha Andrea Orrok, kindergarten/ELL teacher, School 12

We have spoken to our superintendent to try to get translators in at least two of our major languages—Arabic and Spanish—



Lori Lalama



Martha Andrea Orrok



Judy Bassford



Laura Zagorski



Michael Tecza



Ahmad Hamdeh

to attend the board of education meetings. We also plan to reach out to community groups that can help with mentoring. We strongly believe that involving all members of the community without restrictions will help our students succeed.

Judy Bassford, parent and community ally

We have a lot of immigrants here who have had bad experiences with “authority” in the past. They associate the school with authority, and there is a lot of fear. Many don’t enter the schools. They ask an older child or a cousin to be a translator at home. We want them to know that we are here to support them. We will help them with academics and other resources. If they need food or clothes, everything from prom dresses to Halloween costumes, we all know somebody we can call. The community is big, but we’re a small town. We really care about each other and who we serve.

Laura Zagorski, principal, School 17

We do need to rethink how we serve our community. After the pandemic, struggles have intensified. The needs are greater. We need to rethink how we focus on the whole child and the whole family.

Michael Tecza, social studies teacher, Woodrow Wilson Middle School

COVID-19 put a wedge between parents and schools. We need to bridge that gap again. When families are involved, students are more engaged, and student engagement can lead to more family involvement. For example, we want to create more cultural events, where high school students connect with their younger siblings and students in other schools. The students can spearhead these events and encourage their families to be involved.

Ahmad Hamdeh, principal, Clifton High School

We’ll offer workshops on how to be engaged or how to use the parent portal. We want to host a multicultural festival where students perform dances from their cultures and the cafeteria serves foods from many of their countries. We want families to know we are a part of their village. We want to help them help us help their kids.

Laura Warren



Laura Warren, Oregon special education paraeducator and advisor to Dolton, Illinois, team

The pandemic has led to huge losses and missed learning opportunities for our students across the nation. Many students have severe deficits and cannot just take up where they left off. The path to learning recovery is steep, but not impossible if we work together.

Paraprofessionals play a vital role in the learning recovery process. Paras have the knowledge and flexibility to provide small group and individualized instruction that is difficult for teachers to provide. They partner with classroom teachers and specialists to deliver instruction designed to help students advance quickly and address specific skills.

Paras also assist with the escalated behaviors exhibited by many students that get in the way of their learning. They build close bonds with students and support their learning as well as their emotional needs. They work tirelessly to make sure students are ready to learn by providing support around food insecurity, safety, and so much more.

Too often, experienced paraeducators are leaving the profession because of the lack of support and recognition of the professionals that they are. Low wages make it impossible for many to stay in the profession, even though that is where their heart is. They find that they cannot exist without being on public assistance to meet their monthly living expenses, even while working in education full time. This creates a shortage of paraprofessionals needed to do this work.

Professional development is extremely important for this group. Paraprofessionals need the tools to effectively address the needs of each student. Paras are indispensable and must be part of the learning recovery process in order for it to succeed and put our students back on track. 🦋

Paraeducator power

Every team in NEA’s Accelerated Learning Program convening included a paraeducator and a teacher who provided feedback as teams worked on local plans. With this level of collaboration, teams ensured that all school community members had a voice and role in supporting student learning.

Andrea Beeman, Ohio special education paraeducator and adviser to Clifton, New Jersey, team

Our students need so much to close the achievement gaps and support social and emotional learning. They need small group instruction in reading and math as well as tools to help them process the trauma experienced as a result of the pandemic.



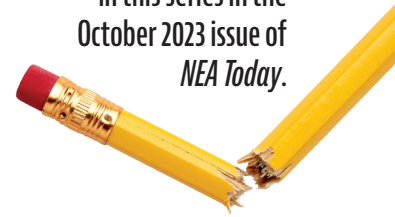
Andrea Beeman

To support this work, the education team must understand paraprofessionals’ critical role in learning recovery. We must include paraprofessionals in education teams to support certified educators. We need to see how essential these individuals are to student learning.

School districts can’t afford to use paraeducators as glorified babysitters anymore. They must receive quality professional development, time for team collaboration, and wages that enable them to support families.

SPECIAL SERIES

Look for the next article in this series in the October 2023 issue of *NEA Today*.



FOR MORE

For NEA resources to support accelerated learning, go to nea.org/accelerate.

Mindfulness Helps New Immigrants Face Trauma and Stress

A LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY SCHOOL OFFERS NEWCOMERS MORE THAN ACADEMIC SUPPORT

By Cindy Long

Students who have recently arrived in the U.S. often don't know how to speak English let alone navigate the complex social and academic ecosystem of a typical American high school. These newcomers feel like outsiders.

"We have almost 50 newcomer students this year," says Emily Grijalva, community school coordinator at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School, in East Los Angeles. "The students ... have been displaced and many have gone through trauma."

Often they come on their own as unaccompanied minors, separated from their families and the only communities they knew. On top of trying to make up learning gaps and create relationships with educators and classmates in a new language, a lot of the students have to work to provide for themselves. The stress can be overwhelming.

Community partnership supports mental health

Grijalva knows these students need help with more than academics. That's why her school partnered with the nonprofit InsightLA and its community outreach program Insight in Action. The program partners with community groups,

other nonprofits, and schools to provide free mindfulness training to vulnerable populations.

Each week, the program's director, Rosamaría Segura, conducts mindfulness classes in Spanish with the school's newcomers, who are mostly recent arrivals from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela.

She asks students to follow their breath, engage in deep breathing, and stay in the present moment. She even led students in a sound bath, a meditative experience where participants are "bathed" in sound waves produced by soothing instruments, such as gongs, singing bowls, or chimes.

"The first few weeks were challenging. Some students seemed to care, and others appeared to have difficulty settling in and would try to distract their classmates," Segura says. "But by the fourth session, almost all of the students seemed relaxed and eager to participate."

Community schools bolster both emotional and physical health services and provide students and their families with a wide range of other support based on their needs.

Now when Segura walks into the classroom, she says the students welcome her with "Hello Miss, we were waiting for you."

"In December, I gave them an anonymous survey asking what they liked and didn't like about mindfulness meditation, and how they applied it in daily life," Segura says. "They didn't have any complaints or dislikes."

What they did have was a lot of positive feedback.

"Observing my breath helps me to feel less anxious," was one student's response.

"After meditating I feel calm and relaxed," was another.

One student reported noticing sounds more and practicing mindful coloring.

The survey also asked if the students wanted to continue the mindfulness sessions for the rest of the year. Every one of them answered yes.

"Mental health has always been a need, but it's especially critical coming back from the pandemic," Grijalva says. "Our students have experienced deaths of loved ones, evictions, family job loss, and now we have newcomers arriving unaccompanied and experiencing trauma."



Emily Grijalva, community school coordinator, in California



Students meditate at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School, in Los Angeles.

“The meditation series brings relief to [students’] lives and the ability to use strategies to help them deal with stressful situations.”

—Carlos Martinez, high school English teacher, Los Angeles

Mindfulness isn’t only for the wealthy

Grijalva says she sees how meditation and mindfulness help ease traumatic stressors—and research on the topic backs her up. But the practice is often more accessible to affluent communities.

InsightLA’s mission is to change that.

“The organization works with underserved communities that can’t afford mindfulness training,” Grijalva says. “I jumped at this partnership because I knew they could start healing some of the trauma, and I saw the organization looks through the same social justice lens that we do as a community school.”

English teacher Carlos Martinez has noticed how the weekly sessions have benefited students.

“Newcomers have additional stress in school because not only are they expected to perform at grade level, but their thought process and language abilities are in another language,” Martinez says. “The meditation series brings relief to their lives and the ability to use strategies to help them deal with stressful situations.”

For a while, the local community wasn’t receiving as many newcomers because of gentrification, Grijalva says. Most were going to neighborhoods in the southern part of the city.

“Recently we’ve had a huge increase and had to pivot our community resources,” she explains.

“Their needs are very different, and that’s what a community school can do—pivot to meet new needs.”

The school used to serve mostly immigrants who came to the U.S. with their families. Now, most of the students make the journey on their own, crossing a heavily militarized border. Many come from rural areas and speak Indigenous languages, so their Spanish isn’t as strong.

“There are also huge gaps in academics,” Grijalva says. “One student hadn’t attended school since second grade, and now he’s an eleventh grader.”

Mindfulness is one of the myriad programs Mendez offers students through community partnerships that support academics and mentoring, arts and enrichment, health and wellness, housing, job skills, leadership, and more.

“Everything that happens at Mendez is about strengthening the community,” Grijalva adds. “Easing stress through mindfulness adds a deeper dimension to that work.” 🌸

LEARN MORE

Discover more about community schools at nea.org/communityschools.

Joe Biden: A President Who Hears Our Voices

‘This is the most pro-public education and pro-union administration in modern history.’

—NEA President Becky Pringle

Let's Keep Winning!

Check out a timeline of the Biden administration's accomplishments. Text BIDEN to 48744, or go to nea.org/BidenWins.

By Abreanna Blose and Amanda Litvinov

Since taking office, Joe Biden has shown that he understands the critical role our public schools play in the lives of American families. His administration reopened schools safely during the pandemic and championed a historic reinvestment in public education focused on addressing inequities.

On April 26, NEA President Becky Pringle announced that NEA, the largest labor union in the country, is recommending President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominees for reelection.

During Biden's term, he has prioritized public schools, pushed for sensible student loan forgiveness, and made strides to curb gun violence. Biden, Harris, and first lady Jill Biden—an educator and NEA member—have also amplified educator voices and recognized their work.

Soon, educators will have the chance to help reelect Biden.

"In 2024, the future of our students, our public schools, and our democracy are on the ballot," Pringle said. "President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are tireless advocates for public education, proving time and time again that this is the most pro-public

education and pro-union administration in modern history."

Here are just a few examples of how Biden has supported public education and labor unions:

INVESTMENTS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

In March 2022, Biden signed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) into law, setting aside nearly \$170 billion for schools. The School Rescue Funds made history as the largest, single investment in education.

In Pennsylvania, Erie's Public Schools dedicated part of its \$90 million in federal relief funding to expanding



Donna Wall

its community schools initiative. Back in 2016, the district's Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary School adopted a community schools model, providing families with access to food, clothing, hygiene products, and other supplies. They also implemented mental health services for students and families.

“Educators innately want to help but oftentimes the barriers ... are things that educators do not have control over,” says Erie educator Donna Wall. “A community school offers support and resources so that we can do what we do best—focus on educating our students.”

The district aims to use ARP funds to bring the initiative to all Erie schools.

STUDENT DEBT RELIEF

The Biden administration’s Department of Education announced a limited-time waiver under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, in October 2021. Some 360,000 educators and public service workers received a total of \$24 billion in student loan forgiveness through the program.

Biden’s broader plan would provide immediate relief to 40 million families through the cancellation of \$400 billion in federal student loan debt—but it has been stalled by lawsuits brought by Republicans officials.

Emily Robinson, a Georgia high school teacher, found out in November 2021 that her remaining student loan debt of about \$21,000 was forgiven. Without that monthly payment, she was able to start saving.



Emily Robinson

Robinson is grateful to the Biden administration’s efforts to fix the program: “It’s like a validation: I am important, and you do want us to stick around!”

SAFER COMMUNITIES

In June 2022, Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) into law. It is the first major gun safety bill passed by Congress in over 30 years.

The legislation expands background checks; targets interstate gun trafficking; and supports state “red flag” laws, which allow courts to temporarily prevent people in crisis from accessing guns. It also provides roughly \$1 billion in mental health resources for public schools.



President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden gave a livestream address to the 2023 NEA Representative Assembly, held in Orlando, Florida, in July.

Alana Rigby, a college student and aspiring educator from Florida says, “My generation has grown up with school shootings and active shooter drills. This has always been our reality.”



Alana Rigby

It has been difficult for Rigby, a gun violence prevention activist, to see years of inaction on the part of state and federal lawmakers. But she says the BSCA shows that change can happen.

“It gave me hope,” Rigby says. “I think that they are finally listening.”

a teacher without this program,” says Cheryl Libutti, who is part of New York’s Classroom Academy program. It offers an annual stipend of \$22,000, plus \$5,000 annually in tuition assistance.



Cheryl Libutti

Libutti says she has gained skills over the past two years that she would not have developed in a traditional student teaching program, which typically lasts only three to four months. 🌟

EASING SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGES

One of the ways the Biden administration has worked to ease the educator shortage is by expanding support for teacher apprenticeships.

Unlike traditional student teaching programs, apprenticeships pay a living wage to aspiring educators who spend extensive time in the classroom.

“I honestly don’t think I could have gone back to school to become

TAKE ACTION

Become an EdActivist

NEA’s all-in-one digital organizing app makes it easy to rally support for public schools and get involved in elections. Get started at nea.org/EdActivist.



KEEP A JOURNAL

Write down what works—and doesn't—in your classroom. The act of reflection will help you better respond to students' needs in the future. Take inspiration from National Teacher of the Year Rebecka Peterson, who wrote about something good that happened every day in her classroom for 1,400 days! Finding the good has made her a better teacher, she says.

7 Ways to Make This a Great School Year!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Summer's over! But things are about to heat up in classrooms and other workspaces. Here are seven things you can do now to smooth the way for a positive and powerful school year to come.

FORGET LESSON PLANS, YOU HAVE A MORE PRESSING TASK

Focus on student relationships first—and learning will follow, advises **Yahaira Rodriguez**, a Worcester, Mass., paraeducator.

"Just sit down. Talk to them. What'd they do over the summer? Students want to feel seen by you as more than just a test score," she says.

Rodriguez's students often ask her: "Are you married? Do you have kids? Can I see pictures?" She always answers. (No, yes, and of course!) Relationships are a two-way street.

"There's always been this distinction between educator and child, but we have to let them see us as imperfect human beings, too," she says.

The time that you spend on relationships now will help everything go more smoothly in the months ahead, Rodriguez promises. When your students know you care, when you trust in each other, you become a well-functioning team that can learn and grow together.

Lastly, make an effort to pronounce their names right, she urges. Repeated mispronunciations are disrespectful and dehumanizing. And nicknames are lazy. (Fun tip: If Rodriguez mispronounces a students' name, she gives them a candy. When they see her practicing, they know she cares.)



CREATE A SPACE THAT SUPPORTS YOUR GOALS

After 29 years of teaching, **Alison Tingle** knows her way around a classroom. Even better, within days of school starting, so do her students. Tingle, a second-grade teacher at West Seaford Elementary School, in Delaware, provides a neat, organized, and predictable environment.

"Anything I can do to minimize stress and unpredictability for my students is my priority. There should be no zingers! Nothing to ramp up

their anxiety," she says. "Neat and organized are my strengths. And hopefully I'm teaching them organizational skills, too."

Set up your space to support the student behaviors you want to see and to buttress the procedures that make your class run smoothly, says Tingle, a National Board Certified Teacher. "We joke that your bedroom might be messy, but this classroom, which is your home away from home, is not. The custodians love us!"



Alison Tingle

Tables versus desks.

Tingle strongly prefers four-person tables for the sense of community they build. Also, six tables take up a lot less room than 24 desks! As the year goes on, Tingle rearranges tables and students, depending on their evolving needs. She also preserves an island for students who need to work in isolation.

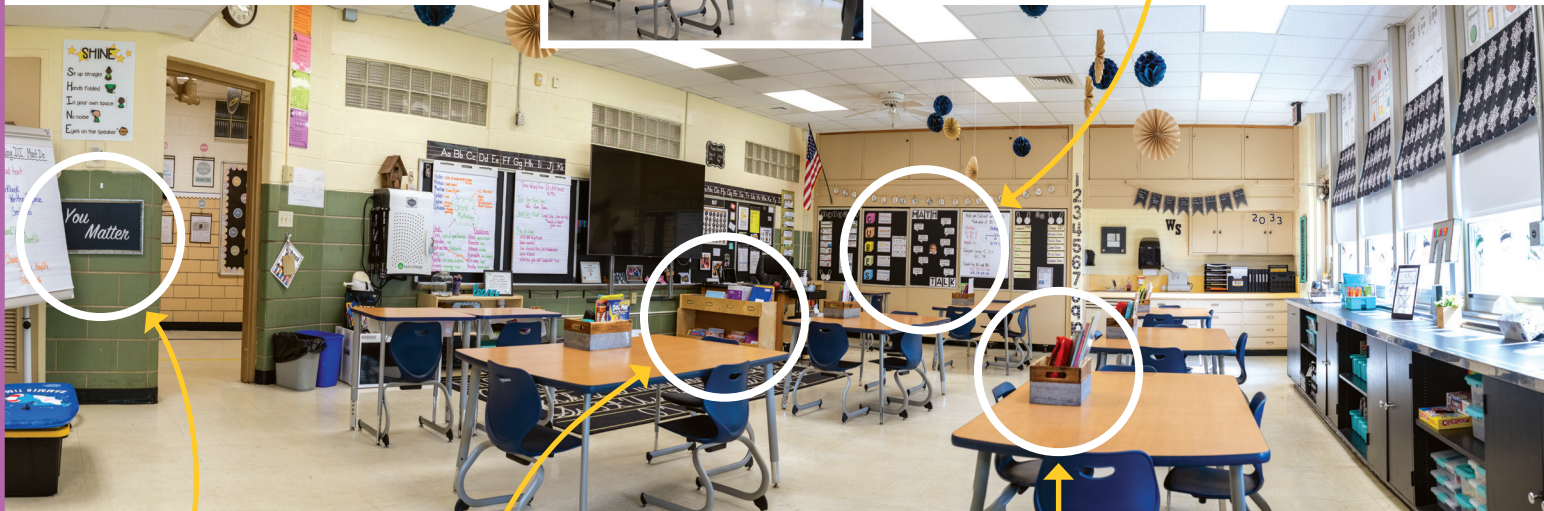
"Maybe this week Alison is having a difficult time because her mom and dad are going through a divorce, so she needs to be up here with Ms. Tingle," she says.



Anchor charts.

Anchor charts can be helpful, but let's not go overboard, Tingle suggests.

"I typically just keep up anchor charts on our current tasks," she says. "If a kid can't focus, I'm of the mindset that more stuff will just make it harder."



You matter.

By the door, Tingle has a poster that says "You Matter." On their way out of the room, every student taps it and says, "I matter!"

The best \$300 she ever spent.

Tingle tells every new teacher to get an organizational cart like this. Hers has eight compartments—the top four hold students' reading books, workbooks, journals, and work folders.

At the start of the year, Tingle tells students, "When we finish with word-response cards, boys and girls, put them in the yellow folder." Eventually she doesn't have to say a word. They know. The bottom compartment holds other subject-matter content.

Tabletop caddies.

These boxes hold shared pencil pouches, books, and Play-Doh. Tingle gives her students brain breaks every 30 to 45 minutes and lets students use the Play-Doh. Tingle used to have a "calming corner" for students, but found she no longer needs it.

"Brain breaks have reduced the need for the calming corner," she says.

LEARN
MORE

Want to hear more ideas from Alison Tingle? Scan this QR code to take Tingle's video tour, showing the creative ways she keeps her classroom organized. Or visit nea.org/seven-ways.



7 Ways to Make This a Great School Year!

SET AN INTENTION OR GOAL

Think about who you want to be as an educator and what you want to accomplish in the year ahead—for your students, your colleagues, and yourself. Maybe you need to take better care of yourself or focus on a specific aspect of your professional practice. Self-reflection is key. When setting an intention, consider your strengths, weaknesses, motives, and desires.

When we asked NEA members about their goals or intentions for the new school year, this is what we heard:



“To do things in my classroom that bring me and my students joy.”

—Leah Hood, high school social studies teacher, Lakeville, Minnesota

“To learn more about and support my LGBTQ+ students.”

—Julie Spaargaren, paraprofessional, Westmont, Illinois



“To focus on students’ voices and working with them on self-advocacy.”

—Rahaf Othman, teacher, Oak Lawn, Illinois

“To fight book bans and push back against censorship.”

—Michelle Burton, librarian, Durham, North Carolina



“To get better at public speaking. I foresee speaking at a lot of school board meetings!”

—Nicole Nichols, paraprofessional, Bloomington, Illinois

MEET THE PARENTS

Reach out as soon as you can to introduce yourself to parents and set a good foundation for the school year. A quick survey can be helpful. Find out how and when they prefer to be contacted: by text, email, or phone, and if they will need English translation services. Ask them to tell you about their child’s interests! (For more tips, read Try This, Page 26.)



GET SERIOUS WITH YOUR UNION

Your local and state unions have a calendar of events for this school year. Tap into those calendars now, advises Washington high school teacher and union leader **Gabrielle Wright** (right).

The offerings for professional development—whether you’re a teacher or support staff member—are often geared toward recertification.

“Ask yourself: What do you need for recertification? Or what are you hoping to improve



Check out NEA micro-credentials at nea.org/micro-credentials.

MAKE A PLAN TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF THIS YEAR

Don't wait until the dark days of winter to focus on your physical and mental well-being. Instead, take steps at the start of the school year so you can stay healthy in the months to come.

Taraja Shephard Allen, a school counselor who now works for the Ohio Education Association, provides trainings on self-care to fellow educators. She offers this advice for establishing good habits:

Create daily routines so that your days are as predictable and stress-free as possible. Lay out your clothes the night before, pack lunch in advance, and make sure to have a go-bag of snacks.

"When things go haywire and you've got to cover an additional class or drive an extra route, you need your snacks," she advises. Also, and this is key: Decide on a daily shut-down time, after which you don't grade papers or respond to emails, and stick to it!

Set up your physical environment. Family photos, posters with affirmative messages, and other decorations or trinkets can help make you feel good. If you're a staff person without the ability to decorate a space, Shephard Allen recommends slipping a meditation rock into your pocket. "It's something you can hold onto, and they're cold, so they calm you down when you're feeling hot," she says.



Figure out healthy coping strategies.

These look different for different people. Develop interests outside of work and put them on your schedule now.

"For me, I enjoy volunteering," she says. "It's so soothing to feel that I'm actually making a difference."

Also identify your "go-to people" who will listen and provide constructive advice. (Hint: It's likely not the people in the lounge!)

Start practicing moments of mindfulness.

Try taking three deep breaths when you get into your car at the start and end of the day. When you eat lunch (don't skip lunch!) try focusing for a minute on how it smells and tastes, and on the texture of your meal, suggests Shephard Allen.

Finally, **identify additional resources** before you need them. Your local and state unions likely have wellness programs. Through NEA Member Benefits, you can also get one year of free access to Sanvello, an app that helps dial down the symptoms of stress and anxiety. 🌟

LEARN MORE

Check out NEA's webinar "Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First: Cultivating Healing and Wellbeing in Ourselves," where participants learn strategies for self-awareness and self-management. Visit nea.org/oxygenmask.



informed supports or learn about LGBTQ+ anti-bias curriculum, there's a micro-credential to help you meet students' specific needs.

If you don't see what you're looking for in your union's offerings, get involved.

"Is there an equity event you're interested in leading?" asks Wright. "Is there a book study you want to propose? Maybe you took a course that inspired you, and you want to share it with other educators."

Consider this, she urges: "What can you bring to the table?"

in your practice?" Wright says.

When she gets her class list at the start of the school year, she also turns to NEA's library of

micro-credentials for quick help.

"There's a lot of really brilliant things in there!" she says.

Whether you want to brush up on trauma-

Why *Mentoring* Matters

By Mary Ellen Flannery

A GOOD MENTOR CAN KEEP A NEW COLLEAGUE IN THE PROFESSION

About 20 new educators joined Big Sky High School in Missoula, Mont., last year. The question is: How many will return this year? Retirements are up. So are I-can't-take-this-anymore resignations. Across the nation, the shortage of educators is a "five-alarm crisis," says NEA President Becky Pringle.

But, in Missoula, a union-district partnership is working to retain educators for the long run. Originally funded through an NEA Great Public Schools grant for \$578,008, the project provides intensive one-on-one support to new teachers by trained mentors

"The ultimate goal is to keep them in the profession," says Mary Lyndes, a mentor in the district who has taught and coached teachers and paraeducators for 38 years. "They come in with so much energy—they want to save the world! But they can't do it without support."

'It's become so much harder'

The list of what new teachers need to know includes: How to get email; how to create a class website; how to set up the classroom, including small-group work areas. Where do supplies go? (What happens when you run out?) How do you sign up for the computer lab? (And what happens when you break something in it?)

And then there's the big stuff: Lesson plans that reflect district and state standards; a plan for classroom procedures and behavior management; and more.

"It's become so much harder to teach," says Lyndes. "Back in the day, we used to just shut the door and figure it out. That's just not possible for new teachers today."

To help new educators navigate this world, the district's mentors rely on resources developed through the NEA grant by project leaders Brandy Thrasher O'Neill and Angela Knieper. Throughout the year, Thrasher O'Neill and Knieper also bring together mentors and mentees for at least eight 90-minute workshops.

Their focus? Mostly the Danielson Framework for Teaching domains: planning; classroom environment; instruction; and professional responsibilities. Meanwhile, mentors and mentees meet every week or so.

The power of positivity

"My philosophy is not just to 'fix the teacher,'" says Noel Nesmith, an instructional coach and mentor at Big Sky. "[It's] much more student-based. It's what do I want them to learn, and how do I want them to learn it? I'm here to provide teachers with the support to be successful."



(From top) Montana mentor Noel Nesmith says mentees often ask, “How can educators take care of themselves?”; Oregon mentor Tami Ainsworth, on right, meets with a mentee, instructional assistant Casandra McMorries.

Nesmith visits her mentees’ classrooms—not to evaluate them, but to observe and advise, often through leading questions.

“My feedback tends to things like, ‘That was a great intro, you hooked the kids, and I could see the objective. How do you know they got it? What are your checks for understanding? And what [will you] do tomorrow to review what they learned today?’”

Every mentee is different. Some need help with classroom management; others with work-life balance. Some learn through role-playing with a mentor. Others may need to co-teach a lesson. But every mentor-mentee relationship must be rooted in trust, so that mentees can freely share their struggles, and mentors can respond honestly.

Do You Have What It Takes to Be a Mentor?

Here are a few essential qualities:

Empathy. Can you imagine how it feels to be your mentee? Can you do this without judgment? Your mentee might be different from you. Feeling empathy—and demonstrating it—is essential.

Professional know-how. Your mentee needs solid advice from somebody who knows their way around a classroom, cafeteria, or whatever the worksite is.

Listening skills. You have so much to say! How to do this, how you dealt with that. Hold up! An effective mentor knows how to ask leading questions and listen to the answers.

Honesty. A good mentor tells the truth. This can be uncomfortable, but if the mentor-mentee relationship is rooted in empathy and trust, it doesn’t have to be painful.

Persistence, creativity, and a sense of humor. You might come up with things for them to try—and they don’t work. Sometimes you’ll need to get creative with solutions. Other times you just have to laugh and try again.

“You come out of college thinking you can do anything. Well, you can’t!” Lyndes says. “I help them accept that if they fall on their face, it’s OK.”

Are you a marigold?

Mentorship isn’t the only answer to retaining educators. How about better pay? But Missoula’s mentors believe they’re having an impact.

“I can certainly say that [new] teachers are more successful and less frustrated because they have somebody to go to,” Lyndes says.

Thrasher O’Neill calls it the “marigold effect,” a phrase used in education and business. Just as home gardeners grow marigolds to protect other plants from weeds and diseases, the Missoula project plants mentors to nurture new teachers and support their development.

And, as it turns out, they’re not the only ones who benefit. It’s authentic collaboration. Lyndes notes, “It’s a two-way street. I get a lot out of it.”

“[New teachers] come in and they’re like, ‘Yeah, I’ll try that!’” says Nesmith, who is entering her 19th year in the profession. “For me, that fills my cup. I feed off their energy and enthusiasm and willingness to try new things.”

Why *Mentoring* Matters

Meet Tami Ainsworth, Super-Mentor

Thirty-five years ago, when Ainsworth first started working in Lebanon, Ore., as an instructional assistant, she didn't have a mentor. Today, many of her newest colleagues are lucky to have a great one—it's Tami Ainsworth.

Three years ago, with support from NEA, the Lebanon Education Support Professionals Association (LESPA) launched a mentoring program. Their goal? To ensure new employees have the support they need to persist in their jobs.

"A lot of us had horrible experiences, and we were like, we don't want anybody to live through that!" says LESPA President Laura Warren.

Today, the program matches a trained mentor with every new staff member, including paraeducators, bus drivers, and others. The pairs meet 10 times a year. Mentors are paid for their time, and mentees are required by the district to attend. In 2022 – 2023, LESPA's 30-plus mentors supported about 64 new colleagues.

Trust is key

Ainsworth covers a variety of assigned topics during these meetings, even the union contract.

"People don't understand we have six sick days, three personal days," she says.

She also explains how professional development through NEA micro-credentials can lead to increased pay.

More importantly, she lays the groundwork for a relationship of trust. "You want to provide a place for them to ask questions, so you can guide them along the way," she says.

Recently, a mentee told Ainsworth that she's never been able to attend her department's meetings, because they're held when the mentee is off.

"Have you thought about asking if there's another time the meetings could be held?" Ainsworth asked. That nudge was all the mentee needed. She asked, and now she is included.

Another said, "I never know what I'm going to do until we start doing it." Ainsworth suggested the mentee, an instructional aide, ask her teacher to meet for 10–15 minutes at the start of the day. "New employees don't realize it's OK to ask!"

The benefits are mutual

The 12 new staffers that Ainsworth mentored over the past three years are still in their jobs—save one who left for child care reasons. But employee retention isn't the biggest benefit of the program. In Ainsworth's opinion, the biggest prize is the unity created among employees.

"I've probably gotten as much out of this program as the mentees," she says. "It's enhanced my leadership skills and also allowed me to understand that we need to work together to make this a better place."

Many mentoring programs focus on retaining new employees, Warren adds, but LESPA's program keeps experienced staff on the job, too.

"Wages aren't enough to hold them. This gives them a sense of pride," she says. "I had a mentor break down in tears and tell me they got more from mentoring than their mentee! It gives [mentors] a feeling of self-worth." ❧

"You want to provide a place for them to ask questions, so you can guide them along the way."

—Tami Ainsworth,
instructional
assistant, in Oregon



**LEARN
MORE**

To learn more about NEA's ESP Peer Mentoring resources, visit nea.org/ESPmentoring.



ATTENTION MARVELOUS READERS!

BACK-TO-SCHOOL GIVEAWAY

Celebrate the start of a new school year with some fresh, new NEA gear!

Sign up to receive your NEAToday via email and we'll enter your name to win one of three great thank yous. We're giving away NEA grocery totes, water bottles and travel coffee mugs.

Will you be one of our lucky members starting the year with some new NEA gear?

Log onto www.nea.org/gear today to enter!



HURRY!
Supplies
are limited!

Please visit www.nea.org/gear for complete rules.

Meet the 2023 Teacher of the Year!

REBECCA PETERSON FOCUSES ON FINDING THE GOOD

By Mary Ellen Flannery

As National Teacher of the Year, Oklahoma math teacher Rebecca Peterson has a simple message for her colleagues: Thank you.

Those were the first English words that Peterson learned as a child, when her Iranian-Swedish missionary parents immigrated to the United States. Back then, Peterson deeply appreciated the educators who taught her to read and protected her from bullies who laughed at her “unpronounceable” last name. She was grateful for the teachers who whispered, “Rebecca, math is your superpower!”

Today, she is thankful for colleagues who remind her “that there is no such thing as somebody else’s child,” she writes in her Teacher of the Year application.

Especially today—as it is clear that equal rights are not

guaranteed to women in the U.S., nor to immigrants, People of Color, or LGBTQ+ people—Peterson says she appreciates how her peers “carry our mission that everyone belongs and is worthy of a high-quality education. ... Our diversity is our strength. All are welcome. Every voice gets equal representation. That is the heartbeat of our country, and we, as teachers, safeguard that every day.”

Tapping into joy and forming bonds

Peterson has taught everything from algebra to Advanced Placement calculus at Union High School, in Tulsa, Okla., for 11 years. She models vulnerability and openness, focusing on finding joy and developing relationships with students.



Rebecca Peterson

On the first day of school, Peterson talks about her experience as an immigrant—how she lived in four countries by age 16, and how she felt like she “was on the outside, looking in.” Then she meets with each student to get to know everyone. These conversations can last two hours.



"Nearly every student [has] gone through some form of adversity or trauma," Peterson writes.

By sharing her true self, Peterson builds trust with her students.

"Class [flows] differently," she continues. "Peace, calm, and trust permeate the room. We belong to each other."

Sharing One Good Thing

When Peterson was starting out, she didn't think she'd last as a teacher. Her students' needs were so great. She felt inadequate to meet them. Then she discovered the One Good Thing blog, where teachers post about "one good thing" that happened in their classrooms or careers. The idea is that "every day may not be good, but every day there is (at least) one good thing worth sharing."

One day, Peterson decided to go from reader to writer, and she created one post.

"The next day I did the same. And then again the third day. And eventually, I got to 1,400 days of posting good things," she writes on the blog.



Rebecka Peterson (above and below, left) has an ability to "tap into students' joy," says NEA President Becky Pringle.

"When we are intentional about finding the good, we practice our joy. And when we practice our joy, we build our strength."

—Rebecka Peterson

"More importantly, eventually my brain started noticing the good all around me—to celebrate the beauty even in the middle of pain."

By focusing on the good, her perspective changed. "When we are intentional about finding the good, we practice our joy," she says. "And when we practice our joy, we build our strength."

Looking ahead

As Oklahoma Teacher of the Year in 2022, Peterson met with teachers across the state. She learned about their challenges—and about the wonderful things happening in their classrooms.

"I believe we're not in a teacher shortage. I believe we're in a teacher crisis," she says. "Certainly, we need to

increase teacher pay and staff pay. We also need to work in our communities to make sure teachers feel valued and loved. ... For me that begins by celebrating the important work our teachers do for our students, our families, and our communities every day. We are what we celebrate."

Now, as National Teacher of the Year, an award granted by the Council of Chief State School Officers, Peterson can showcase the work of teachers across the U.S.—with the goal of encouraging current teachers and attracting new ones.

Recently, Peterson described the power of her profession: "I can't think of any profession where the people literally hold you in their hearts!" 🌟

Stronger Together



By Amanda Litvinov

EVERY MEMBER CAN HELP GROW THE UNION. HERE'S HOW, AND WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT.

We know that a bigger union gives us a stronger voice—and the ability to protect and transform our profession, our schools, and our communities.

No one shows the value of union membership better than you. That's why NEA has trained thousands of its educators in how to encourage potential members to join.

Every member can play a role in growing the union, whether or not they have had formal training. Sometimes all it takes is starting a conversation, answering questions, and extending an invitation.

NEA Today connected with members of NEA's National Member Organizing Cadre to find out how to have conversations that make a difference in recruiting new members.

TIP #1:
Share your union story

Alyssa Passmore is a member organizer—as well as an art teacher and volleyball coach—from Shawnee, Kan. When she wants to demonstrate the union's value to a potential member, she often shares her story:



Alyssa Passmore

“After my first few years of teaching, I took a position at a charter school in Missouri where we had no union. I was working 10-hour contract days with mandatory Sunday meetings. I was being live-coached through an earpiece. They were telling me, ‘Take a breath and smile at the kids,’ and things like that.”

Two years later, Passmore was ready to quit education altogether. But her friends and family encouraged her to go back to the public school system and try again. She did, and she is now finishing her sixth year at Hocker Grove Middle School.

“I really regained my love and passion for the union after not being able to be a part of one,” she says.

Passmore also shares with prospective members that in addition to the protections and bargaining power that come with a strong union, she values unity.

She recalls her first union social hour: “I was like, ‘Oh my God, there’s others!’ ... My best friends are my union friends now.”



Education support professionals are more likely to join when organizers can demonstrate that the union understands their concerns and that teachers are willing to stand with them.

Members of NEA's National Member Organizing Cadre (left to right): Cassandra Owens Moore, South Carolina; Shasta Rosales, Wyoming; Brandi McCoid, Wyoming; Timothy "Tee Jay" Lyons, Georgia; Alyssa Passmore, Kansas; Tonya Horn, Ohio; Katie Fuller, Ohio; Andrea Kuchta, Ohio.

TIP #2:
Let local wins make the case for you

Timothy "Tee Jay" Lyons has been a teacher and union member for only four years, but he already excels at recruiting new members. In one of his earliest organizing efforts, Lyons set a goal of 100 percent membership in his building—Hephzibah Middle School, in Georgia—which he accomplished in just a few months' time.

"I want to make sure everyone in my building is supported," says Lyons, who is a seventh-grade language arts teacher and a building rep.

Lyons wants potential members to know how the union can support them. That support comes in many forms. There are critical benefits like liability insurance and the right to due process, which protects educators from suspension or dismissal without just cause. There are valuable benefits like travel

discounts. But many prospective members don't realize that the union also offers opportunities to grow as an educator—such as professional development and programs to help support early career educators.

Another way to show how the union supports members is to talk about state and local wins.

"When our governor took office, he promised a \$5,000 pay increase for teachers, and the union made sure he was a man of his word, and we got it," Lyons tells potential members. "We got an additional \$2,000 increase for the upcoming school year as well."

That's the kind of pay increase that makes a tangible difference in the lives of educators and their families.

Lyons is glad he took advice from his mom—a school custodian and longtime member of the Georgia Association of Educators—and joined the union early on.

"Being a part of the union has had a wonderful impact on my life," he says. "I can't wait to see where I will be and where the union will be in the next 5 to 10 years."

Studies show that one of the top reasons potential union members don't join is because nobody asked them to.



Timothy Lyons



Andrea Kuchta



Cassandra Owens Moore



Tonya Horn



Katie Fuller



Brandi McCoid

Yes, you can!

These member organizers believe you can help grow the union. Here are their answers to common questions about organizing:

What if I'm an introvert? Surely I wouldn't be a good member organizer.

Conversations with prospective members don't have to be some big formal affair. Try thinking of it more as a friend-to-friend conversation. What would you say to friends or family about why you value our union? Think about all the special connections you have in your school community, and then ask others to come be a part of it.

—Andrea Kuchta, pre-K intervention specialist, Ohio

How do I kick off a conversation about joining?

Share what made you first decide to join the union. Before I joined, I was approached by two different unions. One talked to me about liability insurance. But the organizer from The South Carolina Education Association made it sound like they needed my voice, my energy, and my talent. That's what inspired me to join. I'll never forget that.

—Cassandra Owens Moore, teacher and school librarian, South Carolina

I live in a non-bargaining state. How do I explain the value of the union here?

First, make it clear that unions are legal everywhere. Then explain that your union meets regularly with school administrators, school boards, and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle to advocate

for higher wages, better benefits, and improved working conditions for educators. Unions get their strength from members, and when more educators join, the union is in a better position to deliver results for educators and students.

—Tonya Horn, paraeducator, Ohio

What if we have a good conversation, but my prospect isn't ready to join?

That's OK! Reassure them that they can reach out to you with any other thoughts or questions. Follow up with a message of support, and reference anything that stood out during your initial conversation. It's good to connect more than once with a prospective member. The fact that you took the time to circle back will likely resonate with them.

—Katie Fuller, fifth-grade teacher, Ohio

When and where can I have membership conversations?

Don't limit yourself to new teacher orientations. Conversations about joining can happen in the staff lounge, at a training, or at a coffee shop. I recently attended a conference of school custodians to make sure they knew about the union and invited them to join. I also presented at a conference about a different topic, and I was able to have a lot of conversations. I signed up another 22 members. Once you get started in member organizing, you won't want to stop!

—Brandi McCoid, paraeducator, Wyoming

Are you ready to sign up new members?

Tell them to text "JOIN" to 48744 for the new member form!

TIP #3:

Know when to talk and when to listen

Shasta Rosales is a single mom of three, a full-time paraprofessional with two other jobs, and a student herself, earning a master's in special education. (Oh, and by the way, she's also starting a mentoring program for education support professionals at her school, in Laramie, Wyo.) Rosales does not have extra time on her hands, but she still makes time for member organizing, because it is so important to her.

"When I first joined the Wyoming Education Association about 16 years ago, I thought it was really important to have that collective voice, especially as an education support professional, because at that time, it felt as if we weren't being heard," Rosales recalls.

As she became more active in her union and then served as a building rep, Rosales realized that she was good at having conversations about joining the union. Starting a transformational conversation can be as simple as introducing yourself and then asking, "Do you want to be a member? Do you know what this is and what we offer?" Rosales says.

And then, she says, it's time to listen.

"I think it's important to understand where they're coming from, and then show them where the union can help with solutions," she adds. "And even if they don't join right away, I want to be that

person they know that they can come back to."

Often, she explains, making connections with potential members and clearing up misconceptions about the union is all it takes. Rosales recently helped out at a new teacher orientation in Cheyenne, where she and her team signed up 90 new members.

No matter how the conversation goes, Rosales wants people to walk away feeling heard.

"I want to make sure that they feel valued, that they feel secure, that they understand that this isn't a push, it's a connection." ✨



Ohio fifth-grade teacher Katie Fuller, like all successful organizers, is a great listener.

How to be 'all ears'

Your ears are one of your best tools to recruit new members. Some tips to keep in mind:

- 1.** Listen 80 percent of the time and talk 20 percent of the time. Listen without judgment.
- 2.** Ask open-ended questions that use how, what, or why. Yes or no questions don't generate conversation.
- 3.** Practice empathy. Acknowledge the potential member's experience, then show how the union solves problems.
- 4.** Give your recruit time to consider and answer your questions. Don't rush the conversation to ask them to join.

LEARN MORE

Help Build Your Union!

Ready to talk with your colleagues about the importance of joining the union? Get NEA's best tools and tips at nea.org/organize.

2023 NEA Representative Assembly: Taking a Stand for the Freedom to Learn

By Tim Walker

Six thousand united and determined educators assembled in Orlando, Fla., on July 3 - 6, for the 2023 NEA Representative Assembly (RA).

During the eventful four-day meeting, delegates took strong stands on issues impacting educators. They pledged to protect LGBTQ+ students, rallied against book bans and censorship, and debated new policies. They also honored their most celebrated colleagues.

Florida is “our ground zero for shameful, racist, homophobic, misogynistic, xenophobic rhetoric and dangerous actions,” Pringle said, in her rousing keynote address. And that’s exactly why NEA leaders are meeting here, she added.

The challenges are clear, but so is the strength of the nation’s largest labor union. “With 3 million members in households across this nation, it is our duty to lead in the magnificent and complex constellation that is public education,” Pringle said.

An antidote to toxicity

The delegates heard from U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, who declared to thunderous applause, “The time has come for us, as a nation, along with the NEA, to fight unapologetically against toxicity.”

Educators have every reason to feel angry, NEA Executive Director Kim Anderson said in her address. But their anger derives from love, not hate.



(Left) NEA President Becky Pringle at the 2023 NEA Representative Assembly (RA). (Above) RA delegates at the Freedom to Learn rally, in Orlando, Fla.

“Love is why we chose this work in the first place—a love of children and students, and a deep love for the value of public education ... to our students, to our communities, and to our society,” Anderson said.

The 2023 Education Support Professional of the Year, Pamela Johnson, echoed this message in her address to delegates: It’s this “unconditional love for our students [that] gives us the strength to keep working tirelessly, even when the pay and benefits don’t reflect what we need and deserve as knowledgeable and skilled educators.”

‘We thank you’

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden, addressed the RA by livestream.

“Educators have champions in the White House,” Biden assured those in the convention hall and those watching online. “I know the last three years

have been so difficult—we asked so much of you. I want you to know, I see you, we see you, and we thank you,” Biden said.

The third day of the RA kicked off with a rally outside the Orange County Convention Center. Thousands of delegates, waving signs and rainbow flags, braved the sweltering Florida sun to call for an end to banning books, silencing educators, and taking away students’ freedom to learn.

Back inside the convention center that afternoon, delegates heard from National Teacher of the Year Rebecka Peterson. A high school math teacher in Tulsa, Okla., Peterson urged the delegates to never forget that public education is for all of us.

“As an Iranian-American woman, I stand acutely aware that liberty for us all is no guarantee. Rather, it’s a product of a nation’s people insisting we belong to each other,” she said. “Teachers, you are the ones carrying that banner.”

Leadership elections

During the RA, delegates reelected Becky Pringle to continue to lead the 3-million-member NEA. They also reelected Princess Moss as NEA vice president and Noel Candelaria as NEA secretary-treasurer.

Additionally, the delegates voted to elect two members to the NEA Executive Committee: Mark Jewell, an elementary school teacher from Guilford County, North Carolina, and former president of the North Carolina Association of Educators, was reelected; and Shannon McCann, a middle school special education teacher and president of the Federal Way Education Association, in Washington state, was elected to a first term ☪



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The efforts of Cody Vann and other educators may be key to the survival of Native languages and culture.



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“
There are two things that I believe make us Cherokee: our culture, and our language.”
—Cody Vann, Cherokee language and culture teacher, Tahlequah High School, Oklahoma



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57TH ANNUAL NEA HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS AWARDS CALL FOR 2024 NOMINATIONS

Know of an individual, organization, or affiliate that champions racial and social justice and civil rights within their community? Support their good work through a nomination for a 2024 Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Awards. Honorees are recognized during the annual HCR Awards program, held in July, prior to the NEA's Representative Assembly.

- **Identify** and honor exemplary individuals, organizations, and affiliates for their contributions to human and civil rights, and racial and social justice.
- **Celebrate** NEA's multicultural roots and commitment to justice.
- **Recognize** today's human and civil rights victories and chart the path forward.
- **Honor** the rich legacy and history of the American Teachers Association (ATA) and NEA merger from whence the HCR Awards program began.

The work of civil rights and social justice heroes is as critical today as it was yesterday. Let's work together to remind everyone that the cause endures, the struggle goes on, and hope still lives!

Identify your nominees now! It is never too early to begin profiling nominees and potential HCR Award winners! Find information on past winners at nea.org/hcrawards.

Nomination forms and instructions for the 2024 HCR Awards will be available from Oct. 10, to Dec. 8, 2023, at nea.org/hcrawards.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please email NEAHCR Awards@nea.org.



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Scan me!



EIGHT *ways*

...to Make Back-to-School Night Better

By Brenda Álvarez

NEA Today asked participants in NEA's Teacher Leadership Institute—which prepares teachers to lead and transform their profession—for their favorite ways to welcome families back to school. Here's what they suggest:



1 Provide snacks!
Provide refreshments or dinner for families. This way parents and caretakers won't worry about rushing to cook dinner. You can even turn it into a fundraiser by selling food items.

2 Keep it short and simple.
Avoid jargon. Not everyone understands academic terms. Since many people are coming from work, keep the event to one to two hours.

3 Make it informative.
Create a slide deck with important information, dates, and student goals. Include a class syllabus, schedule, and how to access grades. Provide families with multiple ways to contact you.

4 Make it collaborative.
Reassure families that you are part of their child's team and that you can all work together to support their child's success. Families sometimes need to hear this. Let folks know you appreciate the investment they are making in their kids by attending. Provide families with opportunities to meet teachers in different grade levels and content teams.

5 Create a welcoming space.
Ensure that your classroom is clean and organized. Stand by your door and say hello as each person walks into your room. Translate materials and have interpreters available so everyone feels heard

and valued. (Get tips about communicating with non-English speakers on Page 26.) Meet people where they are—step away from the judgment zone.

6 Roll out the red carpet.
Show off other spaces like the library, computer labs, and music rooms. Showcase your clubs, student organizations, and extracurriculars to let families know all your great offerings. Invite community partners to let families know how organizations support your school.

7 Be practical.
Provide child care for younger siblings, with a safe play area overseen by trusted adults in the building. Schedule back-to-school night at a time convenient for families.

Consider a virtual option or a recording for families who can't attend in person. Save conversation about areas of improvements for parent conferences. Have extra handouts. Ask them to fill out a contact card! Sometimes the information in the attendance system is outdated.

8 Find ways to engage families.
Ask families to share what their students enjoy most or how they would describe their child—or have them write a note of encouragement for their kids that you can give them on those tough days. Hook a commitment now: Do you have any classroom trips or activities planned in which you would request families' support? Now is the time to pencil them in!

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