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October 2023

# neaToday

## OUR STUDENTS NEED HELP

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School rankings are overrated

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We, the members of the National Education Association of the United States, are the voice of education professionals. Our work is fundamental to the nation, and we accept the profound trust placed in us.

**OUR VISION IS A GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR EVERY STUDENT.**

**OUR MISSION**  
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:

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.**  
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.

**A JUST SOCIETY.**  
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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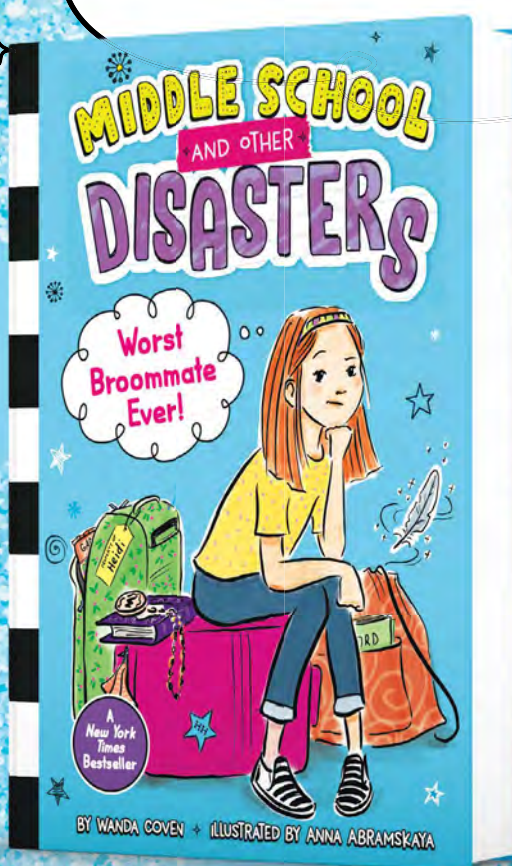
# STUDENTS TAKE ACTION AGAINST HUNGER



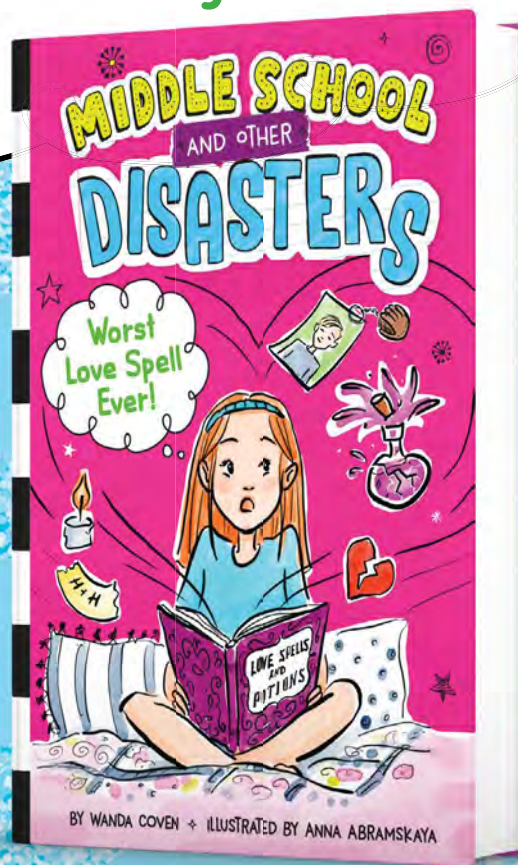


# MIDDLE SCHOOL AND OTHER DISASTERS

Heidi Hecklebeck is headed to middle school, and her schedule is full of magical mishaps and mayhem!



Book 1: Worst Broommate Ever!  
A New York Times bestseller!



Book 2: Worst Love Spell Ever!

Check out this new laugh-out-loud middle grade series perfect for fans of *The Baby-Sitters Club*!

BY WANDA COVEN • ILLUSTRATED BY ANNA ABRAMSKAYA

## EDITOR'S *note*

Associate Publisher and Director **Anitrá Speight**

### NEA Today's Digital Experience Lifts Educators' Voices

The *NEA Today* team is excited to share the launch of our new digital experience, which went live with our last issue. We hope you've had a chance to check out some of the fantastic video and audio of members just like you, who offer helpful tips and share their experiences.

In this October issue, there's even more interactive content for you to explore. Scan the QR code below to go straight to *NEA Today's* digital magazine, where you'll meet fellow educators and learn from experts through video, audio, and other bonus features.

In the online version of our cover story, "Rural Schools Take on the Mental Health Crisis" (Page 38), you can watch a video of parents and educators who share how they teamed up to bring mental health services to their schools.

If you like "Five Things Behavior Specialists Want You to Know" (Page 56), our digital edition offers even more tips in a video from expert Rosa DiPiazza.

In "Measure by Measure" (Page 46), find out how statewide ballot measures impact educators and students. Want to learn more? Hear from an NEA expert in our digital edition.

Now you can read and experience *NEA Today* whenever it's convenient for you. Flip through your print magazine over coffee on Sunday morning or check out the mobile edition—which includes *NEA Today* magazine and news—when you have a quiet moment in the break room or after school.

If you love the videos or see a story that could help a fellow educator, share it with your colleagues with just a click. You can also get *NEA Today* delivered to your inbox. Sign up at [nea.org/signup](http://nea.org/signup), and scan the QR code at right to dive in.

Check out *NEA Today's* new digital experience! Get multimedia content and shareable resources. Scan the QR code or go to [nea.org/NEATodayOctober23](http://nea.org/NEATodayOctober23).



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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



“

“With pride and persistence, you embrace the magnitude of what you’ve been called to do. Deliberate and unafraid, you continue to demand that every student is seen and supported; that every educator is respected as the professional they are.”

—Becky, at the 2023 NEA Representative Assembly, in Orlando, Fla., in July.

## Face to Face With NEA Members

Why did we hold our Representative Assembly (RA) in Florida—ground zero for racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and xenophobic rhetoric and actions? During NEA’s Freedom to Learn Rally, held July 5, at the RA, in Orlando, I hope the answer was clear. We went to remind Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis—and the people with him—that our students do not need protection from Anne Frank or *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. They need protection from gun violence. And they deserve the freedom to read books that teach them about the history, diversity, and beauty of their world. Speaking of beauty ... the thousands of NEA members who rallied with me in Florida’s blazing heat were beautiful. When I stood with you, I saw our heart and I felt our power. And like I said then: We will win because we must win. Our students are depending on us to be worthy of them. Join me in demanding the freedom to learn at [nea.org/freedom-learn](https://nea.org/freedom-learn).



At NEA’s Freedom to Learn Rally, in Orlando, Fla., in July, Becky tells the crowd of thousands: “We will not allow Ron DeSantis—or any other politician—to destroy our public schools for their own political gain.”

## JOIN ME

### 3 Things to Do For Yourself and Your Union

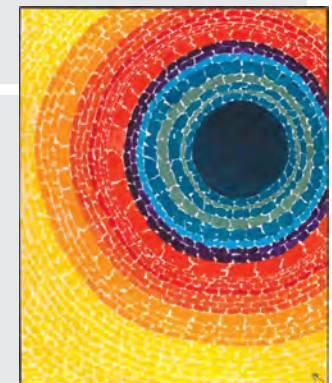
- 1. Observe Bullying Prevention Month.** Are you doing everything you can to support a bully-free environment for your students? Learn more through NEA Micro-credentials designed to help you build these skills: [nea.org/bully-free-micro](https://nea.org/bully-free-micro).
- 2. Protect voting rights!** Election Day is next month—and all of us deserve an equal say at the ballot box. The Freedom to Vote Act will make sure politicians can’t manipulate district boundaries to get elected. Demand that your members of Congress support the law at [nea.org/protect-voting](https://nea.org/protect-voting).
- 3. Practice gratitude.** “The more grateful I am, the more beauty I see,” says Special Olympics CEO Mary Davis. It’s that time of year when many Americans get together and give thanks at holiday tables. But all year, every day, I am grateful for you. Please tell one of your union siblings how much you appreciate them, too.

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

## In the News

“We’re winning because parents and educators are coming together and saying, ‘No, this is not what we want for our kids.’ We don’t want banned books. We don’t want teachers marginalized and attacked. We don’t want funding going away from our public schools. We want to support public schools.”

—Becky, 19thNews.org, July 2023



Alma Thomas, *The Eclipse, 1970*, acrylic on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

## What I’m Looking at

You all know I’m a Philly girl. (Fly, Eagles, fly!) But I do appreciate my adopted city of Washington, D.C., and especially its Smithsonian galleries. Looking at art is like opening a book. Sometimes you’re gazing through a window and observing something new; other times, it’s a glance in the mirror and reflecting on how you feel. The late Alma Thomas—an African American painter who grew up a few blocks from NEA headquarters and spent 35-plus years as a D.C. Public Schools art teacher—is one of my absolute favorites. I’m thrilled that the Smithsonian American Art Museum is exhibiting her work this fall. Inspired by D.C.’s flowers and trees, Thomas’ abstract paintings are colorful and powerful. I look at them when I need a dose of energy. (Check out the Smithsonian’s K–8 interdisciplinary lesson plans, inspired by Thomas’s work, at [americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/alma-thomas](https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/alma-thomas).)

Check out my recorded chats with NEA members at [instagram.com/neatoday](https://instagram.com/neatoday).



Read more about Katie on Page 14.



## NEA Puts Educators on the Ballot

NEA has prepared more than 300 members to run for public office through its See Educators Run training program. As lawmakers, these NEA members are creating education policy that helps all students thrive!



### NEA members have run for:

- U.S. Congress
- State legislatures
- State and local boards of education
- County and city councils
- Mayor

### Should you run for office?

Yes, you should! Find out more at [nea.org/see-educators-run](https://nea.org/see-educators-run).

## NEA Champions Disability Justice

Want to confront ableism and discrimination and boost access and inclusion for students with disabilities? NEA has solution-oriented resources that advance disability rights and can help

you become a better advocate for students with disabilities. These resources will challenge the view that students with disabilities can't achieve or learn; address the many intersecting forms of discrimination that impact these individuals; and more!

Start your journey toward justice at [nea.org/disabilities](https://nea.org/disabilities).

(Right) NEA invited 14-year-old disability rights activist Helena Donato-Sapp to address 6,000 educators on why we must end disability discrimination.



## NEA Funds Big Collective Bargaining Wins!

NEA has awarded \$2.6 million in Student-Centered Bargaining Advocacy grants to 91 state and local affiliates since the program began, in 2015. The grants support members' collective bargaining efforts across the country.

### The results?

In **Pueblo, Colo.** (right, top), the local union won a **12 percent raise** for teachers, school nurses, and counselors—and a starting teacher salary of **\$45,000!**

In **South Carolina** (right, bottom), where collective bargaining is prohibited for educators, NEA grant funds and strong advocacy by the state affiliate helped score these major victories, among other wins:

- **Paid parental leave** for all school employees.
- **A harmful bill blocked** that would have limited and whitewashed history.
- **An end to lunch-shaming** and the practice of sending students and families to collections over **school lunch debt**.

Apply at [nea.org/Bargaining-Grants](https://nea.org/Bargaining-Grants).



## NEA Course Can Help You Address LGBTQ+ Bias

Worried about bias in your school? NEA has a series of courses that can help. These virtual, in-person, or blended classes address bias around sexual orientation and gender identity, with a focus on racial justice. Called LGBTQ+ Blended Learning, the series trains thousands of educators year-round and provides them with the latest data, legal updates, and activities to empower members to support all students.

### The most popular courses to date?

- Supporting Transgender, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming Students
- Walking the Talk: Classroom Strategies for Addressing LGBTQ+ Bias

Request a training at [nea.org/LGBTQ-trainings](https://nea.org/LGBTQ-trainings).



## LEAD4CHANGE

# A simple and free student leadership program that helps students realize their lives matter and they can make a difference in their communities

We believe every student has it in them to be a great leader who gets big things done. This program helps unlock the unique gifts of each student to create real, lasting change in their communities.

Simple lesson plans that are flexible for your classroom

Service learning framework that promotes student growth

Positively impact the climate of your classroom and the lives of your students

## Our program empowers educators and transforms students: a true win-win.

*“Being involved in the program showed me how to overcome barriers and the reality of how much difference can be made within a community when people come together to be the change.”*

-Ariana A., Fife High School, WA

[www.Lead4Change.org](https://www.Lead4Change.org)

## With Lead4Change, you can win real money for your school!

Lead4Change teaches students leadership lessons that help them create a service project that targets a specific need in their community. Upon completion, students present their project to a Lead4Change panel and are entered to win up to \$10,000 for their school or community!

## It's completely free!

Enroll for free at [www.Lead4Change.org](https://www.Lead4Change.org)

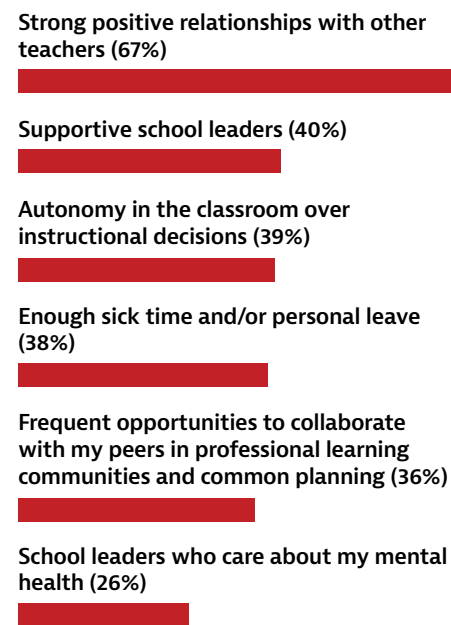


## EDUCATOR WELL-BEING: MAKING PROGRESS ... SLOWLY

The 2023 State of the Teacher Project, by the Rand Corporation, contained a nugget of good news: Teachers reported better well-being in early 2023 than they did in 2022 or 2021. In addition, job-related stress has returned to pre-pandemic levels. But stress levels are still higher than other working adults. More teachers reported access to at least one type of well-being or mental health support in 2023 than in 2022, but only slightly more than half of all teachers indicated that these supports were adequate.



### Educator survey: What factors exist in your school that contribute the most to well-being and positive mental health?



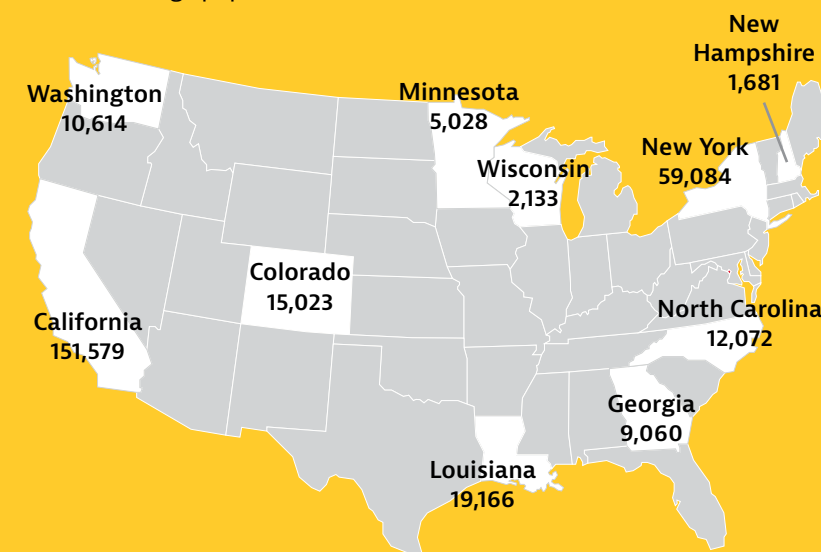
## WHERE ARE THE STUDENTS?

During the first two years of the pandemic, public school enrollment fell by 1.2 million. Many students transitioned into homeschooling, while others were enrolled in private school or moved out of state. But those trends cannot fully explain public school enrollment losses. An analysis by the Associated Press and Stanford University found that in the 21 states with available data, an estimated 230,000 student absences could not be explained.

*“Before this research, we knew virtually nothing about where these kids went,” said Thomas Dee, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. “Now we have some really important evidence to explain a portion of that exodus. But the fact that so much of the loss cannot be explained raises new questions about what will help students get their education back on track.”*

### The 10 states that reported missing students (2019 – 2022)

Number of students who left public school and can't be accounted for by increased enrollment in private and homeschools or changes in the school-age population.



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30

The number of states that expressly authorize the use of naloxone—the over-the-counter drug that reverses opioid overdoses—in K–12 schools.

Rhode Island is the only state that requires all schools to stock the drug. From 2010 – 2021, overdoses among adolescents in the U.S. rose from 518 to 1,146 people. More than two-thirds of those deaths involved fentanyl.





## TEACHER FIRED UNDER 'DIVISIVE CONCEPTS' LAW

**M**y *Shadow is Purple* sat on Katie Rinderle's classroom shelf for a month, until her fifth graders chose it for their morning read-aloud. The next day, Rinderle, a teacher in Cobb County, Georgia, was called into the principal's office. The book was "divisive," she was told. The following week, she was sent home for good—and on June 6, she was issued a formal letter of termination, which she appealed with help from her union, the Georgia Association of Educators (GAE), and the Goodmark Law Firm.

Rinderle had read *My Shadow is Purple* and liked it. "I just thought it had a wonderful message: Be true to yourself, embrace others," she says. Essentially, the award-winning book is about finding value in yourself, which leads to self-confidence and well-being, she says. For gifted students especially, who often feel different and excluded from their peers, it's heartening to hear a story about valuing and embracing the differences in people, Rinderle says.

Rinderle is believed to be the first teacher in Georgia to have been fired because of a trio of vaguely worded 2022 state laws that ban teachers from teaching "divisive concepts."

Educators fear she won't be the last, which is likely the point of the Georgia legislation and similar classroom censorship laws in other states.

"Teachers are fearful of [crossing] the invisible line in their classrooms ... because they don't know where it is," Rinderle says. So, they self-censor, pulling books from their shelves and shutting down student discussions. Or they just quit.

The consequence is a grim and limited education for students, who are experiencing less access to dedicated teachers, diverse books, and honest and accurate history lessons.

Together, many of these parents are working with NEA members to get diverse books back into the hands of teachers and enable students to learn

**Katie Rinderle**

about what NEA President Becky Pringle calls, "the history, beauty, and diversity of their world."

Learn more about how you can demand an inclusive, culturally responsive public education system at [nea.org/freedom-learn](https://nea.org/freedom-learn).



## CROWN Act Gathers Momentum

An important turning point for racial and social justice took place on July 3, 2019, when California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act) into law, which legally protects people in workplaces and children in K–12 public schools from discriminatory grooming policies. African Americans have historically experienced discrimination based on their hair. The CROWN Act protects certain hairstyles, such as afros, braids, twists, cornrows, and locs. Since then, the movement to prohibit race discrimination based on hair has gained momentum across the nation. Today, 23 states have adopted versions of the CROWN Act, with Michigan and Texas signing the two most recent laws this summer.



## Racial Gaps in Discipline Driven by Small Number of Teachers

**O**ffice Discipline Referrals (ODRs)—or visits to the principal's office—are typically the first formal step in the school discipline process. More formal consequences, including suspension, can soon follow.

A team of researchers at the University of Maryland and the University of California, Irvine, explored the role



these referrals play in perpetuating racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline. Drawing on data from a large, diverse urban district in California, what the researchers discovered surprised them: A small group of teachers engaged in extensive referring, effectively doubling the racial gaps in such referrals.

The top 5 percent of referring teachers issued an average of more than 48 ODRs

per year—roughly one ODR every four school days. Top referrers—who tend to be White and early in their career—accounted for 34.8 percent of all ODRs.

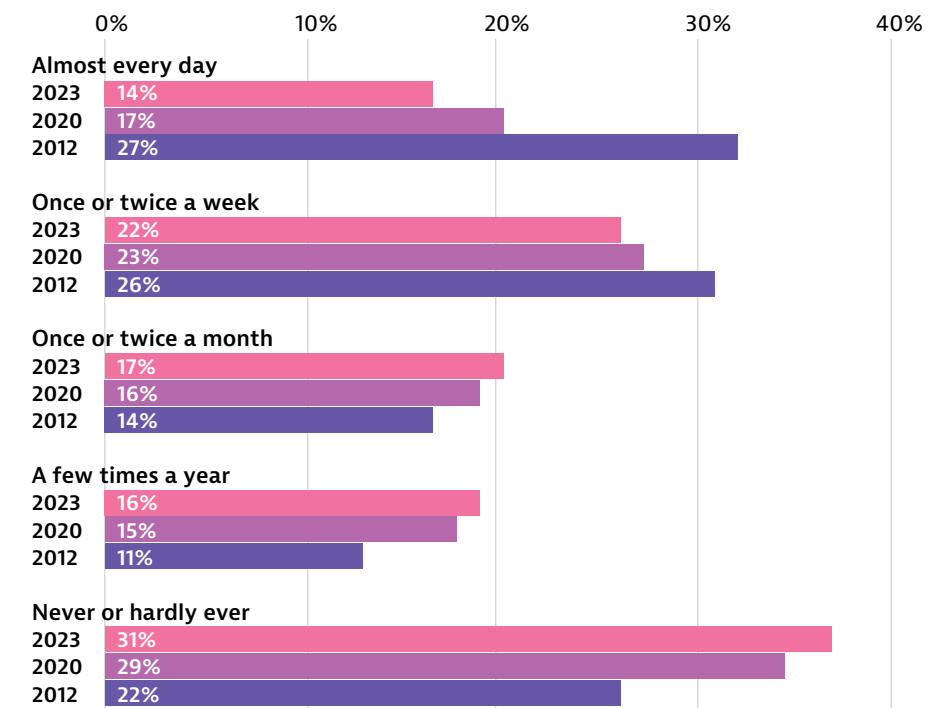
The study also found that referrals issued for subjective reasons, such as "interpersonal offenses and defiance"—as opposed to more objective reasons, like violence or drug use—were largely responsible for the increase in racial gaps.

"Given that top referrers tend to be teachers early in their careers, targeting professional development supports of classroom management skills for this group of teachers might also be a viable approach to reducing their referring frequency," said study co-author Jing Liu. "Our analysis highlights that structural supports at certain school levels are warranted."

## DOESN'T ANYONE READ FOR FUN ANYMORE?

**T**he National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report released in June showed a disturbing decline in reading scores among 13-year-olds. While that news sparked more concerns about the pace of learning recovery from pandemic-era virtual learning, the NAEP report, or the "Nation's Report Card," contained another finding that should alarm educators and parents everywhere. In a separate survey, only 14 percent of students said they read for fun every day. That's down 3 percentage points from 2020, and 13 percentage points since 2012. In 1984, 35 percent of students reported reading for fun almost daily.

### How often students read for fun on their own time



SOURCE: NATIONSREPORTCARD.GOV



## DO YOU HAVE PAID LEAVE? YOU SHOULD!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

**W**hen South Carolina teacher Mev McIntosh had her first child, in 2011, her district provided 10 days of paid sick leave. She bought short-term disability insurance so she could get partial pay while taking four more weeks with her newborn. But not everyone can afford disability insurance or to work without full-time pay, she notes.

"It's crazy!" says McIntosh, an English teacher at Cane Bay High School, in Summerville. "I've talked with teachers who have gone back to work after three weeks."

South Carolina educators deserve better—and so do their students and families. That's why members of The South Carolina Education Association (The SCEA) reached out to state lawmakers this spring, making calls, sending emails, and meeting them face-to-face during The SCEA's annual lobby day.

Consequently, South Carolina became the first Southeastern state to pass a law providing every school employee with six weeks of paid leave following birth or adoption. It also provides two weeks for foster parents.

"We don't have collective bargaining in South Carolina," says McIntosh, "but we do have collective action."

### Better family leave helps students, too

As districts struggle to hire and retain educators, NEA members are

making the case for more leave. Educators are stressed out and overburdened. If they can't take time off when they're sick, or their children are, it's untenable, McIntosh says.

"In a field where nurturing is such a big part of what we do, we do a very poor job of nurturing the teachers and educators who are expected to do that work," McIntosh says.

Paid leave leads to healthier educators. And healthier educators are more likely to stay and excel in their jobs.

South Carolina educators aren't the only ones making this case. Three years ago, the Delaware State Education

Association pushed through a law providing 12 weeks of paid family leave for educators. This spring, Education Minnesota won 12 weeks of paid leave for state employees, for a variety of purposes, including bereavement.

Elsewhere, union members are using their collective bargaining rights. In Malden, Mass., after a

one-day strike last fall, educators won 12 weeks of paid leave for new parents.

"That was huge!" says Malden Education Association President Deb Gesualdo.

Months later, Quincy, Mass., educators followed suit.

"[When I gave] birth, my husband received more paid time off than me," said Quincy school nurse Molly Ehrlich, when the agreement was announced.

"This [contract] gives me hope for the future." ❦



**Mev McIntosh**

**TAKE ACTION**

Many school staff members are not eligible for unpaid leave through the federal Family and Medical Leave Act. To tell your member of Congress to help, go to [nea.org/esp-fmla](https://nea.org/esp-fmla).

## It's Not Only About Sick Leave

Medical and family leave can improve educators' health—and help keep them in the profession. But educators are advocating for and winning other important kinds of leave as well:



### Assault/Injury

Last year, 1 in 10 teachers said they had been physically assaulted by students, according to a survey by the EdWeek Research Center. Assault or injury leave provides for paid time off to recover.



### Professional Development

In Alaska, the Anchorage Education Association's contract provides for 750 "member-initiated professional leave days," to be allocated across the district by a committee.



### Safety

Minnesota's new law provides for paid leave when state workers or their loved ones experience sexual or domestic violence.



### Parental

Recent parental leave provisions typically provide the same number of days for all parents, regardless of gender or how they became parents.



### Deployment

Many contracts ensure educators serving in the military will have jobs when they return from deployment. Some also provide time to attend the deployment ceremonies of family members.



### Bereavement

In addition to typical bereavement leave, a few unions have bargained for educators who experience a miscarriage. In Elk Grove, Calif., those members can take up to three days of paid leave.



### Abortion

Some private companies, such as Amazon, made headlines last year when they pledged to provide time and funding for employees traveling out of state to get abortions. Similar types of leaves have not yet been bargained by NEA members, say NEA staff who work with local bargaining teams.



### COVID-19

During the pandemic, many local unions negotiated for paid leave to cover mandatory quarantines.



### Olympic Leave

Yes, your contract can help you achieve your gold medal dreams! In Delaware, per state law, local contracts provide educators with up to 90 days of paid leave to participate on U.S. Olympic teams.



## BURDENED WITH STUDENT DEBT? YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE.

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Oregon paraeducator Laura Warren is still reeling—with joy, with astonishment, and with deep relief. Early this year, she learned that a mountain of student debt, nearly \$138,000, had been lifted from her shoulders.

Warren had borrowed decades earlier from the federal government to help pay for her children's college education.

"I paid and I paid and I paid, for years and years and years," she says. "We're talking, holy cow, my youngest just had his 20th high school reunion! It's been a long time!"

"I was convinced I was going to die with this debt. Because, in my lifetime, ... I couldn't possibly pay it off," says Warren, president of the Lebanon Education Support Professionals Association (LESPPA).

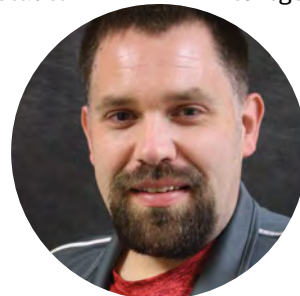
But then Warren received that unbelievable email. And then she called her federal loan servicer. And then, she—and the woman on the other end of the line—both burst into tears.



Laura Warren had \$138,000 in student loans forgiven!

### What is Public Service Loan Forgiveness?

Many NEA members, like Kentucky custodian Matthew Powell, have taken out federal loans to fund their higher education; others, like Warren, borrowed to help pay for their children's college expenses.



Matthew Powell

Today, both Powell and Warren have zero balances, thanks to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program—and to the NEA resources they used to navigate the federal program.

Unlike Teacher Loan Forgiveness, PSLF is available to paraeducators, school office staff, custodians, and other education support professionals (ESPs). Your job title doesn't matter.

"A lot of our ESPs think it's for teachers. They don't realize that if they've borrowed for any kind of college coursework—whether it's tech school for HVAC or whatever—it counts," Powell says. "And we do have a lot of ESPs taking college courses, because they want to be the best for their students."

PHOTOS: BOB WILLIAMS; COURTESY OF MATTHEW POWELL

AS OF MAY 2023, MORE THAN **615,000** TEACHERS, SCHOOL CUSTODIANS, NURSES, AND OTHER PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS HAVE RECEIVED LOAN FORGIVENESS FROM THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION.

In late 2021, Powell had the balance of his federal student loan debt—nearly \$12,000 that he had borrowed as a graduate student—erased through PSLF.

His advice to his colleagues? Learn about Public Service Loan Forgiveness. "Even if you don't think you qualify, you should reach out and see," he advises.

"Now I can take that money and spend it on my students!" says Powell, who was the NEA 2019 Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year. "It's been really helpful to have that extra income."

### 'It changed my life!'

Illinois library associate Jill Scarcelli owes about \$150,000, despite doing everything right. Her three children had academic scholarships. One attended community college before transferring to Illinois State University; another attended Illinois State all four years. (Her oldest went to a private university, but his education was the least expensive, thanks to need-based aid.)

"I'm doing a job I absolutely love, but it doesn't pay," Scarcelli says. She took out Parent PLUS Loans, because otherwise she couldn't afford to send her kids to college.

Three years ago, Scarcelli consolidated her PLUS Loans into a federal direct loan and enrolled in an income-driven repayment program to begin making progress towards PSLF. Because her income is so low, she pays

basically nothing each month. In seven years, her debt should be forgiven by the program.

"When you first start, the paperwork can be challenging," Scarcelli says. "I applied on my own and got denied—for a crazy little thing like the street address on my application didn't exactly match the address on my tax form."

Then, while attending an Illinois Education Association conference, Scarcelli learned about the NEA Student Debt Navigator, a program offered through NEA Members Benefits.

Free to NEA members, the program provides individualized help, so borrowers can get into the right repayment program and file the paperwork to enroll in PSLF.

Warren also relied on NEA's help. "It was like a three-minute application—and it changed my life!" she exclaims. "I couldn't even keep up with the interest. And, even with an income-based payment, it was still a lot."

"Every month, I was like, 'How am I going to pay this?' I used to tell my kids that the good thing was it was going to die with me. That was the good thing!"



Jill Scarcelli

## Educator Debt: By the Numbers

**62%** of NEA's ESP members and

**53%** of NEA's pre-K–12 teachers reported having student debt in 2021.

**28%** of support staff owed more than \$65,000, compared with

**26%** of teachers.

SOURCE: "STUDENT LOAN DEBT AMONG EDUCATORS: A NATIONAL CRISIS," AN NEA REPORT.

LEARN MORE

### Get Help From NEA!

Check out NEA resources on student debt at [nea.org/student-debt-support](https://nea.org/student-debt-support).





## SPARKING A PASSION FOR POLITICS

*"I have a strong desire to meet people where they are and let them know the union is there for them, and I am there for them."*

—Rochelle Greenwell, paraeducator, Washington

Early in Rochelle Greenwell's career, she wanted to help her fellow paraeducators receive more professional development. Her unions, the Washington Education Association (WEA) and the Kent Association of Paraeducators (KAP), provided an avenue for her through a lobbying training program called Poli SPARKS.

She attended her first training in 2018. "After that weekend, I not only was versed on the union's political advocacy, but I knew I discovered a passion," says Greenwell, who works at Kent Elementary School.

Poli SPARKS is intended to build curiosity and enthusiasm for political activism and organizing. It's a two-part training that teaches participants valuable advocacy skills and organizing tips, with a focus on virtual lobbying. Participants interact with insiders and decision-makers at the state capital and get a close-up look at how government works at the state and federal levels.

"It takes a lot to impress me, but when I attended my first Poli SPARKS training in Olympia, all I could say was, 'Wow!'" Greenwell says.

The program is a hands-on experience offered to all WEA educators in their first six years of working in a public school.

### Feeling empowered

One of the first bills Greenwell lobbied for would allow paraeducators to take 28 hours of professional development paid for by the state. Greenwell was inspired and honored to be the voice of advocacy for all paraeducators in Washington.

"I was so proud when the bill was passed and implemented in 2019," she says.

Two years after attending her first Poli SPARKS training—and scores of lobbying visits and union meetings later—she is now president of her local association, serving 400 members.

Her first order of business? Visiting schools and connecting with members and potential members.

"I have a strong desire to meet people where they are and let them know the union is there for them, and I am there for them," Greenwell shares. "This was especially important after the pandemic.

"It is also my job to identify leaders in our schools and train them to make a difference and get involved," she adds.

While most days still feel chaotic to Greenwell—working in the classroom, leading KAP, and being a mom to her 25-year-old daughter—these are the roles she cherishes.

"They are the roles I know will make a difference to the next generation," she says.

—JANET RIVERA MEDNIK

## WHAT DOES YOUR PERFECT SCHOOL DAY LOOK LIKE?

*"I'm a middle school counselor. A perfect day would be students feeling safe and happy outside of my office and outside of our school."*



—Erika Zamora, California

**"Class size under 20, enabling a mix of whole class, collaborative, and independent work."**

—Fawn J., Alaska

**"I get a paycheck proportionate to my skills and qualifications."**

—George N.

**"I'm in Jackson, Miss. We'd have clean running water to drink and flush. Currently, we flush the toilet in the faculty bathroom with the water in a 50-gallon garbage can."**

—Carol M.

**"A DAY WITHOUT ADMINISTERING OR PREPPING FOR STANDARDIZED TESTS."**

—Debbie G.

**"MY 'PERFECT' SCHOOL DAY WOULD BE FOR ADMIN TO LEAVE MY BLACK WOMAN TEACHER SELF ALONE, STOP SURVEILLING ME, AND LET ME DO MY JOB JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. AH, BLISS!"**

—D. Carlson

**"Imaginations engaged!"**

—Ardis G.



We want to know what's on your mind. We asked this question on NEA Today's Facebook page and received so many great answers! Keep an eye on [facebook.com/neatoday](https://www.facebook.com/neatoday) for our next question, and share this link with your fellow NEA members.



OUR VOICES

member spotlight

A Family Tradition

Marty Gutierrez  
Middle School Math Teacher  
WESTMINSTER, COLORADO

The Chicano Movement was born in Denver, in 1969. At the time, my parents were a young couple with a growing family, and they proudly supported the movement's activists, known as the Crusaders for Justice. However, my parents drew the line at the more militant actions of the time. They believed in the power of education and the strength of reason.

I must have done a lot of eavesdropping on their conversations around the kitchen table, because their values were instilled in me, as were those of my maternal grandfather. For years, my grandfather worked the mines in Colorado and spoke to me about why unions were crucial to workplace safety and financial security.

Today, after 28 years of teaching, I continue to proudly serve as a foot soldier for the Colorado Education Association and my local, the District Twelve Educators' Association. I will always find the time to say yes to what's asked of me. I guess you could call it a family tradition.

LEARN MORE

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



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\* Eliminates odors by killing odor-causing bacteria in the air.  
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TRY  
THIS  
*engage*

## FOUR WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

By Abreanna Blose

“It’s scary to think about all of the queer kids that are experiencing this hate from people who just don’t understand who they are,” says Amber Ingram, an English as a second language teacher in New Jersey.

More than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced by state legislatures in 2023. These bills would ban curriculum related to LGBTQ+ identity, ban gender-affirming care for youth, criminalize parents supporting their children, put transgender students’ safety on the line—and endanger all LGBTQ+ students.

In Florida, for example, lawmakers passed a measure targeting trans people by requiring all individuals in government buildings to use bathrooms that align with their sex assigned at birth. Anyone who violates this law could face trespassing charges. In Tennessee, a new law prohibits public schools and colleges from requiring implicit bias training. In Montana, a bill created a statewide, anti-LGBTQ+ definition of “sex” as binary and immutable.

These measures and many others impact the safety and well-being of our LGBTQ+ youth who desperately need community support.

The Trevor Project’s 2022 national survey of nearly 34,000 LGBTQ+ young people, ages 13-24, paints a clear and distressing picture. Nearly three-quarters reported symptoms of anxiety; 58 percent reported symptoms of depression; and 45 percent said they had seriously considered attempting suicide within the past year.

### UNDERSTAND THE LAW

“I have educator friends across the country [who] are trying to toe the line between what they can say and what they can’t say without literally losing their jobs,” Ingram says.

Third-grade International Baccalaureate teacher Tami Staas, who is also the executive director of the Arizona Trans Youth and Parent Organization,

explains that amidst all of the new anti-LGBTQ+ legislation being introduced, it’s important for educators to know how to legally advocate for their students.

“We’re seeing a lot of those laws weaponized against us, and I’m hearing a lot of mistruths,” Staas says.

At a recent webinar for the Arizona Education Association, a participant asked Staas a simple, yet alarming



question: Is it legal to hang a rainbow flag in an Arizona classroom? The participant’s superintendent had said it was against the law.

“I said, ‘No, it’s perfectly legal. There’s no law against that,’” Staas says. “Knowing what’s legal and knowing what’s not is really important. ... There’s a lot of ambiguity in [anti-LGBTQ+ laws] and a lot of confusion.”

Many of these laws are intentionally vague and meant to create a climate of fear and self-censorship. So knowledge of your rights is crucial.

It can be helpful to read legislation that impacts your schools. And keep in mind that districts may have policies prohibiting certain types of displays in classrooms.

K–12 educators should always seek clarification from their administration and their local or state association. It’s also important to use available resources and ask questions. Organizations like GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) and your union are here to help.

### USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

The key to making students feel included in the conversation is language and intent, Staas advises.

“Look at any school mission statement and it says ‘all kids, everyone.’ And when we talk about everyone, we have to include the LGBTQ+ kids,” Staas says. “By using inclusive language, we kind of set that environment where they’re able to feel more comfortable.”

Staas suggests avoiding binary-restricting directions and language. For example, educators should not divide the class into “boy” and “girl” groups.

Instead, divide by shirt color, randomly generate groups, or let students choose.

Similarly, Ingram is normalizing inclusive language and pronouns in her classes. For instance, she uses “they” and “them” to refer to individuals when she doesn’t know their preferred pronouns. Ingram also displays her pronouns in all spaces, which helps students feel more comfortable sharing their pronouns.

### ADDRESS HARMFUL COMMENTS

Regardless of political or religious beliefs, classrooms should be a safe space for all students. That’s why Ingram suggests addressing harmful language and comments in an open and honest conversation.

“I just kind of attack it head on—not from a place of calling a student out, but just kind of examining why they said that or where it’s coming from—so I know my students who are queer feel safe in that space,” Ingram says.

A fifth-grade teacher once asked Staas for advice about a student who had started transitioning, using a different name and new pronouns.

Some of the kids were basically saying, “I don’t get it,” and didn’t want to use the student’s new pronouns, Staas recalls.

Staas encouraged the colleague to have a class discussion, telling students that they don’t have to understand, but they should try to display respect.

“What we’re asking you to do is be kind,” Staas explains. “Empathy doesn’t mean endorsement.”

### AMPLIFY VOICES

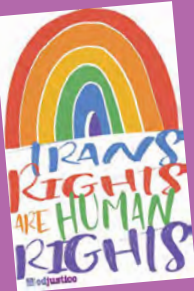
Rather than arguing about student experiences and autonomy, educators

## LGBTQ+ Toolkit: What you need to know

What should you know about federal protections for educators and students? How do you create an inclusive classroom?

NEA’s new LGBTQ+ toolkit provides these answers, plus trainings, an LGBTQ+ pronoun guide and book list, downloadable art for your classroom, a pledge to support your LGBTQ+ students and colleagues, and more.

Find it at [nea.org/supporting-lgbtq-youth](https://nea.org/supporting-lgbtq-youth) and share with your colleagues.



and legislators alike must take a step back and listen to the voices of the students being impacted.

“Give them a platform,” Staas suggests. “Give them the microphone. Make them feel comfortable speaking their truth. If you’re setting up that classroom where ... they know it’s a safe space, they’re going to use their voices. That’s going ... to go a long way.”

Colorado high school teacher Sam Long identifies as a transgender man and advocates for LGBTQ+ inclusion in curriculum and standards. Educator representation and voice, he says, play an important role in students’ comfort.

“Every child deserves to have teachers who share their experiences and identities because these adults provide hope and proof that a fulfilling life is possible,” Long writes in an online *NEA Today* article. “For our growing number of trans and nonbinary and questioning students, I get to be that proof.”



TRY  
THIS  
*technology*



## ARE YOU AS TECH SAVVY AS A FIFTH GRADER?

By Jacqui Murray

I taught technology to kindergarten through eighth graders for almost 15 years, and parents and colleagues were constantly amazed that I could get the littlest learners to pay attention, remember, and have fun with tech skills.

I have a confession to make: It's not as hard as it looks. Sure, during those first few months of kindergarten—when the students don't know what the words "enter" and "backspace" mean, and don't understand why they can't grab their neighbor's headphones or bang on their keyboard—I do rethink my chosen field. But that passes.

By January, the parents who tour my classroom think I'm a magician.

What's my secret? I teach every child to be a problem-solver. If their computer doesn't work, I have them fix it. I ask, "What's wrong with it? What did you do last time? Have you tried ...?"

If they can't remember how to do something, I prod them: "Think back to the instructions. What did you do last week? See that tool right there, does it look like it would help?"

I insist they learn those geek words that are tech terminology: "There's no such thing as earphones. Do you mean headphones? I don't understand when you point. Do you mean the cursor?"

No matter how many hands are waving in my face, I do not take a student's mouse in my hand and do for them, nor will I allow parent helpers to do this. (That's a bigger challenge than the students. Parents are used to doing for.)

I guide students to an answer. I am patient even when I don't feel it inside. My goal is process, not product.

By the end of fifth grade, my students have learned how to solve each of the following tech problems:

### 16 SIMPLE TECH SOLUTIONS

#### 1. Take the first step to solving many problems.

Turn the computer off and then on. Close down and reopen your internet browser. Turn the modem or printer off and then on again.

#### 2. The website doesn't work.

Check to be sure the URL is entered correctly, and is not missing letters or the http. If that doesn't work, change browsers.

#### 3. I can't exit a program.

The universal exit command for Windows-based computers is "alt-f4."

#### 4. I can't find a program.

Type the name in the "search" field. Most middle and high school students prefer this method of locating a program.

#### 5. \_\_\_ doesn't work.

This could be the mouse, keyboard, monitor, speakers, or some other piece of hardware. Make sure everything is plugged in and turned on. If it is, unplug-replug.

#### 6. The sound doesn't work.

Is it muted? Are the headphones plugged in? For little ones, do they have the right headphones on?

#### 7. I deleted \_\_\_.

If it's part of a document, use "ctrl+z" to undo. If it's a file, check the recycle bin and restore if it's in there.

#### 8. The font is too small.

Use "ctrl+" to zoom in and "ctrl-" to zoom out.

#### 9. I can't find \_\_\_ in the file.

The universal keyboard shortcut for "find" is "ctrl+f." This works in documents and online.

#### 10. The document is 'read-only.'

"Save as" under a different name and edit.

#### 11. I'm worried about security.

This is a massive topic, but two solutions that work even for kids in grades K-5

are to cover the webcam and put smartphones in airplane mode (to cut access to the internet).

#### 12. The program froze.

Is there a dialogue box open that's waiting for an answer?

#### 13. The "shift" key doesn't work.

Is caps lock on?

#### 14. Double-click doesn't work.

Push "enter" after the first click.

#### 15. I can't remember how to \_\_\_.

Right-click. This reveals the most common actions for the context you are in.

#### 16. The internet toolbar disappeared.

Push "f11."

Jacqui Murray has been teaching K-18 technology for 30 years. You can follow her on Twitter @AskaTechTeacher.

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# My Disability Activism Models Pride

A 14-YEAR-OLD BLACK GIRL WITH GAY FATHERS AND LEARNING DISABILITIES FIGHTS BIAS ON A NATIONAL STAGE

The following is adapted from Helena Donato-Sapp's speech at NEA's 2023 Representative Assembly, in July.

By Cindy Long

Helena Donato-Sapp is only 14 years old, but she has a strength of character and a sense of identity and purpose that many never achieve in a lifetime. She is a Black girl from Long Beach, Calif., who was born with medical issues that led to lifelong learning disabilities.

"These disabilities are only one part of my many identities," said Helena, who has published articles in peer-reviewed journals, spoken to national audiences, and received national and global honors for her activism in Black girlhood, disability justice, and abolitionist education.

"I am Black. I am dark-skinned Black. I am a Black girl. I am adopted. I have gay fathers. We are a multiracial family," she said. "One of my dads is an immigrant. The other dad was raised in poverty. I am not just one thing. I am many things, and these multiple intersectional identities shape my world."

Helena explained that her identities give her power and that they also "rain down bias and discrimination on me."



## UNFULFILLED IEPs

When Helena's learning disabilities were identified, she felt as though the school held them against her. She has ADHD, a visual processing disorder, a working memory disorder (an inability to hold and use information over short periods of time), and dyscalculia (a learning disorder that affects a person's ability to understand number-based information). Like many schools, she said, hers does not have enough teachers and resources, and it's hard to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) implemented.

It was especially hard early on as she and her fathers were figuring out the tenacity required for disability advocacy.

"My teacher had too many students and didn't have the needed resources to provide me with the supports I needed for my multiple disabilities," she said. Helena has studied her disabilities extensively with her parents and understands them well. She also understands her IEP, and has ever since she was in third grade.

Every year, she and her dads make a one-page, accommodations sheet on card stock for each of her teachers, telling them exactly what Helena's strengths and needs are and how the teachers can help support her.

"It's all in my IEP. I know the Education Department code, I know the district policies, I know the school's intentions, I know the federal laws. And as clear as we are, my unique, individual needs are still not fully met."

Helena knows that like her, many kids

## Helena Donato-Sapp

across the nation are not being served in accordance with the law. She also knows why.

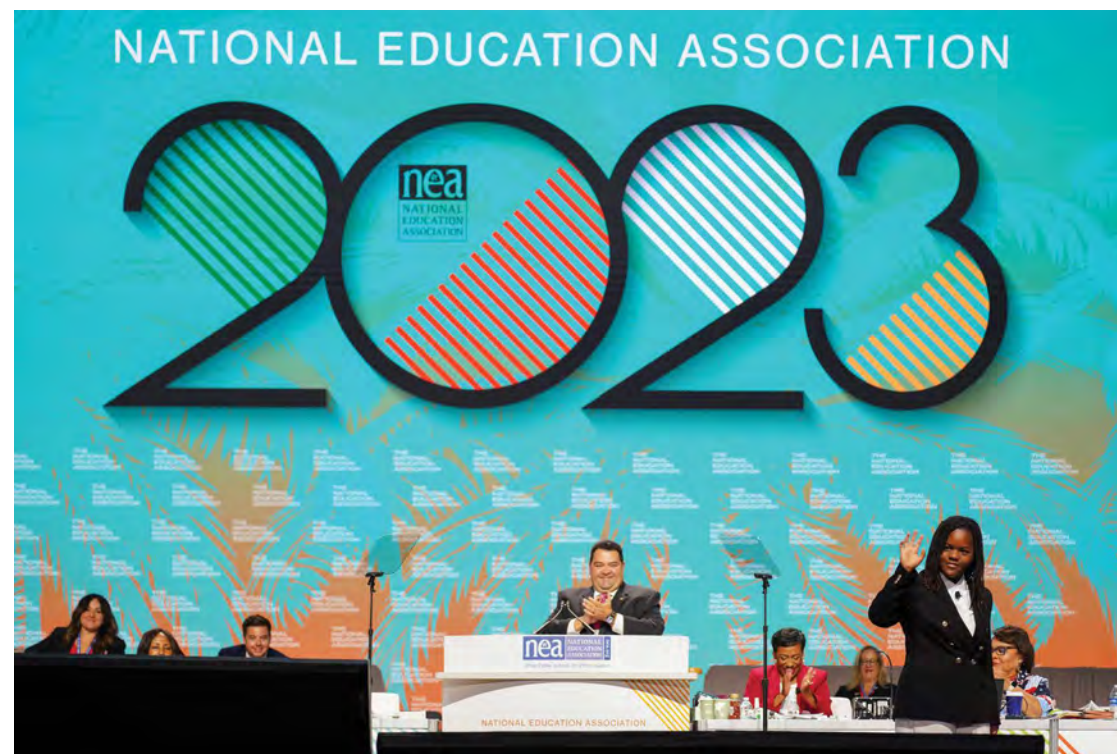
"Educators need more time, resources, and supports," she said. "And that takes funding, not just the promise of funding, but collaboration time, training, and reasonable workloads."

## 'I LIFT MY HEAD UP HIGH'

As if it weren't enough for a teenager to have to fight for her education, Helena faces bullying, isolation, and exclusion, too.

She led a schoolwide anti-bullying campaign, which she said didn't go over well with her peers.

"But I am the kid who will not be put down or held down. I am the kid who will just show



Teenage disability activist Helena Donato-Sapp captivated NEA leaders and delegates at the 2023 Representative Assembly.

"Look for me in your school and in your classroom—and be my champion."

—Helena

you what! You want students like me in your classroom," said Helena, who finished middle school with three years of straight A's.

But the exclusion never stopped.

"I left middle school last year with no good friendships that I will long for. The strange thing is that I think my peers wanted me to feel shame, but I am already clear at 14 that my work is about refusing shame for any of my identities," she said.

"I have a strong armor of self-worth. And my disability activism is modeling that pride to all other students and all educators. I lift my head up high with pride in who I am."

Helena has faced discrimination against her Blackness, against her disabilities, against her girlhood, and against her gay family, but she realizes how lucky she is to have two parents who lift her up.

"Not every kid is as lucky as I am. And so I beg [educators] to look for the lonely child sitting by themselves at school, the child that no one picks for play or group work, the child that never chatters excitedly about a sleepover," she said. "Look for me in your school and in your classroom—and be my champion. I am a prime example of a child that can soar and succeed if you champion me."

## WORDS MATTER

"Being a champion, to me, means confronting your own deficit ideology

and seeing my assets. It means to lift up the underdogs. It means caring for the down-trodden. It means championing my work and my character," Helena continued. "It means learning more about how to support the students with disabilities in your classroom."

As part of her advocacy, she reminds educators that it takes just one caring adult to transform a child's life, and she asked them to be that adult and that champion.

One of Helena's champions was her fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Takii.

"She was the first teacher

who loved me and my learning disabilities. And she stayed up at night thinking of ways to support me and make me successful," she said. "One thing she did for me was to be sensitive to the way she talked about my learning disabilities."

Before Mrs. Takii, teachers made Helena feel like she had a problem body and mind. Their message? She was lacking, and she was a deficit.

"But not in Mrs. Takii's room," Helena recalled. "She smiled and simply said that I learned differently. It was the first time that anyone in school was careful and sensitive about the language they used to define me, and I am here to tell you it made all the difference."

"Language matters," she added. "Words matter. How we talk about disabilities matters deeply."

Not only is Helena an activist for disability awareness, but for all public school students and educators. She encouraged them to keep saying the word gay, keep teaching the truth of history, keep teaching person-to-person and heart-to-heart. ✨

LEARN MORE

Scan the QR code or go to [nea.org/Helena](https://nea.org/Helena) to watch Helena tell her story. For more on disabilities, visit [nea.org/disabilities](https://nea.org/disabilities).





# YOU CAN'T Judge A SCHOOL BY ITS Ranking

By Cindy Long

SCHOOL RANKINGS DIVIDE COMMUNITIES AND SELL SCHOOLS SHORT. THERE ARE BETTER WAYS TO MEASURE SUCCESS.

After the state stamped Webb Middle School, in Austin, Texas, with another failing grade, the pressure mounted to boost standardized test scores. Otherwise, the school would be closed for good. It was as if the state was pointing an angry finger at the school, shouting, “Do better ... or else!”

It was a tense time, and a group of students in an after-school animation class created a film showing how they felt. In the film, students talk and laugh in the hallway, when animated monsters suddenly descend, chasing and attacking them.

The monsters are the tests.

“The message of their film was loud and clear,” recalls Allen Weeks, a longtime educator and community activist who is now executive director of Austin Voices for Education and Youth. “The kids felt they were being attacked by the tests and the system.”

That happened back in 2005, and the community fought back and won (see sidebar, Page 32). But the same monster movie is now playing across the country and it rarely has a happy ending.

## You can't measure community

With little data to go on, states use standardized test scores to identify the lowest performing schools and assign grades or ranks, in accordance with federal law.

If a school continues to underperform on test scores, attendance, or graduation rates, the district may take over or close the school altogether.

State rankings tell us what educators already know—schools with high populations of students of color or students from under-resourced communities sometimes do not perform well on standardized tests.

“The test scores are used to justify the closure of schools in a disproportionate way,” says Susan Lyons, principal consultant at Lyons Assessment Consulting. The rankings also distort what happens in classrooms, she adds.

“By emphasizing a single measure, we corrupt the thing we’re trying to measure, because students come to associate learning with a test score,” she says. “Schools feel pressured to organize learning around the structure and format of tests, but learning is supposed to be much richer and more engaging.”

Michelle Cardenas, a bilingual pre-K teacher at Hillcrest Elementary School, in South Austin, says the school rankings impact her as a teacher and parent.

“I am not a fan of the letter grade,” she says. “I don’t even look at the letter for my kids’ schools.”

She has two daughters, one in middle school and the other in high school. Both schools have dual language programs, and her girls are fluent in Spanish and English. The high school has enrichment pro-

grams, like robotics and an excellent basketball team.

“The togetherness of families at basketball games is huge,” Cardenas says. “That community is very supportive. It’s a family. That’s hard to measure in a state rating.”

Her daughters like their schools and do well in their classes, yet other kids often tell them they go to the “ghetto school.”

“Their friends are transferring out to ‘A’ schools because their families think they’re better,” she says. “It tears communities apart when families flee to higher-rated schools. And the rankings don’t tell the full story of what is really happening inside a school.”

School ratings are often missing pieces of the puzzle that aren’t captured in numeric form, says Jack Schneider, an education policy analyst and assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

They don’t measure how safe and welcoming the school climate is, what arts and enrichment programs are available, the teachers’ years of experience, or the professional development available to educators.

## Rankings increase segregation

Schools are communities of people, where students have individual strengths and weaknesses. Rankings that rely too heavily on test scores reduce them to data points.

**“It tears communities apart when families flee to higher-rated schools. And the rankings don’t tell the full story of what is really happening inside a school.”**

—Michelle Cardenas,  
bilingual pre-K teacher,  
Texas



**Michelle Cardenas has been at her school for 20 years and spends free time making student scrapbooks. School rankings don’t reflect this kind of educator experience and dedication.**

Many families then compete for highly rated schools, driving nearby home prices ever skyward while shutting out lower income families. The result is segregation.

Research shows that increases in school segregation by race and socioeconomic status over the past 20 years can be attributed to school accountability policies, such as No Child Left Behind, Lyons points out.

“The typical person doesn’t know how schools are rated and just sees the A through F or 1 to 10, and assumes those ratings reflect what makes a good school or a bad school,” she says. “Those who have the ability to pay for housing in districts that receive better scores will often buy homes there, which in turn further stratifies our system by race and class, which is really detrimental for equity.”



YOU CAN'T  
**Judge**  
 A SCHOOL BY ITS  
**Ranking**

**"We have a very strong community. You can't see that on a ranking."**

—Kimberly Reece, ESOL teacher, Maryland

**GreatSchools.org** is often a top return in online searches of school names. Cardenas' elementary school received a B from the state, but a 4 out of 10 on the ratings website.

The site results don't show that Cardenas spends hours of her own time creating scrapbooks for each of her students, or that she has been at the school for two decades, as have most of the teachers there.

"We don't have teacher turnover here, which is rare during the shortage," she says. "We have teachers who have been here 20 to 30 years with so much talent and experience, and students have that stability, but that doesn't show up on the ratings."

Cardenas' school is predominantly Hispanic, and most families are low-income. Some people look at those demographics and decide against sending their children there.

"That makes me so upset," she says. "Our school is so good! I have been here long enough to see my former students during the Senior Walk. Some go on to Harvard, some go on to community college. Where is that in our ratings?"

### Open the doors to parents

Kimberly Reece teaches English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at Charles Carroll Middle School, in New Carrollton, Md., where the state assigns numeric rankings. Her school ranked 42.5 out of a possible 96.5. **GreatSchools.org** gives the school a 4 out of 10.

"If you're moving to a new community, especially from out of state, and you don't know anything, there's not much else to go on," Reece says. "I'm a parent. I get it. But as a teacher, I know the shortcomings of these rankings."

She recommends that educators encourage families to visit schools and sit in on a class. If a child is learning English, the family should visit an ESOL class. If the child has anxiety, the family can learn about the guidance program. They can also ask about the arts, enrichment, or sports.

"You can't really learn about a school from a state rank," Reece says. "If a school is

genuinely good, it will show when you visit and talk to teachers and other parents."

Her school's soccer team is the best in Prince George's County, and everyone goes to the games—students, parents, alumni, community members, and teachers.

"I don't even like sports—even though I'm six feet tall and people assume I played ball. I am a total nerd, but I go to all the games," she says. "I have students on the team, one of my students is the goalkeeper. I'm so proud of them and I go to support them. We have a very strong community. You can't see that on a ranking."

Cardenas agrees. She encourages educators and administrators to open their doors, let parents into the school and classrooms, and start bragging about everything the school is doing for students and their community.



As a parent and teacher, Kimberly Reece knows the importance of school quality. She also knows rankings don't measure it accurately.

**LEARN MORE**

Find out how to improve the way schools and students are assessed at [nea.org/testing](https://nea.org/testing).

## How a community saved a 'failing' school

**W**hen the state threatened to close Webb Middle School, in Austin, Texas, due to low rankings, the district had no plan to help the school. But the community refused to give up.

By organizing meetings and community conversations, they discovered that the No. 1 problem was family instability, which leads to homelessness, high mobility, and absenteeism.

The families, community activists, and community partners came up with a school improvement plan that became a community school plan. They built about 30 local partnerships to support family health, housing, job security, and enrichment opportunities as well as programs to overcome language barriers. Over time, Webb's ranking improved—it became the top-performing Title 1 middle school in the district.

"Maintaining the community schools strategy has been key," says Allen Weeks, who is executive director of Austin Voices for Education and Youth. "Academics work so much better when you are taking care of

external factors impacting families and building those opportunities for kids."

Community schools address the needs of the school and the community to solve problems, Weeks says. The strategy can turn around a public school that is struggling.

Despite the school's progress, charter schools are still nipping at the Webb School's heels.

"To get charters in, the state needs a certain percentage of failing schools to make their narrative work," he says.

And in Texas, they keep moving the goal posts, and more schools don't make the grade.

"According to the privatization narrative, there are too many schools with A's and B's, so they are raising the benchmark from 65 percent of students passing the standardized tests to 82 percent," he says.

The big school districts in the state know the results will be bad. In Dallas, the superintendent said that the number of schools with D's or F's will rise from 7 to 27 with the new benchmark.

"They keep moving the standards up and up and

up, but I don't see it as trying to make schools better, because they are not providing the necessary resources for the low-ranked schools," Weeks says.

Charter schools won't help those students either. "Charters cherry pick kids," Weeks says. "They don't want to take kids who need extra resources. Charters don't have the refugees or the homeless or the kids with special needs."

Those schools, he says, are set up on a franchise business model, and students and families must conform to that one-size-fits-all model or be shut out.

Community schools, on the other hand, are totally customized to the conditions of the neighborhood.

"We live in a hard world, with homelessness, issues with health care and housing affordability, class, and race,"

Weeks says. "But we can have great schools if we work together to be thoughtful, positive problem-solvers."



Allen Weeks

**LEARN MORE**

Want to know more about the community schools strategy? Visit [nea.org/communityschools](https://nea.org/communityschools).



# MATH IS NOT BORING!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

## THERE'S A REVOLUTION HAPPENING IN SOME MATH CLASSES

The stereotypical question on a standardized math test goes something like, "You're in a hot-air balloon and you're traveling ..."

Ugh. Who cares? "None of my students have been in a damn hot-air balloon!" says Louisville, Ky., math teacher Kumar Rashad.

This is the problem with a lot of math education. Despite decades of effort to make it more relevant to students, to be more about concepts than computation, not much has changed. This century's "new math" is a lot like last century's old math. Boring.

It's time for a fresh approach, say many NEA members. Whether it's teaching math through ethnic studies or with a social justice lens, or asking real-world questions that pique curiosity and enthusiasm, math education needs to become more interesting.

More fun, too.

### Creating purpose

A decade ago, Karim Ani was attending a town hall meeting about the Affordable Care Act, listening to Northern Virginians lose their heads, when he had a small epiphany.

"If we could have this conversation through what is fundamentally sixth-grade math, we

wouldn't necessarily agree, but the conversation would be much more constructive!"

That realization changed the way he thought about math education. "I'd been treating math as something to look at, when it should be something to look with," says Ani, author of *Dear Citizen Math: How Math Class Can Inspire a More Rational and Respectful Society*.

Today, Ani's learning platform, Citizen Math, provides teachers in grades 6–12 with two-day lesson plans that ask questions like, "Should the government increase the minimum wage?" (Or the most popular one: "Should people with small feet pay less for shoes?") Most often, there isn't a right answer, Ani says.

"For us, [the question is] more about do you enjoy the act of learning," says Ani. "Are you getting better at analyzing issues? Do you see a purpose in school?"

### Creating better people

Ani calls math a prism—something to look through. Rashad calls it a tool. In his classes at Breckenridge Metropolitan High School, Rashad asks students to dive into the school district's COVID-19 data or actual Louisville neighborhood crime stats and create multiyear projections.



Shraddha Shirude teaches ethnic-studies math in Seattle. Her approach encompasses curricula, pedagogy, and assessment.

Do they see linear growth? Or is it exponential? From there, they talk about policy solutions that might help keep them safe.

His goal isn't to create better math students. "It's to create better people," he says.

Rashad sees a few—maybe more than a few—problems with math education in the U.S. For one, it's too compartmentalized.

"There's no reason you can't teach math and science simultaneously," he points out. For another, he adds, it's too focused on teaching to the standards—or, in other words, to teaching to the test.

"We should treat it as a tool to solve local issues," says Rashad, who is also a local Metro Council member.

Nearly nine of 10 Breckenridge students are Black, and Rashad frequently uses math to address social and racial justice issues. He's not alone in thinking that math can and should be taught through a social justice lens.

### Creating activists

In DeAndrea Jones' preschool classroom, math is viewed through a social and racial justice lens because Jones views everything through a social

and racial justice lens. That is who she is. That is her lens on life.

For her, this doesn't just affect what she teaches—although she does have math lessons that enliven Black history. It also shapes how she teaches her 4-year-olds. Her students' interests and questions drive her classroom activities.

"Much of mathematics teaching is listening to children's thinking and allowing the children's questions and thoughts to drive the discussion," she says. In this way, Jones ensures that her students know they have a voice.

She also makes sure they have fun. When young students engage in play, they're more likely to employ "non-routine problem-solving" and practice perseverance, Jones says.

Too few teachers understand the importance of letting students lead, especially at the elementary level, says Marian Dingle, a former Georgia teacher who provides professional development on math education. Dingle spent the first weeks of every year asking students a million questions. Their answers guided her curricula.

"Much of mathematics education is listening to children's thinking and allowing their questions and thoughts to drive the discussion."

—DeAndrea Jones, preschool teacher, Ohio



DeAndrea Jones



# MATH

IS NOT BORING!

**"The purpose of my classroom is to create critical thinkers who challenge the world. We see that in English and history classes—but we don't see it as often in STEM classes."**

—Shraddha Shirude, high school math teacher, Washington

"I lean toward curriculum that is generated or co-generated with students, with teachers, with communities—things generated out of students' interests," she says.

But it's not just curricula. When you teach math through ethnic studies, "It encompasses actual pedagogical teaching practices and the ways we assess students," says Seattle high school teacher Shraddha Shirude.

In Shirude's classroom, students are free to make mistakes. "Students are free to correct the teacher. They can say 'I disagree and this is why,' and it becomes a critical conversation," says Shirude. "The purpose of my classroom is to create critical thinkers who challenge the world. We see that in English and history classes—but we don't see it as often in STEM classes."

For Shirude, who also is a curriculum director at Washington Ethnic Studies Now, this often means project-based learning. Her students look at math transformations—like rotation and reflection—through shapes found in indigenous plants. They learn about symmetry and congruence and similarity through a unit inspired by the AIDS quilt. And, like Dingle, Shirude works collaboratively.

"My curriculum is co-constructed with colleagues, students, and family members," she says. "If you're doing it alone, it's not ethnic studies."

### Creating educators

As part of Black History Month lessons, Jones used to have students simulate Harriet Tubman's rescues of enslaved people. Using mathematical language, spatial thinking, and measurement, her 4-year-olds created "pathways to freedom." For example, "Take five steps under the circular table ... then turn right at the filing table to freedom!" Math plus Black history equaled fun.

But this lesson wouldn't work for every teacher, Jones acknowledges. Jones is a Black woman who has taught at the same school for 20-plus years. She knows her community. Parents equally know and respect her. When Jones wrote about this activity in a math journal, and White teachers copied it, she says, "some got pushback."

Similarly, while Dingle taught through a social justice lens, she doesn't recommend it for everyone.

"Can you define social justice? Can you defend it? I would start with the inner work. ... If you can't practice social justice in your personal life, if you can't point to it in your personal life, you have no business practicing it with kids," she warns.

Get good training, Shirude urges. Look to experienced educators and community resources. And be brave, she says. People often fear incorporating ethnic studies into math, she says.

"There's this fear that it takes something away," she explains. "But it's less about adding [ethnic studies] to math curriculum and more about figuring out why we teach it."

Unlike standardized tests, this approach addresses the most essential question, says Shirude. It's this: "Why do we give a f\*#\$ about math?" 🦄

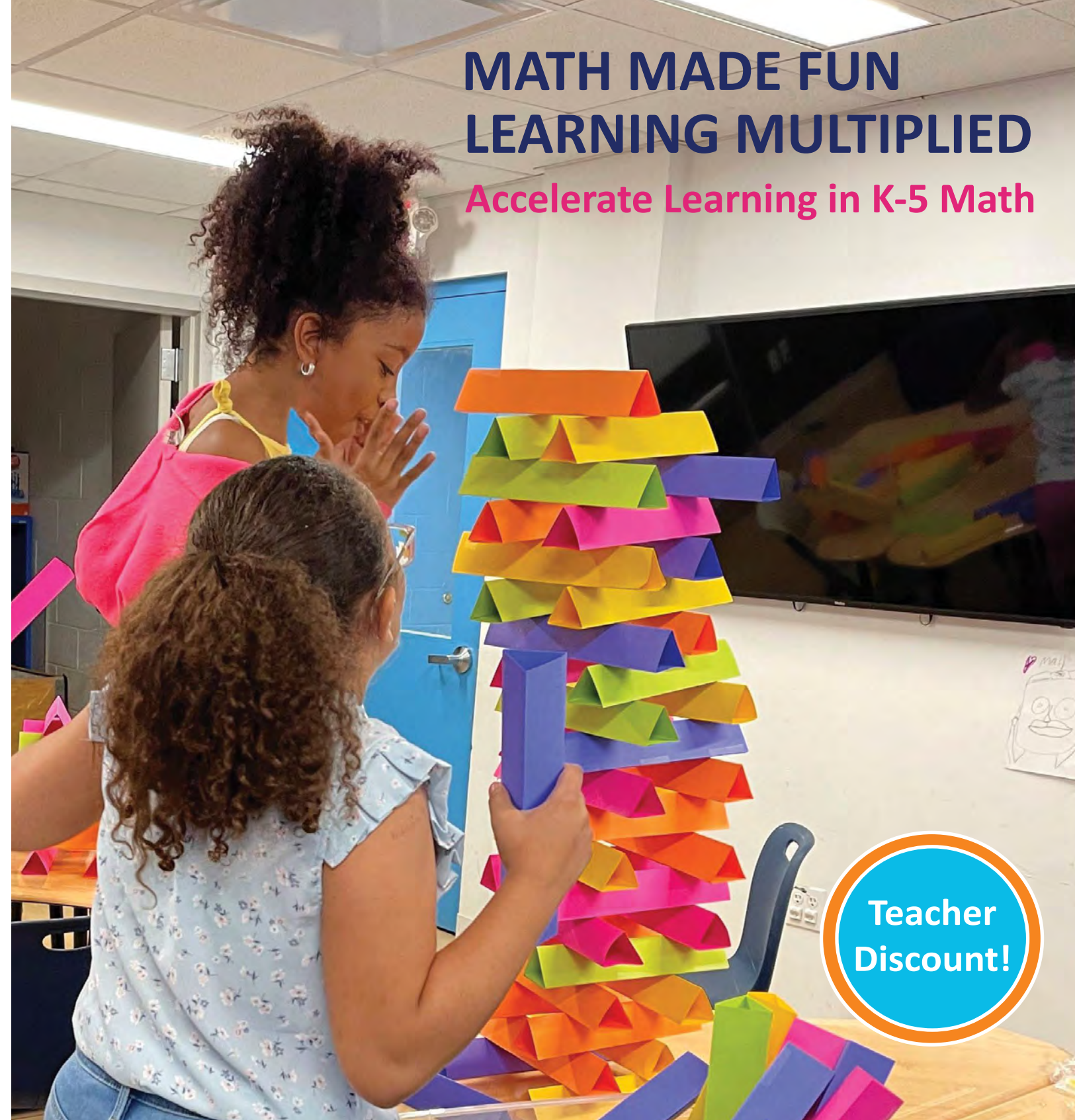
### LEARN MORE

For more on teaching math through a social justice lens, check out *Rethinking Mathematics* at [rethinkingschools.org](https://rethinkingschools.org).

PHOTO: A.J. MAST



Kentucky teacher Kumar Rashad



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# Rural Schools Take on the Mental Health Crisis

By Tim Walker

**'IF WE DON'T GIVE THEM THE HELP ... THEY NEED, MANY ARE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT'**

When educators, parents, and students filed into the town hall center in Hamlin, W.Va., one day in April, they were determined and hopeful that they would change minds. The school board had recently announced plans to lay off the 10 social workers employed by Lincoln County public schools. The county, everyone was told, simply could not afford them.

Putting a price on children's mental health seemed abhorrent. One by one, community members stood at the microphone and implored board members to find the money. The social workers were saving lives, and the students could not imagine facing the upcoming school year without them. Hamlin is the county seat and has a population of 1,040. Much of the county is marred by poverty, crime, and opioid addiction.

"The social workers speak to our kids every day," says Catricia Martin of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA). "They are an integral part of this community."

Ten-year-old Grace told the board how her social worker helped her through post-traumatic stress disorder after a recent car accident.

"If they take away these social workers, ... people with depression and suicidal thoughts ... suicide will increase," she told a local TV reporter after the meeting, as she fought back tears. "It's not OK!"

The school board listened impassively and expressed concern but said their hands were tied. The grant that paid for the positions had expired, and there were no available funds in the general budget. Anyway, there were other priorities—including the possibility of a new school sports complex.

The county could keep one social worker. The other nine would have to go.

The school board's decision was heartbreaking and gut-wrenching, says Cassie Stone, vice principal of Duval PK-8 school, in Hamlin.

"It felt like a slap in the face. The trauma our students are facing is very real. They can't focus on learning. If we don't give them the help and resources they need, many are not going to make it."

## Record levels of sadness and anxiety

The surging mental health crisis facing young people has been on the nation's radar since the pandemic. This heightened awareness, however, didn't make the results from a recent survey any less shocking.

In March 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 42 percent of high school students were suffering from overwhelming stress and anxiety—a 50 percent increase from 2011. But the data on girls was especially alarming. Nearly 3 in 5 girls felt persistently "sad or hopeless"—double that of boys. That figure represents a nearly 60 percent increase from 2011 and the highest level reported over the past decade. Nearly 1 in 3 seriously considered attempting suicide—up nearly 60 percent from a decade ago. Among LGBTQ+ youth, the trends were even more alarming.

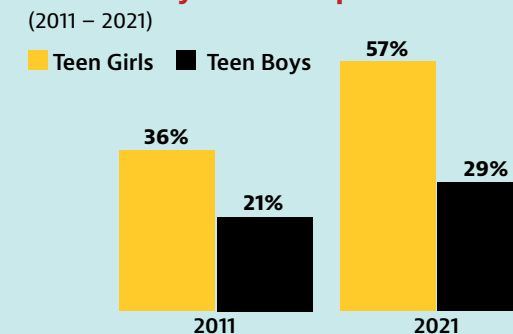
Students of all ages and backgrounds are experiencing these heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and



(Above) In Coachella Valley, California, one of the poorest school districts in the U.S. makes mental health a priority. (Right) A student urges the board of education in Lincoln County, West Virginia, not to reduce the number of school social workers.



## U.S. Teens Who Report Feeling Persistently Sad or Hopeless (2011 – 2021)



trauma. But young people in rural communities are facing graver challenges. Serious mental illness, adolescent depression, psychological distress, and suicide are higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Mental health services are limited in rural communities, and a lack of public transportation makes it difficult for many to seek help far away.

Although telehealth is more widely available, it remains an imperfect solution. Rural schools are also disproportionately affected by staff shortages. Recruiting and retaining counselors, psychologists, and social workers in remote areas is a perennial challenge. Case loads can be overwhelming, leading to staff burnout and higher turnover rates.

And then there is the stigma.

"There are those 'old school values' in our town that prevent people from seeing the benefit of mental health treatment. It's still taboo," says Athena Robinson, who teaches social studies to middle schoolers in California City, located in the Mojave Desert.

Factor in high levels of substance abuse and the widespread availability of firearms, and it's "a perfect storm scenario," says Catherine Bradshaw, associate dean at the University of Virginia (UVA) and co-director of the National Center for Rural School Mental Health.



# Rural Schools Take on the Mental Health Crisis

The influx of federal funds from the Biden Administration’s American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act—both championed by NEA—have boosted many schools’ ability to support student mental health and social and emotional learning.

But school leaders and educators, especially in many rural communities, continue to struggle with dwindling resources and a stubborn lack of attention to the severity of the crisis.

“We needed more preventative interventions prior to the pandemic, and now we have more stress on the system than ever before,” Bradshaw says.

## The burden on school counselors

In many rural communities, a school counselor or psychologist may spend hours in the car each day, traveling long distances to visit multiple districts.

Haley Kunze and Brandy Rose, who are psychologists for Nebraska’s Educational Service Unit 7 (ESU 7), do just that. ESU 7 is 1 of 19 education subdivisions in the state and serves 13,000 students in 19 school districts across 7 counties.

Kunze, Rose, and their colleagues fan out each day, sometimes driving an hour from their respective homes to their first school visits.

“I usually drive somewhere between 1,000 to 1,200 miles every month,” Rose says. “You get used to it, but it can be exhausting.”

Prior to the pandemic, the psychologists’ school visits usually entailed check-ins with special education teachers as well as testing and evaluations. Since 2020, however, they have fielded more requests from teachers to meet one-on-one with students who need help with social skills and emotional regulation.

“My workload in that area has doubled over the past few years,” Kunze says.

But time and resources are limited. And the counselors in ESU 7—and across the nation—are stretched thin.

The three pillars of school counselors’ work are academic development, career development, and social and emotional development. They are not therapists, says Jill Cook, president of the American School Counselor Association.

“Counselors help ensure that the systems are in place to get students the help they need,” Cook

explains. “But schools need social workers, school psychologists, school nurses—all those school-based mental health personnel to support students.”

## All hands on deck

In ESU 7, Kunze and Rose say community support for their work is strong, and awareness of the severity of the mental health problem has increased. But moving the work forward and being able to focus on “Tier 1,” or preventative strategies, as well as social and emotional learning, and less on reactive measures should be the next step.

“With the heavy loads our counselors are taking on, we need more funding and resources to address our students’ mental health,” Kunze says.

Rose recently represented the Nebraska State Education Association at the state legislature, in Lincoln, when she testified in support of legislation that would reimburse schools and ESUs for specific mental health expenses.

“Rather than delay until an incident occurs and then try to step in,” Rose says, schools can intervene earlier if they hire more counselors and school psychologists and train all staff, including teachers.

That was the goal last year when teachers in the Mojave Unified School District were trained to identify warning signs in student behavior.

Robinson and Benito Luna-Herrera, who also teaches social studies in California City, both considered the training necessary.

“We’re already a steady presence in students’ lives. We have existing relationships with them and their families,” Luna-Herrera says. “And some of these students are in households that are just disasters. Staying at home during COVID just made their mental health worse.”

Even though the state has significantly ramped up hiring for school counselors, those positions have been difficult to retain in California City. And even when counselors are on staff, a teacher shortage has forced them to fill instructional roles.

“It’s been a really tough couple of years,” Robinson says. “We’re all under a lot of pressure, so the training helped. Hopefully the district will invest in more. I don’t think we could have survived if it wasn’t all hands on deck.”



**Brandy Rose**



(Left) School counselor Karina Vega says families in Coachella Valley often don’t have the luxury of processing grief. (Below) California teacher Benito Luna-Herrera took training to help him identify warning signs in student behavior.



## ‘We’re all on the same page’

Just three hours south of California City lies the Coachella Valley, a desert region marked by extreme heat and staggering income inequality. Just a few miles away from expensive resorts and clubs, 94 percent of the students in the Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) live in poverty, with all the adverse childhood experiences and trauma that come with it.

The student population is predominantly Latino, many from families of migrant workers. Already plagued by economic instability, these families continue to struggle in the wake of the pandemic and live in fear of family separation and deportation.

The suicide rate in Coachella Valley far outpaces county, state, and national rates. And the anxiety and sadness that was widespread before the pandemic has only worsened since. Fortunately, CVUSD had already prioritized mental health in

their district, committing to a portfolio of programs and initiatives.

“Over the past decade, everybody came together and said, regardless of what our politics are, regardless of whatever our views on other issues are, we all agree that mental health is an important thing that we need to tackle,” says Karina Vega, a K-12 counselor in CVUSD and a member of the Coachella Valley Teachers Association. “Everyone has been 100 percent supportive—the union, the school board, local politicians, and parents.”

Funds from federal pandemic relief packages helped some of the programs in Coachella Valley get off the ground, including the opening of student wellness centers in the district’s middle and high schools in 2022.

In the wellness centers, which Vega helps coordinate, students learn coping skills and can always find someone to talk to.

“There are those ‘old school values’ in our town that prevent people from seeing the benefit of mental health treatment. It’s still taboo.”

—Athena Robinson, social studies teacher, California City, California



# Rural Schools Take on the Mental Health Crisis

“[It’s] somewhere for students to put down some of the things they’re carrying,” Vega says.

Staff at the centers work with school nurses and campus safety officials and refer students to services in the community. The Latino Commission, a nearby mental health therapy and counseling center, provides on-site therapists for every school.

Through these resources and partnerships, CVUSD is able to triage students so they receive the most appropriate and timely care. That level of coordination is required to meet the complexity and urgency of the crisis.

“These students and their families don’t have the luxury to grieve,” Vega says “There’s too much going on in their lives, too much loss, too much pressure to put food on the table. So the fact that our wellness centers are providing a place for our students to take their grief, for me, is a miracle in itself.”

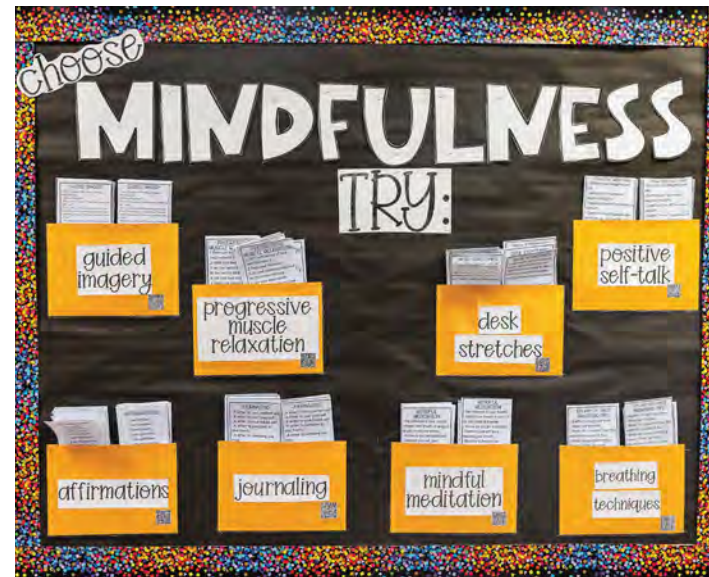
Even when the grant funding for the wellness center expires, school leaders hope the future of the district’s mental health initiative is secure. The response from staff, students, and parents has been overwhelming, Vega adds.

## No time left to lose

Two months after the Lincoln County school board voted to eliminate the social workers’ positions, the district received welcome news. In June, a health clinician at nearby Marshall University struck an agreement with the board. The social workers would be contracted with a local private health entity to provide services to area schools.

Although this is a positive development, the issue of adequately staffing social workers in schools has not been addressed, says WVEA’s Martin.

“We want every county in our state to have the resources they need to support student mental health needs,” she explains. “A better outcome for the Lincoln County situation would have been for the



An activity board inside the wellness center at Desert Mirage High School, in Coachella Valley, Calif. All middle and high schools in the district have wellness centers, and plans are in place to open them in the elementary schools.

county to utilize funding so that every school would have a social worker.”

The longer it takes to provide rural schools with these necessary resources, says UVA’s Bradshaw, the longer it will take to implement effective prevention strategies.

“We’re playing catch up here. These kids need help,” Bradshaw says. “This isn’t just a flash-in-the-pan problem. This is going to be something that is with us for an entire generation of students.”

## LEARN MORE

**Watch the video**  
Hear from parents and educators in Coachella Valley about how they teamed up to bring mental health services to schools. Go to [nea.org/rural-mental-health](https://nea.org/rural-mental-health).

**Community Schools**  
The community schools model has proven successful in bolstering both emotional and physical health services. Learn more at [nea.org/communityschools](https://nea.org/communityschools).

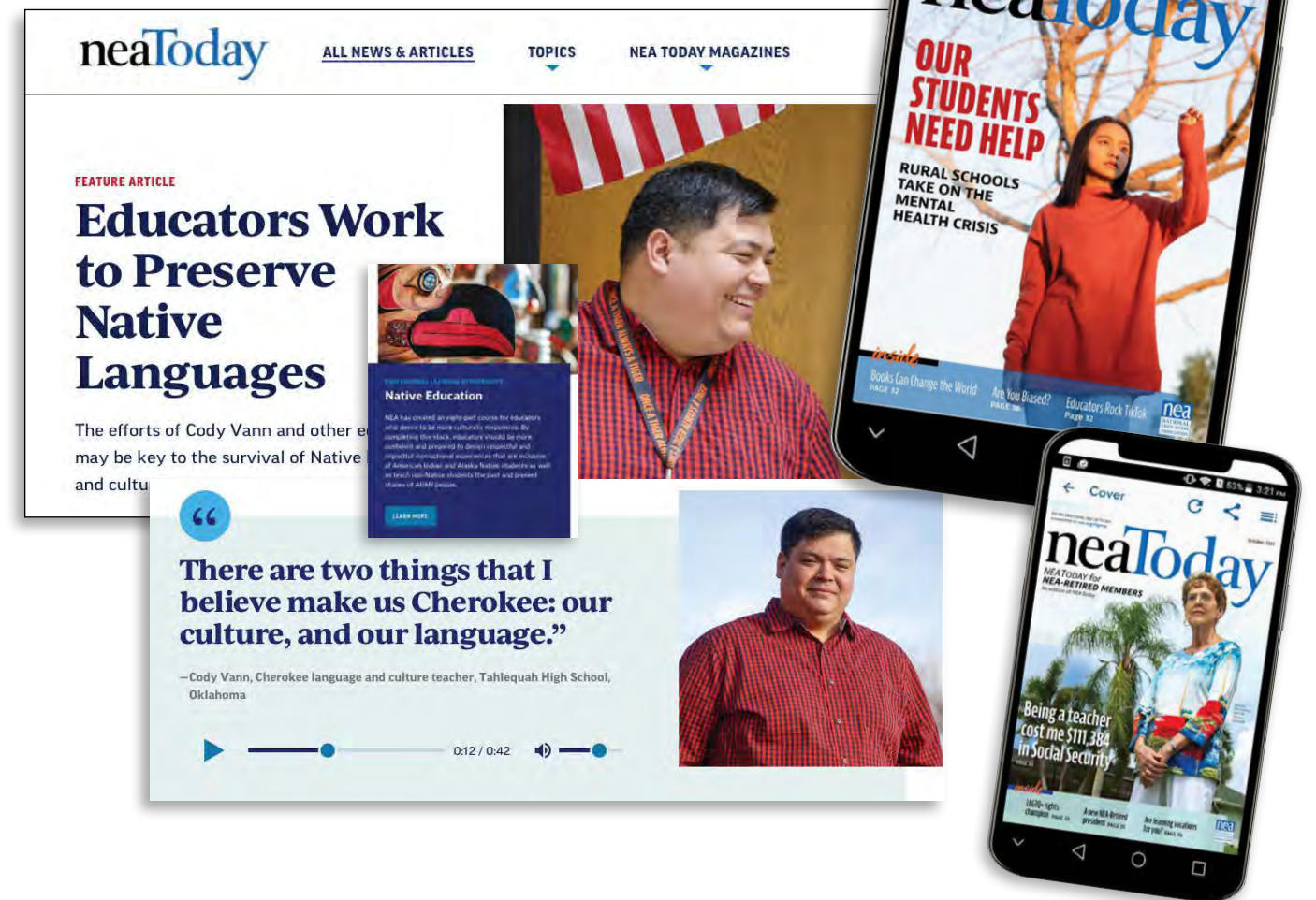
**NEA Mental Health Resources**  
[nea.org/mentalhealth](https://nea.org/mentalhealth).

PHOTO: RYAN HORBAN

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# Champions of Justice

## Meet the recipients of the 2023 NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards

By Brenda Álvarez

New Mexico educator **Grace Mayer** remembers seeing her sisters struggle with having children and full-time jobs. Like several of Mayer's colleagues, they wanted to return to work as soon as possible, but a lack of affordable child care meant they couldn't go back until their kids were 8, 10, or 12 years old.

"That's a huge loss to our profession," says Mayer, in a video shown at the Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Awards ceremony, held in Orlando, Fla., in July.

Mayer, one of the winners of this year's awards, was honored for her successful advocacy for a high-quality, affordable day care center for the children of Santa Fe educators—a first in the state.

Forty teachers and education support professionals now benefit from the center, which offers a safe place for their children during work hours; reduces the need to find child care far from their workplaces; and mitigates the high cost of raising a family in one of the most expensive cities in the state.

"The field of education is predominantly women, and so we have to acknowledge what their life paths are," Mayer said. "Child rearing is a big part of that. You shouldn't pay half of your salary to raise your children, especially

when you're taking care of the community's children."

NEA's HCR Awards honored a total of eight educators and two organizations for their inspiring commitment to advancing social and racial justice. Here are more of their stories:

### Leading with her history

California's **Arlene Inouye** has long reflected on the trauma her family experienced while being incarcerated in Japanese internment camps during World War II—and how that experience relates to the systemic racism that exists today. Her family's history drives her to transform public education and her union into a force for racial, educational, and social justice.

Based in Los Angeles, Inouye is currently collaborating with UCLA's Asian American Studies Center on the *Multi-media Textbook on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*, an online platform that teaches students about the history and dynamics of being an Asian American and Pacific Islander in the United States.

### Sparking self-determination in African American boys

**Cartier Scott's** peers describe him as a life-changer—one who does everything well and with love, honor, and



Grace Mayer

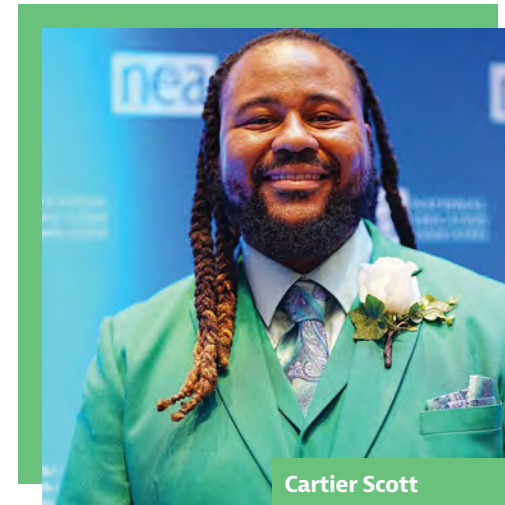
pride. Scott is a math teacher, coach, and mentor, in Riviera Beach, Fla., as well as a co-founder of Connect to Greatness, a nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring African American boys and their mothers to become leaders and changemakers.

The nonprofit has two tracks: The Boys to Men Leadership Academy, which exposes young males to new experiences, from tie-tying and yoga to college tours and navigating tough conversations about growing up.

Meanwhile, the Women of Boys Empowerment Program provides the boys' mothers with mental health counseling, classes in first-time homebuying and rebuilding credit, and more.

### Championing LGBTQ+ rights

**Dirk Andrews** advocates for a better world for the LGBTQ+ community in Wyoming and nationwide. As a Wyoming Education Association Safe and Just Schools cadre member, he facilitates a



Cartier Scott



Arlene Inouye

frequently requested session on LGBTQ+ rights in education, designed to help eliminate discriminatory and abusive behavior toward LGBTQ+ people. Plus, he assists NEA members, school leaders, and community members in developing programs that help defend students' rights and make them feel welcome and seen at their schools.

During his trainings, Andrew shares his personal story of growing up gay in Wyoming. His story helps remove barriers and cultivates a safe environment for growth, where diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity is respected.

### Empowering workers and their families

**Jeanette Arellano** is an educator, artist, organizer, and activist in Milwaukee, Wis., who uses her talents to

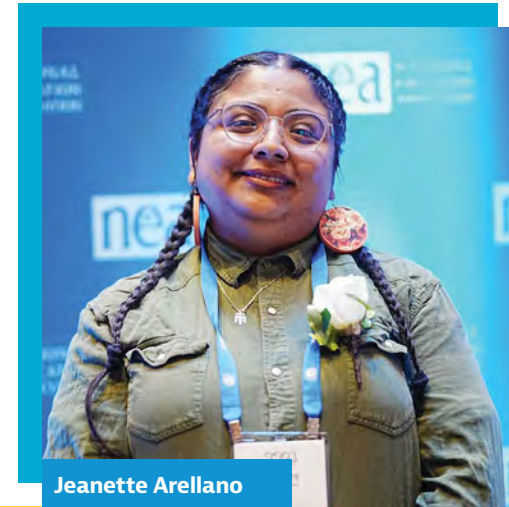


Dirk Andrews

organize community groups across racial and ethnic backgrounds. As a steadfast activist who combines labor relations strategies, grassroots

organizing, and art builds (artwork that amplifies a collective action or message), Arellano helps to improve workplace conditions for the working class and immigrants.

In her efforts with *Voces de la Frontera*, a local immigrant rights organization, she tutors community members in English proficiency and literacy and prepares them for the U.S. citizenship exam.



Jeanette Arellano

### Preserving and sharing Black history

**Derron C. Cook**, an art and media teacher, local association president, and Black history enthusiast in St. John the Baptist Parish, La., leads student and community talks about Black history.

He is described by his community as a griot who preserves Black history and traditions. People often seek out Cook's expertise on the history he has captured from African American elders in his community.

Seeing a need for continued education in African American studies in his parish, Cook founded the Revolt1811 Museum—which includes reenactment photos of the 1811 Slave Revolt that began at the nearby Woodland Plantation.

The museum is his answer to taking a stand against politicians who seek to ban books, whitewash history, and erase Black excellence. 🗳️



Derron C. Cook

LEARN MORE



Watch the winners sharing their inspirational stories at [nea.org/HCRWinners](https://nea.org/HCRWinners).

To nominate an individual or organization, see Page 54.



# MEASURE X MEASURE

By Amanda Litvinov

**BALLOT MEASURES—WHICH TAKE ISSUES STRAIGHT TO VOTERS—HAVE LED TO WINS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS. NOW THIS DIRECT DEMOCRACY IS UNDER ATTACK.**

In today's divisive political climate, it's important to remember that voters share some common priorities—including strong public schools.

Sometimes, when state legislatures fail to support what the majority of voters want, coalitions of parents, educators unions, and other advocacy groups take issues directly to voters through statewide ballot measures.

The wins have been remarkable, including billions of new dollars in education funding.

Over the past decade, voters have approved measures that uplift students and families—by raising the minimum wage and expanding Medicaid, for example.

But some legislators see ballot measures as a threat to institutional power and are trying to curtail their use, says Sarah Walker, policy director at the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center.

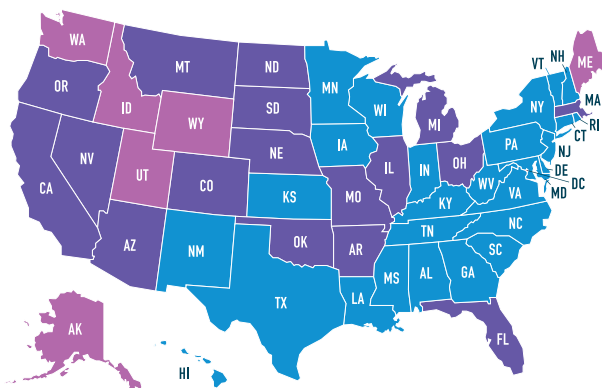
"It's an authoritarian tendency when legislators ignore the majority in the service of a very extreme base," she cautions.

Read on to discover how statewide ballot measures passed in 2022 are powering progress—and why the process is worth defending.

## Ballot Measures Across the United States

Every state has different laws governing ballot measures. In some states, only the legislature can put measures on the ballot; in others, citizens can initiate laws but not constitutional amendments; and some states allow either path to direct democracy.

- Allows citizen-initiated statutes and legislatively referred constitutional amendments
- Allows legislatively referred and citizen-initiated statutes and constitutional amendments
- Allows only legislatively referred constitutional amendments and/or statutes



## A BIG WIN FOR TAX FAIRNESS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts educators helped accomplish a nearly impossible feat: They passed a state constitutional amendment that improves tax fairness and increases state funding for education and transportation by an estimated \$2 billion annually.

Anne Monopoli, a paraeducator from Shrewsbury, Mass., walked up to six miles each day and knocked on as many as 40 doors per day to talk with voters about Question 1, the Fair Share Amendment. It was the summer leading up to the 2022 elections, and it was worth braving the sizzling heat, Monopoli says. Most of the folks she talked with were genuinely interested to hear why the educator on their doorstep wanted them to vote for the measure.

"I explained what a boost this funding would be for our schools, and how the tax would only go into effect on their second million dollars in income," Monopoli says. "Lots of people joked with me that they were still working on their first million." It was a way to drive home the point that the additional 4 percent tax only applies to the ultrawealthy.



Members of the Massachusetts Teachers Association helped pass the Fair Share Amendment.

Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) President Max Page says the win shows that "a coalition of labor, faith, and social service organizations could go toe-to-toe with the billionaire class and win better funding for everyone."

MTA has spent the last year ensuring that the funding is spent well. The governor recently signed off on free school meals for all students. The union is also urging funding for a nurse and librarian in each school, living wages for support staff, and paid family and medical leave for educators.

## ALL-IN FOR KIDS IN NEW MEXICO

New Mexico became the first state in the nation to create a permanent fund for child care and significantly boost early childhood and K–12 education funding, when voters approved the state's Constitutional Amendment 1. It took a full decade of advocacy from a sizable coalition that included NEA-New Mexico.

It was a decisive victory, with more than 70 percent of voters supporting the measure, which the state legislature put on the ballot.

The win represents hope for educators like Bethany Jarrell, an early childhood educator from the city of

Alamogordo. She says the victory will improve the lives of future generations in immeasurable ways.

"Until very recently, our schools were massively underfunded," Jarrell says. "We're still rebuilding the public education system from the policies of previous administrations, and this gives us a stable source of funding to do so."

The win is expected to add \$150 million a year to early learning, and another \$100 million per year to K–12 education. It ensures that lower-income families have access to early childhood education; schools can provide targeted supports



NEA-New Mexico scored a resounding victory for children with Constitutional Amendment 1 in 2022.



to students most at risk of failing; and the school system can address the educator shortage statewide.

The measure does not raise taxes, but rather reallocates funds within the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund, which has an estimated worth of \$15.8 billion and includes leases and royalties on oil and gas production.



## Direct Democracy Under Attack

In 2020, **Arizona** voters passed Proposition 208, a monumental ballot measure to restore nearly \$1 billion in funding for K–12 schools.

For years, the state legislature had grossly underfunded public schools. Arizona was nearly last in the nation in per-pupil spending, and educators and parents were fed up with large class sizes and a lack of resources.

Educators and parents teamed up, collecting more than 250,000 signatures to place the citizen-initiated measure on the ballot. “Prop 208” passed with 51.7 percent of the vote.

However, moneyed opponents lobbied to undermine the will of the people, and the measure was eventually overturned in the Arizona Supreme Court.

### New barriers go up

Since this targeted takedown, Arizona lawmakers have made it more difficult for voters to have a say in how their money is spent. In direct response to the success of “Prop 208,” the legislature passed a measure requiring 60 percent voter approval to amend taxes.

Now these lawmakers want the 60 percent requirement for all state constitutional amendments. This change could be up for a vote in Arizona in 2024.



Singer-songwriter John Legend rallied against “Issue 1,” an anti-democracy measure in his home state of Ohio.

### This trend is taking hold in other states, too

Many legislatures across the country are trying to restrain voters’ power. From 2018 to 2022, nearly 70 percent of ballot measures concerning direct democracy aimed to restrict citizens’ ability to initiate and pass measures. Over 40 percent of them passed.

Another 15 ballot measures with similar intent are likely to be on the ballot this year and next.

Next year in **North Dakota**, for example, voters will consider a constitutional amendment that would increase the number of signatures required for citizen-initiated amendments; require constitutional amendments to pass twice; and limit initiatives to a single subject.

### Not all of these attacks have been successful

In **Arkansas**, voters defeated a 2022 ballot measure that would have required a supermajority to pass constitutional amendments and laws.

In **Ohio**, the Ohio Education Association and more than 200 other organizations rallied against the ballot measure known as Issue 1 in an August special election. The measure failed with nearly 60 percent of voters choosing “No.” The measure aimed to:

- **Require** 60 percent voter approval for amendments instead of a simple majority (over 50%).
- **Make** Ohio the only state in the country that required citizen-initiated amendments to include signatures from every county.

—JELINDA MONTES



In **November of 2022**, voters in **37** states decided on **132** statewide ballot measures.



During the **2022 legislative session**, the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC) monitored **109** bills intended to alter or restrict the ballot initiative process.



BISC is tracking **373** ballot measures expected to appear on the ballot in 2024.

## A STAR-STUDED TURNOUT FOR ARTS EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

Joe Bartell is a music teacher at Brea Olinda High School, in Orange County, California. He and his wife, middle school music teacher Glenda Bartell, were both active in the coalition that helped pass Proposition 28, the Art and Music K–12 Education Funding Initiative.

Things really took off after the California Teachers Association threw its weight behind the measure and helped fund a public information campaign. Bartell was one of about a dozen music teachers throughout the state who helped draw support from other organizations and write



(Above) CTA helped pass Proposition 28 to guarantee arts in all public schools. (Left) Music teacher Joe Bartell met singer Christina Aguilera at a fundraiser she hosted.

op-eds for local newspapers and websites to educate voters.

Support from megastars like Christina Aguilera, Dr. Dre, and Katy Perry helped, too!

The measure, which passed in November, provides nearly \$1 billion annually for arts and music education in pre-K–12 public schools, doubling the state’s previous spending on those programs. Targeted funding will send additional resources to low-income schools, where students have historically had the least access to arts education.

Given that arts programs were underfunded for decades, Bartell wasn’t sure he would ever see this kind of support for arts education in public schools during his career.

“Passing this measure means schools can hire educators rather than rely on one-time grants and temporary positions,” he says. “It will end inequities in access to the arts. I’m honored to have been a part of it.”

## HEALTHY MEALS DELIVERED IN COLORADO

During the dark days of the pandemic, in 2021, district officials in Jefferson County, Colorado, laid off food service workers. With fewer staff to prepare food, the district started buying more prepackaged meals, which are high in salt, saturated fat, and added sugar.

“We had carrots, but they were sad looking carrots,” says Andrea Cisneros, a kitchen manager at West Woods Elementary School.

The JeffCo Education Support Professionals Association (JESPA) filed a class action grievance and worked with Coloradans for the Common Good to demand that

the district reopen kitchens and utilize buses to transport food out to the community until schools could reopen.

JESPA also joined a coalition that connected with state legislators to support the Healthy School Meals for All proposition, or Proposition FF.

Colorado voters approved the measure during the 2022 midterm elections. In addition to providing free breakfast and lunch for all Colorado public school students, the measure will generate funding to pay for cafeteria workers and provide higher quality food.

Cisneros, who has been with the school district for 23 years, helped educate voters in the community both to pass “Prop FF” and demand that the district commit to healthier meals



Colorado parents and educators united to pass “Prop FF,” ensuring free and healthier school meals.

using local food sources and culturally relevant menus.

“We realized that we have more power together ...

and we couldn’t have done this without the support from our parents and community,” she adds. 🌱

LEARN MORE

What’s next with ballot measures? Scan the QR code to hear from an NEA expert or visit [nea.org/measures](https://nea.org/measures).





# TEACHING WHILE SCARED

By Brenda Álvarez

## VIOLENT STUDENT OUTBURSTS ARE PUTTING EDUCATORS AT RISK

Edyte Parsons begins her class at 8:45 a.m. with a check-in, where she learns how her fourth graders are doing or what they did the previous evening. She then moves on to morning work—projects students can easily accomplish—followed by math. Mornings are one of the best parts of her day, she says.

At about 10 a.m., Parsons, an elementary school teacher in Kent, Wash., starts to see the warning signs.

A student gets up from his seat, walks around the class, and begins to provoke other students, until one eventually snaps back. The roving student storms out of the room, slams the door, and joins the fifth and sixth graders during their recess and lunch break.

Parsons' lessons have been interrupted by much worse over her 10-year career in two different school districts. Desks have been shoved



A classroom in Kent, Wash., after a preschooler's outburst.

or tipped over. She's been hit and kicked. Today, as a union building representative, she gets called in when her colleagues experience similar outbursts or physical attacks from students.

Last year, Parsons says, "a 5-year-old hit, scratched, spat on, and kicked at least six adults."

The child was dealing with trauma: His mother had almost died and was revived in front of him. But there were few interventions or resources available to help curb the child's behavior.

### A growing concern

From March 2020 – June 2021, the American Psychological Association surveyed nearly 15,000 pre-K–12 teachers, administrators, school staff, and counselors about their experiences with physical threats and attacks from students and parents.

One-third of the teachers reported being threatened by a student within the year, including verbal threats, cyberbullying, intimidation, or sexual harassment; and 29 percent reported at least one incident from a parent. Fourteen percent of teachers said they had been victims of physical violence from students.

### The kids are not OK

"One of my students punched me," says a Texas physical education (PE) teacher who wishes to remain anonymous.

"You could see it coming," she recalls, explaining that the student had a history of threatening other teachers, too. In one instance, the student had told an educator he was going to shoot her brains out and then stomp all over them.



"Some of our students are angry and confused," says fourth-grade teacher Edyte Parsons. "They need more than what they're getting, and we can't do it with the number of feet we have on the ground."

"She was terrified to go to work," the PE teacher says of her colleague.

For the PE teacher, getting punched was the last straw. She called the police and had the middle schooler arrested. Administrators at the time tried to convince her not to make the call.

"It's tough," she says. "He had problems at home."

A few years later, the PE teacher ran into the student, who had moved on to high school.

"He came up to me, asked if I remembered him. I said, 'Yeah. I remember you.' He told me, 'I wanna apologize ... it was not a good time for me. I learned my lesson. ... I'm sorry.'"

Educators, principals, and parents understand that kids are having a hard time, so it's difficult for them to agree on how to discipline students. But if nothing is done, it will only get worse.

### The consequences of no consequences

Credible threats get downplayed or ignored, says Tim Martin, president of the Kent Education Association (KEA).

Last year, he says, a middle school student in his district cornered a teacher in the stairwell.

"He made a gun with his hand, put it to her head, and threatened her," Martin says. "She was scared to death. She went straight to the office

and reported it." But nothing happened.

According to Martin, school officials reported that the student had a ketchup packet in his hand and that he did not make a hand gesture in the form of a gun.

Because administrators are afraid of getting fired, they try to change the verbiage so the threat doesn't have to be rated so high, Martin explains. But he says behaviors are "out of control."

Norma De La Rosa, a retired teacher and president of the El Paso Teachers Association, in Texas, can attest to this. She has fielded calls from educators who want administrators to follow student discipline policies for threatening and violent behaviors.

"But this seems to be the common result: Kids do things like ... bring weapons to school," De La Rosa says. "They're reported, and nothing gets done to the students, because they're back in class the next day."

### Some parents have it hard, too

Educators know that parent involvement and support is crucial to a student's academic success. But sometimes, that support isn't there.

Last year, Parsons says, two-thirds of parents attended conferences—eight students were not represented. "That's a lot," she says.

"Kids do things like ... bring weapons to school. They're reported, and nothing gets done. ... They're back in class the next day."

—Norma De La Rosa, president, El Paso Teachers Association, Texas



# TEACHING WHILE SCARED

Parents have their own struggles. Parsons tells of a parent who “went off” on the principal saying: “Don’t ever contact me. Don’t do anything unless my son is going to the emergency room.”

Why would she say that?

“Her boss was angry that she was on the phone and told her that the next time she was on the phone, she was fired,” Parsons explains. “What kind of pressure is that on the parent? I’m not faulting parents all the way around, ... but what are we supposed to do?”

### Something must change

“It’s a double-edged sword,” Martin says. “We know ... suspensions or expulsions sometimes amplify the school-to-prison pipeline, and then there’s nobody at home to support the students. So how are we to manage these behaviors and protect other students and teachers when we don’t have the full support of all our administrators or parents?”

One way is to demand from politicians and those who control school budgets to invest in hiring more counselors and interventionists. This would allow trained specialists to fully dedicate

their time to students, just so long as they’re not assigned to lunch duty, too.

Parent and community liaisons are also critical positions. These professionals can help build relationships with families and find organizations that can provide services to students when they need them.

Another way is through your union. Laws that protect teachers from harassment and violence from students vary by state. Your local and state unions can help ensure discipline policies are being followed and can advocate on educators’ behalf.

### Collective bargaining can help

KEA has been able to bargain for strong language in their contract to ensure safety protocols are followed. These protocols document the number of incidents that occur at a school. No students are named, just the number of incidents and the teacher.

This sets in motion a series of actions to ensure educators are supported and protected.

If two or three plans to curb behavior have failed, Martin explains, the union can request that someone from the central office sit in a classroom with all parties involved until a plan is devised.



Tim Martin

“At first, principals were afraid that if they reported things, they were going to get in trouble,” he says. “But once word gets out that the union has stepped in and has made some headway in getting help for the student, and in turn everybody else, then more administrators tend to step into the ring with us.”

## Community Schools Help Address School Climate

Addressing school climate starts with an open dialogue, says Tim Martin, president of the 2,000-member Kent Education Association, in Washington.

“But the bigger issue is that there’s not enough support for our students,” he says. This is where a community schools model can help.

Community schools feature high-quality teaching and learning, family and community partnerships, community school coordinators, and a full suite of support services for students and families, such as health and nutrition services and mentoring programs.

Each community school caters to the

unique needs of its respective neighborhood and designs strategies to meet challenges identified by educators, students, families, local organizations, and social service agencies.

Take restorative practices. When these strategies are implemented early on, addressing student and staff behaviors, pedagogical choices, and school policies, they can help improve the school climate.

“Community schools deeply listen to the vision, needs, hopes, and dreams of students, staff, families, and

community members—and leverage resources from across the community to meet those needs,” says David Greenberg, an NEA senior policy analyst and community schools expert.

This model helps to meet challenges like school violence, he adds, because it brings together a diverse and inclusive team to problem-solve and address the root causes of violence—not just the symptoms.

LEARN MORE

Discover how to bring community schools to your district at [nea.org/build-community-schools](http://nea.org/build-community-schools).

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TIM MARTIN



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- **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.



Read about Jeanette Arellano and other winners of this year's awards on Page 44.

**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](https://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](https://nea.org/hcrawards).

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# ... Behavioral Specialists Want You to Know

By Mary Ellen Flannery



Rosa DiPiazza

Student behavior is more challenging than ever. Indeed, in a recent *Education Week* survey, one-third of educators said they were attacked or verbally harassed last year. How can educators respond? What do they need to know? Rosa DiPiazza, an award-winning behavioral specialist in Milford, Del., works with teachers and students to support the students' behavioral needs. She offers this advice:

how those experiences affect the brain, she says. In your classroom, you might see students acting out or shutting down. "They move from functioning in an executive state, in the brain's frontal lobe, to a 'survival state,' controlled by the brain's amygdala," explains DiPiazza. "Nothing good is going to happen when they're in their amygdala. They're not going to make rational choices. They can't!"



### 1) Stay calm

"The biggest thing I emphasize when I'm meeting with other educators is the importance of a calm presence," she says. "As soon as you lose your cool, your kids do, too."

DiPiazza knows this can be hard. "Every time I work on a crisis, my heart starts thumping in my chest. What kind of human would I be if I didn't have a response to a kid in crisis? That's totally normal." Identify your own coping strategies, she advises. Practice mindfulness, focus on breathing, and label your own feelings.



### 4) Never let the pot boil over

When students start simmering, respond in ways that dial down the heat, says DiPiazza. Talk to students about how and where to take breaks when they feel triggered. "The idea is [for them] to recognize those feelings before they get out of control," DiPiazza says.

Many Milford elementary classrooms have calming corners with sensory putty, bottles of bubbles, and other tools. "These aren't punishment spaces," says DiPiazza. "They're places to use before escalation happens." Older students might similarly practice breathing exercises at their desks.



### 2) 'There's no magic answer'

Educators can sense when students are feeling anxious or depressed, or just having a rough day. Wouldn't you love to wave a wand and fix everything?

"Teachers want to know what to say, but there's no magic answer," DiPiazza says. "The answer is you be calm, and you be supportive, and you validate their feelings."



### 5) Collaborate

If you're a teacher, reach out to behavioral specialists in your district, encourages DiPiazza.



### 3) Understand what's happening in your students' brains

Even before the pandemic, students lived through evictions, domestic violence, and other traumas. Don't wallow in the details of those traumas, but be aware of

LEARN MORE

Want to hear more from Rosa DiPiazza? Scan the code to watch her video and listen to her interview on NEA's *School Me* podcast.



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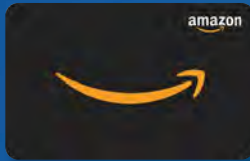
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