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August 2024
Volume 43, number 1

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Explore Equip HQ - a FREE resource to engage K-12 students with online games and activities that introduce intellectual property concepts and support project-based learning with cross-curricular standards-aligned content.

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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.

Vision
To create and promote a just society that develops their potential, prepares every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world, and prepares every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

Values
We believe in the following core values:

Diversity: 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.

Our Vision is a Great Public School for Every Student

Our mission is 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.

Our Core Values: These principles guide our work and define our mission.

Diversity: We believe education is the cornerstone of our society. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be informed, engaged, and respected in our representative democracy.

Partnership: 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.

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HOW Empathy Became the Enemy

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Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!
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Talk to your students about the risks of vaping.

CDC.gov/Vaping
Face to Face With NEA Members

Something I love to do: Surprise educators in their workplaces with an unexpected—but oh-so-deserved—expression of appreciation. This spring, during Teacher Appreciation Week, I traveled with the National PTA president to Montgomery Blair High School, in Silver Spring, Md. We had a big surprise for teachers Michelle Elie, Jeremy Stelzner, and Maria Eugenia Tanos! This amazing trio advises the Blair student newspaper, including a Spanish-language section. Balloons and flowers in hand, we delivered a check for $5,000, funded by Lysol, which the teachers plan to use for printing and photography costs. I also met with their students, who said how grateful they are for these teachers, who help them think and grow, and urge them to be the very best they can be. I, too, am grateful—as they remind us all of our passion for education and our power as educators.

In the News

“IT SHOULD BE Teacher Appreciation Week every week of the year. Our teachers, our education support professionals, nurses, counselors—every educator—should see that support every day of the year. And it’s not just elected leaders talking about the important role educators play, they should be demonstrating that support by investing in public schools and making sure educators don’t have to have two or three jobs to take care of their own children.”

—Becky, FOX 7 on May 2, 2024

JOIN ME

3 Things To Do For Yourself, Your Students, and Your Union

1. Support your new colleagues!
   It’s been a minute since I was a baby teacher in Philadelphia, but I still remember the educators who helped me find my footing. Attend your union’s new-hire orientation events this month and find ways to be supportive. Be the colleague whose door is always open!

2. Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month!
   Despite some politicians’ efforts to erase or whitewash our history, educators will persist in teaching students—and each other—about the vibrant heritage and contributions of Hispanic and Latino people. Visit nea.org/HispanicHeritage.

   So much is at stake in November’s election—our ability to teach the truth, to support our LGBTQ+ students and colleagues, and even to maintain our democracy and the right to vote. President Biden is the most pro-public education president in modern history. Turn to Page 31 to see how the candidates compare on public education. And learn how you can help, even if you have just a few minutes to spare, at educationvotes.nea.org

Find out how NEA is working every day for educators, students, and public schools in “NEA in Action” (Page 10).
NEA Helps New Mexico Educators Win Big!

NEA-New Mexico (NEA-NM) succeeded in advocating for a new state law giving public school students and educators critical resources! With vital support from an NEA Legislative Crisis Grant, NEA-NM achieved these victories:

- Free breakfast and lunch for all K–12 students. New Mexico is now the fifth state to pass a law requiring universal free meals in schools.
- $14 million for early literacy and reading supports.
- $13.3 million for extended learning programs for tribal and rural communities.

Learn how your state affiliate can apply for an NEA Legislative Crisis Grant at nea.org/LegislativeCrisisGrants.

NEA Locals Win in Rhode Island School Bond Vote

Two NEA Rhode Island locals, NEA South Kingstown and the South Kingstown Education Support Professionals, helped organize a historic voter turnout to pass a $150 million school bond for a new high school.

Partnering with parents, municipal workers, and community allies, they knocked on doors, distributed yard signs, organized a rally and car parade, and more, to mobilize thousands of voters.

The new high school will feature the latest technology, science labs, and career and technical education studios.

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NEA Supports Collaboration for Student Success!

Thanks to a long-term investment from NEA, the New Jersey Education Association brings educators, administrators, school board members, parents, and students together to solve problems with equal voices.

Called the New Jersey Public School Labor-Management Collaborative, the initiative’s key outcomes include:

- Increased student achievement
- Improved educator retention, especially in high-poverty schools
- Empowered educators
- A transformed role for local unions, which thrive in a culture of collaboration

Learn more about labor-management partnerships at nea.org/CollaborativePractices.

NEA in Action

Join NEA in Protecting Public Schools

Are you ready to do something to ensure all students attend a welcoming, equitable, and fully funded school? Then join Public School Strong—a national campaign that trains and organizes educators, parents, students, and school board members to influence policymakers and ensure all students have the schools they deserve. Launched by Heal Together, an NEA partner, the campaign will train you in:

- How to show support for well-resourced and inclusive public schools
- What to look for at your district’s school board meetings
- How to form a Public School Strong team in your area, and more!

RSVP now to save your training spot at bit.ly/pssrsvp.
ARE YOUR STUDENTS READING ENOUGH NONFICTION?

Every year, new fiction books hit the market with a rainbow of diverse and engaging characters for young readers. But there are just as many terrific new titles in nonfiction:

One isn’t better than the other, and educators should offer and teach both, says the National Council of Teachers of English.

To learn more about nonfiction trends and how to help students connect with these books, NEA Today spoke with Melissa Stewart, who has authored more than 200 nonfiction children’s books.

Is nonfiction making a resurgence, or has it always been popular with teachers and students?

Melissa Stewart: Nonfiction has always been popular. But teachers often don’t realize that many students prefer nonfiction. We need to do a better job of making teachers aware of the wide variety of titles.

What is different about nonfiction now?

MS: We are really in a golden age of nonfiction. Twenty years ago, there was only one kind of children’s nonfiction, with traditional, survey-style writing. Now we realize that many students prefer nonfiction. We need to do a better job of making students aware of the wide variety of titles.

Why do you think many young readers prefer nonfiction?

Why wouldn’t they? If adults enjoy it—60 percent of adult books sold are nonfiction—it follows that children would, too. But kids don’t buy their own books, and only 24 percent of children’s books sold are nonfiction. We need to get more great nonfiction books into the hands of children.

The goal is to help kids fall in love with reading and books. For some children, nonfiction is the gateway to literacy. I recommend that educators and parents offer children both fiction and nonfiction and watch closely to understand each child’s preferences.

How can teachers find quality nonfiction titles to offer?

MS: Ask a librarian! The librarian’s job is to help teachers connect a book to a student or lesson. The library is the heart of the school, and the librarian is what makes it beat.

Stewart is developing a nonfiction-focused personal learning community to help educators build students’ awareness of and access to nonfiction. Visit melissa-stewart.com

narrative nonfiction, and active nonfiction—such as how-to and activity books.

The genre is blossoming with titles that are beautiful and dynamic, with a range of formats and text structures. They feature rich, engaging language that excites and inspires young readers.

There is so much to offer students that can be used for instruction, read-alouds, book talks, book clubs, and author studies.

84% is the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth who wanted mental health care in 2023. Only 50 percent of those who wanted the care were able to access it. Top barriers cited were fear of speaking about mental health concerns with someone else, lack of affordability, and students not wanting to get parent or caregiver permission.

SOURCE: THE TREVOR PROJECT, 2024 U.S. NATIONAL SURVEY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE

To purchase or learn more

https://h-iq.com/
IN THE KNOW

16 STATES STILL ALLOW CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

The vast majority of schools in the United States—roughly 90 percent—prohibit corporal punishment, but the practice remains legal in 16 states. Major public health organizations oppose its use. The World Health Organization classifies corporal punishment as a "violation of children's rights to respect for physical integrity and human dignity, health, development, education and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

Proponents of corporal punishment argue that inflicting some level of physical pain upon a child deters misbehavior and helps instill discipline. However, extensive research demonstrates that the practice has potentially long-lasting negative effects on students' overall well-being.

Studies show that schools that have used corporal punishment have not been as successful at correcting unwanted behavior as schools that do not use the practice. Students who have been exposed to paddling or other forms of corporal punishment are more likely to exhibit aggression, anxiety, and depression.

In 2023, the American Academy of Pediatrics called for a ban on corporal punishment in school settings and for it to be replaced with practices that better support student behavior. That same year, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona penned a letter to administrators and policymakers calling for the ban of corporal punishment in education settings. “Unfortunately, some schools continue to put the mental and physical well-being of students at risk by implementing the practice of corporal punishment,” said Cardona. “Corporal punishment can lead to serious physical pain and injury. It is also associated with higher rates of mental health issues.”

Fear of School Shootings Grows

Twenty-five years after the mass shooting at Colorado’s Columbine High School—and countless more school shootings since—the majority of U.S. teachers (59 percent) are worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center. Thirty-one percent of teachers say they are not too worried, and only 7 percent say they are not at all worried.

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That same year, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona penned a letter to administrators and policymakers calling for the ban of corporal punishment in education settings. “Unfortunately, some schools continue to put the mental and physical well-being of students at risk by implementing the practice of corporal punishment,” said Cardona. “Corporal punishment can lead to serious physical pain and injury. It is also associated with higher rates of mental health issues.”

In 2023, the American Academy of Pediatrics called for a ban on corporal punishment in school settings and for it to be replaced with practices that better support student behavior.
Help stop the spread of “fake news” about public schools!

**DO:** Add your voice—the right way!

Counter disinformation by seeking out content that you do want circulating. Add comments and give your “thumbs up” to articles, videos, and posts that give an accurate picture of what public schools do or that call out the bad actors. Share content that your state affiliate posts. You can also make memes, videos, or graphics in free programs like Canva.

**DO:** Make a “truth sandwich”

Let’s say you want to counter a social media post that falsely accuses your school of pushing “inappropriate materials for children.” Use the ingredients below to deliver a heaping helping of accurate information.

**START BY STATING YOUR VALUES.**

“All students deserve access to highly qualified teachers and a school library run by a full-time librarian who can help foster their love of reading.”

**ACKNOWLEDGE THE DISINFORMATION WITHOUT REPEATING OR LINKING TO IT!**

“You may see inaccurate claims about the material in our school library.”

**ADD A THICK LAYER OF TRUTH.**

“At Springfield Elementary, where I teach third grade, our educators and librarian are trusted by our community to find age-appropriate material that helps students understand others, learn about new places, and find solace and inspiration. We take that responsibility to heart.”

**ASK YOUR NETWORK TO AMPLIFY.**

“Please like and share this post to support the good work that public schools are doing!”

**DON’T:**

Boost bad content

When you come across a video, article, or social media post that smears public schools, don’t inadvertently give it a boost by commenting or responding directly.

**DO:**

Assess the threat

First, determine the content’s reach. Is it circulating broadly or stuck in partisan spaces? Next, consider its impact. Could this content change the situation offline? For example, could it affect voter turnout for a pro-public school candidate? Is it chipping away at local support for public schools? Minor threats can be ignored, but if you see high-profile content that could do damage, move on to the next step.

Consider how you would respond in this scenario: You come across a Facebook post that talks about your school, but the facts are all wrong. The post—which has dozens of shares—claims that the school library is stocked with inappropriate titles for your elementary students, which you know to be false.

Should you: a) Comment on the Facebook post to debunk the false narrative; b) comment on the article itself; or c) both? Often, the best thing to do is none of the above, says Katie O’Connell, a specialist in NEA’s Center for Communications with expertise in countering false information. “When you interact with disinformation online, it gets a boost from the platform’s algorithm,” she explains.

“Of course, educators want to correct false claims about public schools—but we have to be careful about how we do that to make sure we aren’t inadvertently giving the false narratives more credibility,” O’Connell says. Anti-public education and anti-union forces often circulate disinformation online. The goal? To undermine trust in public schools, educators, and unions. This can harm our schools—and our democracy! So what can you do to get the truth out there? Read on for step-by-step advice from O’Connell on how to evaluate and counter disinformation.

How to stop the spread of “fake news” about public schools!
By Cindy Long

J ust before the 2023 – 2024 school year started, Illinois paraeducator Stephanie Lieurance received a curious text message.

“Hi Stephanie. This is Roland from Sunbelt. Are you in the market for a school paraprofessional position? I have an opening in your area. Please let me know if you’d like more details.”

Turns out Sunbelt is a staffing agency and, yes, she wanted more details.

Lieurance is already a paraprofessional. She is also president of the Crystal Lake Association of Support Staff (CLASS), representing school employees in a district about an hour northwest of Chicago. She also heard from several colleagues who had received the same message. Where did these mystery texts come from?

Right away Lieurance contacted her Uniserv director and the Illinois Education Association. The state association discovered that Sunbelt had been retained by the district to fill vacant paraprofessional positions. The district did this without notifying the union, let alone working with them to find other solutions to staffing shortages. “This really speaks to the seventy of the educator shortgage,” Lieurance says. “This crisis has been looming for years, and the district waited until the last minute to bring in temporary help who aren’t committed to our students and our community.”

Unfair labor practices

Crystal Lake Community Unit School District 47 was paying the employment agency $65 an hour, while the temps were earning $30 to $35 an hour. Lieurance, who has dedicated 20 years to the district as a learning resource paraprofessional, still makes less than $20 an hour, as do many of her veteran colleagues. The starting hourly salaries for permanent, full-time paraparaeducators is a meager $16.14.

The district leaders’ decision to hire temps for more than double the hourly wage of some staff was an outrageous affront to these hardworking employees. What’s more, hiring a firm to recruit temporary employees without bargaining first is a direct violation of the Illinois Educational labor Relations Act (IELRA) and the Illinois School Code. District 47 administrators that due to budgetary constraints, wage increases for new hires and current employees cannot be sustained,” she added. “They are now seeing the consequences of their own decisions.”

Instead of working with the union to offer attractive positions to fill shortages, the district took a shortcut to offer attractive positions to fill their own decisions. “We’ve had nine people quit,” Lieurance is already a paraeducator. “It was very daunting, but I’ve heard the positions. Instead of working with the union to offer services for less cost, while covering their overhead and making a profit? Most do not provide the same benefits to current staff. So it was easier for them to contract out the positions.”

“Hi Stephanie. This is Roland from Sunbelt. Are you in the market for a school paraprofessional position? I have an opening in your area. Please let me know if you’d like more details.”

Lieurance says. “[District leaders] don’t see us as a priority.”

Big wins!

In May, the union and district finally reached an agreement, awarding CLASS members with life-changing wins, including: A $2,000 payment at the end of the school year; an immediate raise of $1 more an hour; a 5 percent raise starting in July; and an extra paid professional development day, so they can train alongside the teachers they work with.

Lieurance admits she was hesitant at first about standing up. It was scary, and she feared retaliation. “It was very daunting, but I’ve heard from other districts that are going through this,” she says. “I want the story of our small local to be told to bring awareness to what can happen. Our jobs are not hobbies. Our contracts are not suggestions. Our contracts are there to protect us.”

Lieurance updates members on the Crystal Lake Association of Support Staff (CLASS), which filed an unfair labor practice charge against their district; CLASS President Stephanie Lieurance updates members on the union’s complaint.

(From left) Members of Illinois’ Crystal Lake Association of Support Staff (CLASS), which filed an unfair labor practice charge against their district; CLASS President Stephanie Lieurance updates members on the union’s complaint.

Who pays the price for outsourcing school staff?

Filling school support positions has been a problem for decades and has now spiraled into a crisis. Instead of funding these roles, districts have kicked the can down the road for so many years that today they must resort to last-minute outsourcing—and pay big sums for services.

How do private contractors offer services for less cost, while covering their overhead and making a profit? Most do not provide the same benefits to current staff. So it was easier for them to contract out the positions.

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Find out more about ESP pay, job security, and the ESP Bill of Rights at nea.org/ESP.
2024 TEACHER OF THE YEAR HELPS STUDENTS THRIVE IN RURAL TENNESSEE

By Tim Walker

T
he rural Appalachian town where Missy Testerman teaches is home to families who have lived there for generations. But a growing number of students are newer to the small town of Rogersville, Tenn., and they represent diverse cultures from around the world. Many in the community view these newcomers with suspicion, but Testerman has dedicated herself to building bridges and ensuring that every student, no matter their background or circumstances, has a chance to succeed.

For this tireless dedication to all of her students and her support of new immigrant families, the Council of Chief State School Officers named Testerman the 2024 National Teacher of the Year.

“Missy’s message of advocating for inclusivity and success for all students meets the moment we’re in as a country,” the selecting committee said in a statement announcing the award.

Day after day, students arrive at school every morning and then return home in the afternoon or to a parent’s workplace—without interacting with or leveraging the resources in the community.

Testerman enjoys taking students to the post office, a bank, a coffee shop for the first time, and teaches them the local library system.

Sometimes simple gestures can mean the most. Testerman makes it a point to sit with the families at major school events, such as graduation ceremonies or student performances.

“I have belonged to this community for decades and others trust my lead,” she said at the award ceremony. “I take this role as ambassador seriously, and I am thankful for the opportunity to connect these groups.”

Testerman says teachers are the true education experts, as opposed to many lawmakers who shape education policy.

As president of the Rogersville Education Association, Testerman believes unions are critical in elevating educator voices to advocate for schools and students. “Union” can be a “dirty word” in her rural community, but the positive changes educator advocacy has brought to the learning conditions in their schools have not gone unnoticed.

“The students in my school now have the benefit of hot water to wash hands, and clean, remodeled restrooms that were free of sewer odors,” she reports. “Instead of people being negative or resentful, they were appreciative that we cared enough about our students’ well-being to become tireless advocates for change.”

Every student in every public school in this country deserves a teacher like Testerman, said NEA President Becky Pringle, when the award was presented.

“Missy Testerman with students
(From left) National Teacher of the Year Missy Testerman at the event.
quick takes

WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE?

“Genuine curiosity in students.”
—Anne N.

“Those little notes from the toughest and sweetest, saying, ‘I want to be an art teacher like you when I grow up!’”
—Debi B.

“My amazing students! Especially my middle school’s newcomer immigrant students. These kids have lived through incredibly challenging life experiences, and yet they show up at school with positive attitudes, ready to learn.”
—Jennifer H.

“My union family!”
—Amy Harrison, North Carolina

“Being part of a strong union that has our back—even when the world forgets to appreciate our work!!”
—Greg M.

“THAT EVEN ON MY LONGEST, HARDEST, MOST DISPIRITING DAYS, I WILL HAVE A STUDENT BRING ME A BAG OF CHIPS OR SOMETHING FROM THE VENDING MACHINE, AND SUDDENLY NOTHING SEEMS AS TERRIBLE BECAUSE ONE RANDOM TEENAGER, WHO IS BIOLOGICALLY GEARED TO BE TOTALLY SELFISH, THOUGHT ABOUT ME ENOUGH TO BRING ME FOOD.”
—Echo M.

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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 for our next question, and share this link with your fellow NEA members.
HOW TO COLLABORATE WITH YOUR ADMINISTRATORS

By James Paterson

Until recently, science teacher Val Chuchman would run into administrators in the hallway and enjoy friendly chats about local sports teams, music, or the students. But that all changed when she became the union representative at her school in the Hillsborough County Public Schools district, in Tampa, Fla. After 23 years as an educator, she realized it was time to think more deeply about those connections.

“On one hand, it is very much about relationships. You need to have respect for each other, and you really must be genuine,” Chuchman says. “But you don’t have to be their friends and go out for drinks. It is a fine line between being collegial and being too cozy.”

Walking this line can be a challenge, especially as educators advocate for better working conditions and more resources for their students. A focus on students, Chuchman says, is the key to making those relationships work.

“If your heart is in it, and you want to make the school better and improve circumstances for the kids, an administrator will know that,” she adds. “They both can come to respectfully understand that you each have a job to do that can put you in adversarial positions, but that [you have] similar fundamental goals.”

The extra effort will pay off. Research shows that when collaborative teams work, student performance and school culture improve, and student absenteeism decreases. Positive working relationships also significantly improve teacher retention.

“This is a volatile time and people are triggered easily,” Chuchman says. “That perhaps makes this more challenging, but also all the more critical.”

To address this need, NEA joined with seven national educators’ organizations to develop the Collaborating for Student Success guidebook, which provides a step-by-step road map to building partnerships and increasing shared decision-making.

The guidebook suggests a three-step structure that requires preparation, action, and reflection. Here’s what that looks like on the ground:

Prepare a solid foundation

The first step, Chuchman says, is to establish mutual goals and a shared understanding that when teachers are satisfied and engaged, both retention and student learning improve.

“It is all about students being successful, but we need happy, healthy teachers,” she says. “That is what is best for the kids and where we have to come together. Administrators who understand that are good partners.”

Conversations can start with an agreement about what a great school looks like. Chuchman begins by asking questions like: What ideas do you have about the school culture? How do we work on that together? How do we help our kids succeed?

Alan Young, a teacher and project manager for the Educator Growth System with Jefferson County Public Schools, in Louisville, Ky., has been involved in negotiations at the district and school level.

“His advice? ‘You have to establish explicit goals that everyone has a role in defining,’ Young says. ‘It could be a problem you want to define and solve or a future that you want to create. Everyone has to be in doing something substantive.’

It’s helpful to break down larger goals into smaller projects, he advises, and then assign specific tasks to each member of the team. Brian Ebertz, president of the Greece Teachers Association (GTA), in New York, says collaboration occurs at the school level in his district in part because it is written into the association’s contract, with a section that states:

“Neutral negotiations is the process clean and ensures no one feels that the collaboration is a ploy. Teams with all veterans or with a completely new membership both have diminished effectiveness, he notes.

Chuchman points out that people need to work together to get results.

“It’s not about a ‘gotcha,’ ” she says. “It’s about bringing fresh perspectives. People need to understand it’s not about getting a win. It’s not about ‘a patch.’”

Ebertz says it’s about trying to support people and create an environment that’s really successful for students in a way that honors the profession of teaching.

In Greece, he says, school leaders on both sides found common ground through a non-profit, developed by the union, that provides support for teaching professional development. The organization also offers teacher mini-grants.

Share this contract language, from New York’s Greece Teachers Association, with your local union leaders:

“We believe that teachers and administrators should share the responsibility for effective school management. That is, as equal partners, teachers and administrators should establish expectations for their school, together plan how to best realize these expectations, and together evaluate the outcomes of their effort.”

GTAs collaborations at both the school and district level have paid off. Educators and administrators came to an agreement on a wide range of issues, including redesigned standards-based report cards that include ratings for social and emotional competencies; better information about special education; a more restorative code of conduct, and a culturally responsive education course, among other improvements.

Reflect on results

Once an agreement has been reached, the guidebook suggests that teams evaluate the outcomes and the effectiveness of the group’s processes and systems.

“I would advise that once the system is set up, you have to regularly review the work,” Young says. “It is important that the agreement be reviewed any time new leadership steps in.”

Input from a third party at this stage is helpful, he says: “It keeps the process clean and ensures no one feels marginalized.”

Finally, the guidebook calls for “scaling and spreading” successful processes. In other words, if you find something that works well, share what you’ve learned!

James Paterson is a contributing writer for NEA Today.

Get more information and download the Collaborating for Student Success guidebook at nea.org/collaborate.
TRY THIS TECHNOLOGY

WHAT TO DO WHEN TECHNOLOGY FAILS

By Jacqui Murray

H as this happened to you? You spend hours rewriting an old lesson plan to incorporate rich, adventurous online tools. You test it several times just to be sure. It’s a fun self-paced lesson plan with lots of activities and meaningful paths students undoubtedly will adore. Technology enables it to differentiate authentically for the diverse group of learners that walk across your threshold. Everyone who previewed it was wowed. You are ready.

Then, on the day of the lesson, the technology fails. Hours of preparation wasted because no one could get far enough to learn a d*** thing. You blame yourself—why didn’t you stick with what you’d always done? Now, everyone is disappointed. Implosions like this happen every day. Sometimes because the network can’t handle the increased traffic or the website server goes upside down. Really, the reason doesn’t matter. All that matters is an effort to use technology to add rigor and excitement to a tired lesson plan fails, leaving the teacher to add rigor and excitement to a tired lesson plan. For many, “tech problem” equates to the mind-numbing, bone-chilling feeling of “I have no idea what to do.”

In a word: Failure. Not a feeling of “I have no idea what to do.” Even a stressful tech day: Don’t expect technology to work today. The favorite software you’ve used for years could be incompatible with system updates. Your new computer might not run programs you used regularly on your old computer. Prior to presenting, go through the tool you’re planning to use or the process you’re teaching—see if it works like it used to. If the computer won’t start, check that it’s plugged in; then, if power isinesisn’t the problem, reboot. So what should you do to prevent half of the tech traumas I’ve faced: don’t apologize. Save apologies for something you caused. Tech failures are caused by the Universe. Tech is the third leg in the “inevitable experiences” stool, along with death and taxes. Personally, I don’t know anyone who hasn’t had the major tech failure. You know it’s coming. Control how you react to it.

Be a problem-solver

Embrace problems. Own them. And try these basics to get you through many a stressful tech day:

• Do a web search for the problem. You’ll find an answer about 70 percent of the time. If you’re looking for general, narrative information, ChatGPT (or another generative AI source) could offer assistance.

• Don’t expect technology to remain unchanged. Links die. The website you used last week may not work today. The favorite software you’ve used for years could be incompatible with system updates. Your new computer might not run programs you used regularly on your old computer. Prior to presenting, go through the tool you’re planning to use or the process you’re teaching—see if it works like it used to.

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• Use failure as a teachable moment. Show students how you handle stress, problems, frustration. It’s an opportunity to stretch that magnificent big brain and devise a solution. It’s a chance to ask students, What would you do?

• Don’t apologize. Save apologies for something you caused. Tech failures are caused by the Universe. Tech is the third leg in the “inevitable experiences” stool, along with death and taxes. Personally, I don’t know anyone who hasn’t had a major tech failure. You know it’s coming. Control how you react to it.

NEW DIGITAL LESSON

The Impact of the Gold Rush on California Native Americans

Using primary sources, students and teachers can gain insight into a vitally important aspect of one of the most iconic events in American history.

Access the lesson and sign up to learn more at AmericanIndian.si.edu/nk360

Lead funding for the Native Knowledge 360° education initiative provided by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies and Bonnie and Jeff Bush-Kahn.

Image: Portrait of Captain Tom’s Daughter in Partial Native Dress, and Bonnie and Jere Broh-Kahn. Graton Rancheria, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies initiative provided by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies and Bonnie and Jeff Bush-Kahn.
Iowa teacher and statehouse Rep. Molly Buck had an ideal expert to consult for feedback on a proposed bill last year: her dad. The bill was HF 2586, which would make educators eligible for a permit that would allow them to carry concealed weapons in schools. Her dad is a former Nebraska state patrol officer who spent much of his career training other tactical officers.

“I almost never talk politics with my dad—he’s a rock-ribbed Republican,” says Buck, a member of the Iowa State Education Association (ISEA). But it turned out that he agreed with his Democrat daughter that teachers should absolutely not be armed.

“My dad explained that even with regular, advanced tactical training, some officers aren’t as good in high stress situations as others, and educators simply don’t have any of that training,” says Buck. “It doesn’t even work on a practical level—even if I do think I’m capable of taking down a shooter, who’s taking care of my 25 frightened 4th-graders?”

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Teaching the Impacts of Climate Change

ARMING TEACHERS STILL A TERRIBLE IDEA

TWO STATES PASS LAWS TO ALLOW TEACHERS TO CARRY CONCEALED WEAPONS, HEIGHTENING THE SAFETY RISK TO THE ENTIRE SCHOOL COMMUNITY.
Though Buck was a vocal opponent of the bill, the conservative-dominated legislature passed it in April. Tennessee also passed a bill allowing educators to carry concealed weapons in schools. A similar bill passed in Wyoming, but was later vetoed by the governor.

WHY THIS? WHY NOW?

There has been a sharp spike in school shootings over the past five years, and 2023 saw the most ever—348 shootings in K-12 schools and 30 on college campuses.

School shootings with fatalities and injuries often prompt a response in state legislatures, with proposals that range from bold, research-backed ideas to curb gun violence to potentially dangerous plans, including efforts to arm teachers.

NEA tracked roughly three dozen proposed gun laws this legislative session. At least nine of them would have put more guns in schools, by arming teachers and other staff members. Though most of those efforts ultimately failed, the laws passed in Iowa and Tennessee are deeply concerning, regardless of their views on gun ownership in general.

NEA and allies were able to stop bills to arm teachers in previous legislative sessions chiefly because they could show that the companies that insure the school districts would not offer liability coverage if educators were carrying firearms.

“The way the legislators pushing this bill got around it is by providing qualified immunity both to the district and the school personnel,” explains Melissa Peterson, ISEA Legislative and Policy Director. That means if an educator injures or kills someone when responding to an incident, both the employee and the school district are free of financial liability.

In such situations, Tennessee’s law provides immunity from monetary claims to the district, but not the school employee, a fact that the Tennessee Education Association is working hard to inform its members about.

The two laws share several features in common. Both leave the decision whether to arm educators a matter of local control: School boards will decide whether to allow their employees to carry a firearm at school. Both laws also require that if educators are armed, weapons are always concealed, and which school personnel are carrying firearms would be kept strictly confidential—a feature that does not sit well with many educators.

“My students’ safety and well-being are paramount,” says Sarah Amos, a Response to Intervention and parent involvement coordinator, Vonore Elementary School in Monroe County.

“I want my students’ safety to be protected, but in reality, more guns just put more people in danger. It’s time for us to focus on prevention.”

The Des Moines Independent Community School District, which serves more than 30,000 students, and the Council Bluffs Community School District, which serves 9,000 students, have also opted out of arming educators.

Buck knows that her colleagues in the state legislature genuinely want to curb gun violence, “but a large faction believes that the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” she says. “But in reality, more guns just put more people in danger. It’s time for us to focus on prevention.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. New laws in Iowa and Tennessee make it possible for local districts to allow educators to carry concealed weapons.

2. Many educators are concerned about the safety risks that arming educators poses for the entire school community.


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BIDEN-HARRIS BREAKS DECADES OF INACTION ON GUN VIOLENCE

The Biden-Harris Administration heard the many educators and other advocates who demanded meaningful action on gun violence. The Administration spearheaded the first major federal efforts to curb gun violence since the 1990s.

Here are some of the pivotal actions the Administration has taken:

**SIGNED A NEW FEDERAL LAW**
- Signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, landmark legislation which:
  - Expands background checks before the purchase of firearms.
  - Targets interstate gun trafficking.
  - Supports state “red flag” laws, which allow courts to temporarily prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.
  - Provides nearly $1 billion for mental health supports in public schools.

**CREATED AN OFFICE OF GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION**
- Led by Vice President Kamala Harris, the office will:
  - Provide on-the-ground crisis response.
  - Coordinate government agencies on programs and new research that can prevent gun deaths.
  - Help implement the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.

**TOOK EXECUTIVE ACTION**
- The Biden administration has taken more than 20 executive actions to reduce gun violence, from working to curb gun trafficking and the proliferation of “ghost guns” to investing in community violence prevention initiatives.

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TO THE 2024 AWARDS FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE HONOREES!

**SETH BRADY**
Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence
Social Studies Educator
Naperville Central High School
Naperville, Ill.
Illinois Education Association

**HARLEE HARVEY**
Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence
K-8 Educator
Tikiġaq School
Point Hope, Alaska
NEA-Alaska

**CAROL PIEROBON HOFER**
Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence
English as a New Language Educator
Fox Hill Elementary School
Indianapolis, Ind.
Indiana State Teachers Association

**LOUISE SMITH**
Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence
Band Director
Gautier Middle School
Gautier, Miss.
Mississippi Association of Educators

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON**
NEA Member Benefits Award for Teaching Excellence
Interventionist and Resource Educator
Auburn Junior High School
Auburn, Ala.
Alabama Education Association

Visit neafoundation.org to learn more.

**PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; AP PHOTO/GEORGE WALKER IV**

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**PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; AP PHOTO/GEORGE WALKER IV**
Middle school teacher Natalia Fierro gets 50 minutes a day to plan lessons, run to the front office for supplies, call or email parents, analyze test data, do paperwork, maybe attend an IEP meeting, confer with school counselors or social workers, respond or reach out to administrators, chat with a student who might stop by, run a few hundred copies, go to the bathroom, wash her hands, and grade the papers of about 135 students.

"Is everybody feeling this tired?" asks Fierro, who teaches at Mesa Middle School, in Las Cruces, N.M.

Yes, everybody is! Eighty-four percent of teachers don’t have enough time in their workday to get everything done, according to a 2024 Pew Research Center report. The reason? Their workloads are too heavy. According to new NEA research, on the average day, about half don’t have time for grading or planning lessons. More than 4 in 10 don’t even have time to eat lunch or go to the bathroom.

"I never feel satisfied at the end of the day that I have completed all my work. I’m not sure I even know what that feels like," says Jared Washburn, who teaches AP English and creative writing at Red Land High School, near Harrisburg, Pa. Instead, Washburn takes work home every night, mostly piles of students’ papers to read and evaluate, and makes himself unavailable to his wife and son on Sunday afternoons.

"Work/life balance is sort of a mythical creature to me right now," he says.

What teachers are saying
It’s only getting worse, educators say. Students’ needs are increasing, parents’ demands are growing, and dictates on teachers’ time are multiplying.

These burdens are leading to burnout, which causes educators to quit, which feeds the national educator shortage, which, in turn, makes more work for the remaining staff.

The No. 1 reason teachers can’t get to their grading, lesson planning, or other essential work? Some 98 percent told Pew they simply have too much of it. Other reasons cited: Having to do non-teaching duties, like lunch duty; helping struggling students outside of class; and covering other classes.

The mandates around standardized tests are particularly infuriating, teachers say. And it’s not just the 16 days, on average, dedicated to test-taking, according to a Council of Great City Schools study. The bigger problem is the incessant demand to analyze that data and develop lesson plans targeting individual student’s deficiencies, according to a test they took weeks or months earlier.

"I prefer to teach according to the needs I see, " says Debbie Baker, a third-grade teacher in northwest Georgia, who actually has the highest test scores in her region.

Paying the price
Who suffers the consequences when educators don’t have enough time? Students do!

"Probably the biggest thing is students get less personalized feedback," says Fierro, who, after teaching language arts for 20 years, recently switched to a media elective. "We probably also give fewer innovative assignments. There’s not time to plan them and get the resources for them.”

Why can’t teachers get everything done during their paid day?
In a recent survey, K–12 teachers cited the reasons they can’t get all their work done. Among those who are overwhelmed, the common reason is that they simply have too much work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Reason</th>
<th>Minor Reason</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just have too much work</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often spend time helping students outside of class time</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often have to perform non-teaching duties such as hallway or lunch duty</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often have to cover for another teacher’s class when they aren’t available</td>
<td>51%</td>
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</tbody>
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Of course, educators bear some of the brunt of the time crunch, too. A large majority find their job to be overwhelming (74%). And although stress is common across the profession, it is more prevalent in elementary grades, the survey shows. It is also very common among special educators and specialized personnel, says Christina Rojas, a speech-language pathologist in Lancaster, Pa. “It’s not about making our jobs easier,” she says. “The focus is students. How can we make this job manageable to provide better services in Lancaster, Pa.”

Christina Rojas, a speech-language pathologist, says the mother of three. “It’s probably something I learned more as I became a mom,” says the mother of three. “I circle something for them to work on,” she says. The best use of her time is conferencing with students, she says. “The worst? Analyzing outdated test score data.”

Debbie Baker, formal grades take a back seat. After 22 years, she knows her students are just as motivated by hand-drawn stars or smiley faces on their papers. “I circle something for them to work on,” she says. “I circle something for them to work on.” The best use of her time is conferencing with students, she says. “The worst? Analyzing outdated test score data.”

For Georgia elementary teacher Debbie Baker, formal grades take a back seat. After 22 years, she knows her students are just as motivated by hand-drawn stars or smiley faces on their papers. “I circle something for them to work on,” she says. The best use of her time is conferencing with students, she says. “The worst? Analyzing outdated test score data.”

NEA members are a few of their answers: “We are able to provide better quality, more one-on-one services for students, and more time for better evaluations and collaborations with teachers,” Rojas says. “We are able to provide better quality, more one-on-one services for students, and more time for better evaluations and collaborations with teachers,” Rojas says.

In Lewisberry, Pa., high school teacher Jared Washburn’s union won additional pay for middle and high school educators when their planning time dips below 270 minutes across six days. (Or 320 for elementary teachers.)

In Lewisberry, Pa., high school teacher Jared Washburn’s union won additional pay for middle and high school educators when their planning time dips below 270 minutes across six days. (Or 320 for elementary teachers.)

1) Learn to say no. “Honestly, I don’t know if this is something I could have done when I was young,” says Cassie Gambler, an elementary teacher in Riverton, Wyo. “It’s probably something I learned more as I became a mom,” says the mother of three.

2) Figure out what matters less. For Georgia elementary teacher Debbie Baker, formal grades take a back seat. After 22 years, she knows her students are just as motivated by hand-drawn stars or smiley faces on their papers. “I circle something for them to work on,” she says. The best use of her time is conferencing with students, she says. “The worst? Analyzing outdated test score data.”

3) Use your time smartly. Try doing similar things at the same time, like answering emails at one specific time of day. (Tell parents at back-to-school night when they can expect to hear from you)

4) Let others help. When administrators or colleagues offer help, say yes, Gambler advises. And use their stuff, especially great lesson plans. “You don’t have to create everything yourself,” she adds.

5) Use artificial intelligence to help with administrative tasks. ChatGPT, for example, can save time on emails. Then those minutes can be used for higher priorities!
### Breaking the Cycle of Bad Behavior

**By Cindy Long**

Students throw furniture, overturn desks, shout insults, threaten violence, and curse out teachers, support staff, and classmates! Behavior that was once rare or unthinkable is becoming commonplace. An NEA survey found that disruptive and even violent behavior became so rampant during the 2022–2023 school year that many educators cited student behavior as a top concern—second only to low pay. The reasons for this spike in bad behavior are, of course, complicated. 

“The children are quite literally screaming out for help,” says Joshua Tracy, an elementary school teacher in Springfield, Mo. Teachers’ workloads are overwhelming, which impacts students, who are already going through too much, he explains. “It’s a recipe for an explosive situation!”

According to a recent report by the Pew Research Center, about 1 in 5 teachers surveyed said major problems include students getting up and walking around when they’re not supposed to and students being disrespectful. A majority (21%) said this happens at least a few times a month.

Educators know all too well that students are still recovering from the trauma of the pandemic and struggling from missed social and emotional development opportunities. Educators and families are still trying to make up for what was lost. Stress and anxiety are palpable, and sometimes the charged environment erupts.

**A mental health crisis**

“I’m talking about... a child who, the night before, saw their guardian overdose and is facing troubles that we can’t imagine. I’m talking about the kid who... goes from place to place, never knowing where they’re going to have a meal or bed or anything else,” says West Virginia Education Association President Dale Lee. “And we wonder why we have disruptions in class. It doesn’t take an expert to figure that out. We have to make sure that our students’ mental health is addressed.”

Educators agree that managing behavior also means using trauma-informed practices and multitiered systems of support across the school setting. Fanta Lee-Sankoh, a high school prevention and intervention specialist in Fairbanks, Alaska, has students who sleep in tents or cars. Some struggle with addiction. Many suffer from depression and intense anxiety.

When a student’s behavior is unmanageable in the classroom, the next stop is Lee-Sankoh’s office. With a degree in social work and training in addressing behavior issues, she is able to build trust with her students and help them manage their emotions. But she can’t begin to keep up with the demand. “We simply don’t have enough trained staff to handle this crisis,” she says.

**What you can do today**

While behavior problems and staffing are systemic issues that take time and money to resolve, educators need help now! You can’t solve all of the problems yourself, but there are steps you can take—and the beginning of the school year is the perfect time to start.

All educators, no matter their role, can build trust with students. Lee-Sankoh says. She shares these tips:

- **Show genuine interest and care**. Everyone wants to feel valued and respected. Get to know your students as people, ask about their interests and achievements. Celebrate your students. Take time to recognize their efforts and achievements. Celebrate your students. When students have a strong relationship with you, they will feel more positively toward you and toward school.

**Long-term remedies**

The bigger solutions come down to funding to hire more school staff. “A smaller class size would be ideal, as it would enable teachers to work closely with students individually, while also having better control over classroom behavior,” says kindergarten and first-grade teacher Dirk Andrews.
**Breaking the CYCLE of Bad Behavior**

Andrews recognizes the importance of teaching students to work independently and in small groups, as well as the need to have one-on-one time with them. A paraeducator in the classroom would help make all of this possible, he says: “As an educator, I always strive to be patient,” he adds. “But there are times when it’s best to step back and allow someone else to take over.”

**Your union and community can drive change**

Bargaining for the common good is a strategy where educators and their unions join with parents and the community to demand change that benefits not only educators, but the students and community as a whole. Demands can include lower class sizes, more paraeducators, and mental health supports, among others. It worked in Oregon. The Portland Association for Teachers won pay increases and more planning time, in addition to class-size committees and an expansion of a mental health rapid response team. It worked in Maryland. The Montgomery County Education Association bargained for the incorporation of restorative practices in school behavior management plans. They also won improved training for educators in restorative practices and trauma-informed teaching and learning.

It worked in Colorado. Denver educators bargained for smaller class sizes; restorative practices; washroom services, including a full-time nurse and social worker in every school; and the expansion of community schools. (What’s a community school? Find out at nea.org/communityschools.)

“NEA locals across the country are organizing and bargaining to improve student behavior and ultimately provide a safe, quality learning environment for the entire school community,” says NEA senior policy analyst Brian Bealler.

Join them! Contact your local union, learn about bargaining for the common good at nea.org/BGC, and apply for an NEA grant to help at nea.org/bargaininggrants. Advocate for funding at nea.org/actioncenter.

Dirk Andrews

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**How to De-escalate**

Some students go from zero to 60 in what seems like a split second, and as the educator in the room, your adrenaline can fire up just as fast. But there are techniques that can help you defuse the situation.

**How to De-escalate**

*Fred McMahon*

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**Keep calm**

“Soaking in a student’s negative energy is taxing,” McMahon says. “It’s natural to get emotional or feel angry.”

Once you recognize your feelings, work on restoring your own sense of calm. Only then can you fully de-escalate the student.

Behavior influences behavior, he explains. The goal is to reduce agitation and defuse the student. McMahon suggests recognizing triggers and responding to agitation.

**Recognize triggers and respond to agitation**

A trigger is an event, such as a challenging assignment, that leads to a change in behavior. Whatever the trigger is and how you felt when it happened. Pay attention to when students with behavior problems are triggered and what it looks like. This can manifest as frustration, anxiety, agitation, fidgeting, or pacing around. These are all signs of stress relief.

Try speaking calmly and saying things like “I notice you’re upset. Let’s breathe slowly for one minute.” McMahon adds. “It’s a team effort.”

**Train all staff**

Everyone who works with students needs to be trained in de-escalation,” McMahon adds. “It’s a team effort.”

Train all staff. Everyone who works with students needs to be trained in de-escalation. McMahon shares. “It’s a team effort.”

**Have a plan**

When a student is defiant and unwilling or unable to communicate, and the situation could get violent, you must have a protocol in place. The beginning of the year is the time to talk to administrators and counselors to establish a solid plan.

**Does your school have a calming room? It should!**

**What can teachers and support staff do when a student’s behavior is out of control?** It’s not always effective to send them to the principal’s office. The student needs a place to settle down and learn strategies to cope with anger, anxiety, and other difficult emotions.

Some schools have calming rooms staffed with trained educators. This short stay in a non-punitive seclusion zone, nor should it be used as a “get out of class free” card. It’s a place for students to calm down and learn self-regulation strategies so future outbursts are less likely.

“NEA Today asked our Facebook followers if their schools have calming rooms. Hundreds of educators responded! Here’s what a few had to say:"

**Cortney Kindall-Ritchey**—“Yep! And it’s with the counselors! It is designed to help reset and take accountability for disruptive choices.”

**This doesn’t mean there isn’t a consequence for poor behavior, but try to help students reset and return to class as soon as possible without rewarding undesirable choices or further disrupting students engaged in the learning.”

**Stephanie Bradley**—“We have a Zen Den where students can go to refocus themselves through a sensory break or by speaking with our SEL staff.”

**Michelle Cobb**—“We have a Responsi­ble Thinking Classroom where they write a plan about their behavior choices and how they will change those behaviors to be more successful at school.”

If you don’t have a calming or refocus room, take the opportunity to collaborate with your administra­tors. Go to your principal with a thoughtful solution rather than just stating a problem.

Ask for a place for students to learn regula­tion tactics. Ask if there aren’t enough school-based resources. (For more on collabora­tion with administra­tors, see Page 24.)

**For a student on the verge of losing control, a calming room can provide a brief break and an opportunity to refocus.**

**“We have a Responsible Thinking Classroom where they write a plan about their behavior choices and how they will change those behaviors to be more successful at school.”**

Stephanie Bradley

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**August 2024**

"A smaller class size would be ideal, as it would enable teachers to work closely with students individually, while also having better control over classroom behavior." —Dirk Andrews, elementary school teacher, Wyoming
Fabion Vicks, a middle school counselor in Hampton, Ga., is continually collecting data on students’ achievement, attendance, and behavior. He looks for gaps and problems and sets goals so students get the support they need.

Vicks shares that data with teachers, advisory councils, parents, and students themselves.

“We need to advocate for counselors, social workers, and security resource officers.”

—Fabion Vicks (above), middle school counselor, Georgia

How Counselors (and their data) Can Help

When NEA members called for more support for mental health, the Biden administration responded with the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), signed into law in June 2022. The law provides $1 billion through grant programs to increase the number of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists in schools, and help train these professionals in providing the mental health services students need.

Find out more about these grants and share this link with colleagues and administrators: nea.org/mentalhealthgrants.

NEA offers webinars, micro-credentials, and more resources for managing student behavior at nea.org/behavior.

NEA members made a difference!

Learn More at SimonandSchuster.Net

Go Back To School with a Great Read!
Hello, Columbus!

Two years after a winning strike, these Ohio educators are still reap ing the rewards.

By Mary Ellen Flannery

When Joe Decker walked into his classroom on the first day of school last year, he got chills. Literally and figuratively. His school finally had air conditioning! "I was a little teary-eyed, to be honest," he says. A year earlier, in August 2022, Decker and his colleagues in the Columbus Education Association (CEA) had gone on strike— and one of the chief reasons was to compel Ohio's largest school district to invest in safe, well-maintained school facilities. At the time, about a quarter of the city's schools didn't have air conditioning. In an attempt to improve learning conditions, Decker, a social studies teacher at Mifflin Middle School, who became a building sub after a 32-year teaching career. "We are teachers—we are teaching—but we weren't being recognized or respected for that work," she says. In 2023, the subs' first-ever union contract not only boosted their pay, but also provided paid family leave and professional development.

"We are the union!"

In 2022, the picket line brought parents and educators together, and bridged common gaps between academic teams or departments. Union members felt a part of something powerful, educators recall. "It was the best professional development we ever had," Gray says. But it's not like you walk into school the day after a strike ends and all is better, she adds. Everything was the same, except educators—especially union leaders—were even more exhausted than usual.

"What the strike brought us, for sure, is that sense of solidarity," says high school English teacher Kelsey Gray. "And I think we maintain it through organizing actions." Striking build power

In 2022, the picket line began to flex its muscle. One significant change did happen fast: Within months of the strike, school-based substitutes moved to join CEA. These educators had been the only full-time, frontline employees in Columbus City Schools without union representation. Not only were they poorly paid, they also didn't have a voice, notes Kim Maupin, who became a building sub after a 32-year teaching career.

Within months of the strike, school-based substitutes moved to join CEA. These educators had been the only full-time, frontline employees in Columbus City Schools without union representation. Not only were they poorly paid, they also didn't have a voice, notes Kim Maupin, who became a building sub after a 32-year teaching career.

"We are the union!"

In 2023, CEA's "member action team" rolled back into high gear when Columbus City Schools offered a new tax levy to infuse nearly $100 million into public schools. Frankly, it looked like it was going to fail, says Izetta Thomas, lead organizer for the Columbus Education Justice Coalition. Thomas, a former special education teacher, has led conversations with more than 1,000 community members over the past two years. She says she has found that many residents don't think the district "speaks to them," or invests adequately in their students. "A lot of our folks [are] tired of the status quo, tired of a district managing decline," Thomas says.

"The levy would help fulfill the promise of better, safer schools, but the school board was doing a poor job of talking to voters. Weeks before the election, only 36 percent of voters supported it. So, union members stepped up and mobilized their partners. "We went to the neighborhoods nobody else was going to and did phone banking with the voters nobody else deemed important," Thomas says. And the levy passed!

"I was a coach for 20 years in a gym that wasn't air-conditioned," says high school teacher and longtime coach J Sanchez. Making it worse, the district roofed over his gym's attic fans. "I was a little teary-eyed, to be honest," he adds. But teachers are ready. The key thing they learned two years ago is this: "We are the union," says art teacher Annelise Taggart. "Our leaders aren't the only people in the union. It's all of us.""
WHEN EXTREMISTS ATTACK SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING, STUDENTS PAY THE PRICE

Megan Bain recently helped a young student overcome social anxiety. “He would freeze up in the face of unstructured social interactions,” says Bain, a special education social worker for Falmouth Public Schools, in Maine.

To reduce the student’s anxiety during recess and lunch, she helped him learn to socially engage with a friend or two. Together, they worked on how to initiate conversations and transition from one topic to another.

Bain now sees the student searching for friends without her support.

Eboni Rucker, a restorative justice coordinator for Illinois’ Thornton Township School District 205, says she helps students “put out the fires.”

“It is my job to help them solve conflict, recognize the feelings and perspectives of others, and support them in their social and emotional endeavors,” Rucker says. “The biggest thing is giving them the resources and the skills they need to be most successful. I’m teaching my students life skills.”

Known as social and emotional learning (SEL), these skills include how to navigate social situations, stand up for people from diverse backgrounds, and empathize with others. But these important teachings have come under attack by certain lawmakers and anti-public education groups, such as Moms for Liberty.

Their goal? Spread disinformation and vilify schools and educators.

A manufactured crisis

Megan Bain Since 2021, attacks on educators and public education have been relentless. Some politicians deliberately confuse any talk of diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the teaching of “critical race theory”; rerouting discussions of LGBTQ+ people; and criminalizing the teaching of an honest and accurate history.

“These opposition groups are not reacting to reality,” says Denise Specht, president of Education Minnesota (EdMN). “They’re reacting to a conspiracy network that runs through some churches, Fox News, and QAnon.”

She adds, “It’s not an organic movement. It’s a national campaign through national media channels that has popped up here.”

Disinformation creeps into schools

In June 2022, The New York Times reported how right-wing activist Chris Rufo made SEL a “flashpoint for conservatives.” Rufo spread lies that SEL was being used to “groom” students.

His messages were picked up by groups like the Center of the American Experiment (CAE)—a political think tank, which pushes the agenda of its right-wing corporate donors and runs campaigns to get EdMN members to leave their union.

At an event earlier this year, a CAE guest speaker accused educators who use SEL practices of teaching students a “worldview that is anti-God, anti-family, [and] anti-American.”

While comments like these are baseless, the worst part is that they’re making their way into establishment organizations.

“These types of groups are not outlawish outliers,” Specht says. “The Center of the American Experiment is very much right in the middle of the conservative movement in Minnesota.”

In April 2024, Matt Aduette, a member of the Anoka-Hennepin School Board, posted on Facebook that he and two other board members would reject the $20-million school budget if it included SEL.

The budget is expected to pass, but the threats to SEL remain.

‘A serious disconnect’

Minnesota school counselor Ambrosia Doty shares how one day, while leading a staff meeting focused on students’ concerns, one teacher walked out of the room.

Another asked: “How long until this is over?”

“I am frustrated with the general lack of understanding, support, and misrepresentation of social-emotional learning, especially amongst other educators,” says Doty, who at the time worked for Atwater Cosmos Grove City School, in western Minnesota. (Her job was eliminated at the end of the school year for budget reasons.)

“Helping kids to learn conflict resolution is not a Marxist concept!” Doty adds. “Teaching coping skills and how to advocate for one’s needs is not a form of rebellion in schools.”

She recalls one of her colleagues saying that the research on SEL proves schools need and want it. In the next breath, he said students don’t need to leave the class to take a walk, as a coping skill.

“There’s a serious disconnect,” she says.

Attacks on emotions

The contentious rhetoric around SEL hit close to home for Hannah Grimley, a third-grade teacher in the Anoka-Hennepin district, the largest district in Minnesota.

“These [extreme conservative groups] think we’re indoctrinating students toward an ‘LGBTQ lifestyle,’” Grimley explains. “If they were to look at the content, enter our classrooms, and see what’s happening, they would realize very quickly that that is not what social emotional learning is.”

At her school, they focus on nine words in their SEL curriculum: Empathy, cooperation, respect, responsibility, perseverance, courage, gratitude, honesty, and creativity.

Students face real danger

A few years ago, Grimley’s district had the highest rate of death by suicide among LGBTQ+ teens—eight in under two years.
Grimley shares that SEL has helped high schoolers feel welcome, seen, and heard in their schools. It’s given middle schoolers resources to help them use their voice to advocate and express themselves. For elementary students, they’re learning how to talk to one another in kind, respectful ways.

“If that is taken away, they’re going to lose the base of good, human decency,” she says.

**Foundational skills for a better future**

“When we think about social-emotional learning at our school, we’re not just thinking about preparing students for the world they exist in now,” Bain says. “We’re thinking about … the world that they’re [going] to enter into, which is why some topics feel controversial to certain families.

“[SEL] is about exposing kids to different ways of life, different walks of life, different humans so that they can interact with them in a way that’s kind of respectful.”

“What to Say…

...when someone attacks SEL

Say what students could lose. When anti-public education groups attack SEL, they want to block our efforts to help students develop life skills, such as self-confidence, decision-making, and communication skills. SEL also helps students understand, express, and control their emotions so they can succeed academically.

Connect mental health care to common goals. Preparing all students to pursue their dreams after high school means providing all the support they need for academics, extracurriculars, and mental health. We should come together and protect, not attack, mental health services for our students.

Pivot from unreality to real issues. Instead of spreading conspiracy theories about our schools, we should focus on providing our students with a high-quality education. That means having enough professional educators and counselors for every student to get the support they need.

—Hannah Grimley (above)

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An Educator’s Commitment to LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

By Brenda Álvarez

In 2017, a Holcong Middle School student, from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, shared with his school principal how they were having a difficult time being in a school that had little supports in place for them. At the time, the student was beginning to identify as a transgender male and wanted a more supportive environment. They suggested a GSA club. The principal obliged.

Keith Willard, the student’s social studies teacher, jumped at the opportunity to launch the club. He recalls telling his principal: “I’ll absolutely do it, and it’s going to be the best GSA.”

With help from a local nonprofit, the school’s English teachers and librarians, Willard started the GSA by creating an LGBTQ+ classroom library, with curated titles that were appropriate to a middle school audience. Within two years, he amassed about 60 titles.

Willard’s library collection and field trips were always pre-approved by school administrators. “Things had been fine,” he says, “until the fall of 2020.”

SO, WHAT HAPPENED FALL 2020?

It was a Monday, early in October, when Willard heard rumblings of a video making the rounds on far-right media. The video was of his classroom library. Set to music one might hear in a horror film, the video shows someone going into Willard’s classroom, after school hours, and scanning book titles.

“I was very stressed about this,” shares Willard. “I thought that despite my due diligence in selecting books, I had done something wrong. The books that were chosen were deliberate and mirrored the stories of the LGBTQ+ youth in the club. I felt very alone, and suddenly the library and my work for students were a liability. That is, until my union called me Friday and provided support.”

No group ever claimed credit for producing the video, which had a similar look and feel to a flyer that appeared in district office mailboxes by an individual sympathetic to the Moms for Liberty agenda.

But one thing was clear: “They were looking for nefarious or inappropriate books in my library,” Willard explains.

Not finding any controversial titles, the trespassers superimposed into the video two books, including the title, “Lawn Boy.”

The targeted attacks to his classroom would last more than two years and would come to include audits to determine which books were age appropriate. Equally as had, if not worse, were the lies spread about Willard on social media and at school board meetings to insinuate “grooming.”

CHAOæ CAN BE STOPPED

At the height of Willard’s ordeal, the Central Bucks School District School Board, which oversees schools in Bucks County, included members—some of which ran on M4L platforms—and others who were pro-public education.

Willard believed community members were on his side. This proved true when education-friendly candidates completely flipped the school board during the 2023 November election.

The attacks against Willard and the LGBTQ+ community within the Central Bucks district ended after educators, parents, and community members came together to reject school board candidates with M4L agendas.

“If people aren’t informed, and we don’t win elections, we’ll have the wrong people in place,” he says. “We need to be paying attention … or your community could be the next Central Bucks.”

COMPELLED TO ACT

When Willard first learned of the video, he was nervous. “I really believed I must have done something wrong because I didn’t know anything about Moms for Liberty back then.”

His feelings shifted after he was personally attacked, and learned more about the group’s agenda to whitewash history and censor books that positively represent LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

“I went from feeling like I did something wrong to being angry,” he says. “Ever since then, I’ve been fierce about trying to preserve every one of those book titles,” adding that he didn’t remove one single book from his collection.

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Find information on past winners and submit nominations for the 2025 HCR Awards at nea.org/hcrawards. Nomination forms and instructions will be available online Oct. 7, 2024 – Dec. 6, 2024.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please email NEAHCRAAwards@nea.org.

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**Build Your Team**
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**Grow Your Union**
- Take the next step! We build union power by increasing membership. Talk to your building rep about getting involved in back-to-school membership drives.
- Use NEA organizing tools to anticipate common questions. For example: “Are you sure unions are legal here?” Answer: “Unions are legal everywhere! Unions are legal here?” Answer: “Unions are legal everywhere! Unions are legal here?” Answer: “Unions are legal everywhere! In states where we can’t collectively bargain, we still meet as a union with lawmakers, school board members, and administrators from all political parties to talk about better pay and working conditions.”
- Text BACK2SCHOOL to 48744 for resources, including NEA’s guide to transformational conversations.

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After your first week’s lesson plans are perfect. Your bulletin boards look great. Now it’s time to grow your union power! More educators join NEA during the back-to-school season than any other time of the year—and a bigger union means a stronger voice for educators. Take these steps to build your team, flex your union muscles, and grow your union!
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There was a time when manufacturing jobs symbolized shared progress and determination. With changing times, these critical roles have been unfairly diminished, seen not as esteemed professions but as fallback options. The work that forged industries, built our infrastructure, and raised our cities has been marginalized, viewed through a faulty lens that those who pursue these careers simply didn’t “make it.”

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