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May 2025

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Therapy dogs go to school SEE PAGE 40



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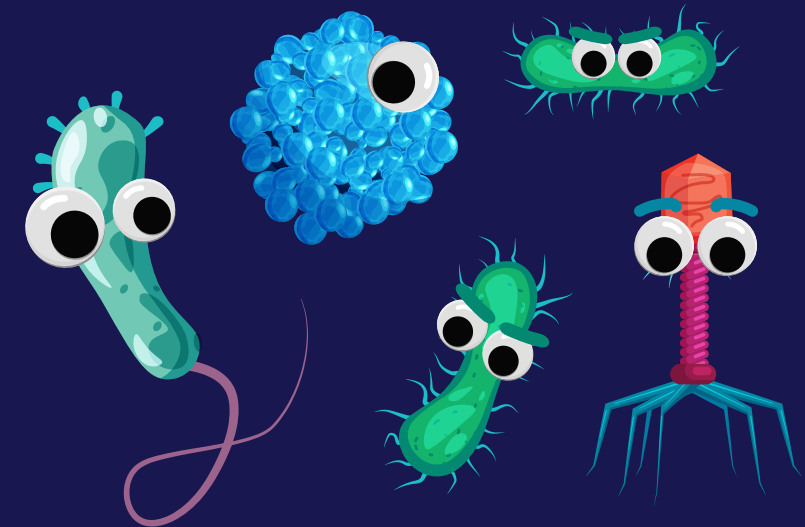
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COVER: DIEGO BLANCO. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DIEGO BLANCO; TRACY + DAVID STILLS AND MOTION; STEPHEN TAKACS



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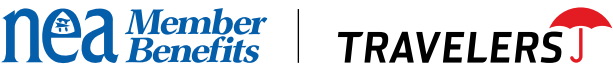
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To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

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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.

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

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

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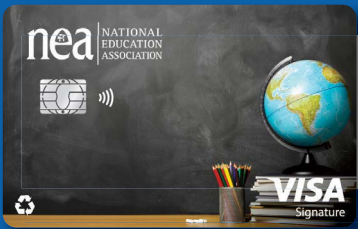
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Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!

Meet these inspiring educators and many others in this magazine.



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MARSZALEK

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KEAVENY



DOMINGUEZ



OSMAN



PARRA-QUINLAN



CURLIN



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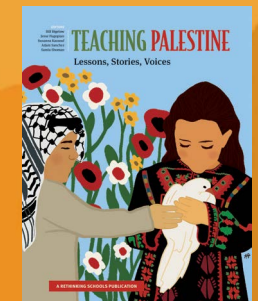
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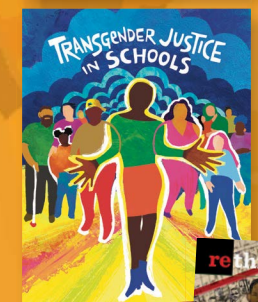
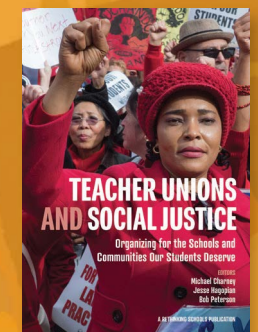
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Joy, Justice, and Excellence

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

Becky Pringle
NEA President



“

We, the NEA, will always fight like hell when people come for our kids, for our professions, and our communities.

—Becky, to NEA members, shortly after President Donald Trump announced his plan to shutter the U.S. Department of Education.

Face to Face with NEA members

Shoulder to shoulder, hearts united, I was honored to join educators, parents, students, and neighbors at Maryland's Takoma Park Middle School this spring, at one of hundreds of school walk-ins across the nation. Together, we will protect every student and public education. Together, we will ensure our students are not harmed by these dangerous cuts to services—we will fight every step of the way! We cannot allow billionaires to get tax breaks, while educators, nurses, and other public service workers are asked to pay more! Together, we are educating, organizing, and mobilizing—and we're not done yet. Find out how you can help at nea.org/Protect.



(Top) I am thankful to the Takoma Park, Md., educators and neighbors who welcomed me to their March 19 walk-in to protect public schools! (Bottom) I am joined by Maryland educators, including Montgomery County Education Association President David Stein (in the red jacket).

JOIN ME 3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

- 1. Speak up!**
Visit the online NEA Action Center, which makes it easy to email your senators and representatives on *all* the current issues facing educators today, at nea.org/Action.
- 2. Appreciate and be appreciated.**
May 5–9 was Teacher Appreciation Week. Please know that I see and appreciate every one of you, every day. I also understand that teacher appreciation should look more like fair pay and supportive working conditions. Find NEA's latest state-by-state pay data at nea.org/FairPay.
- 3. Rest. Recharge. Return.**
These days, I sometimes feel like the women described in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, whose “idle moments” are filled with “the seep of rage.” Current efforts to harm our students weigh heavy and compel action. But I also know that we must pause to rest and recharge—and this summer season is the time. Please take care of yourselves. Our students and communities need us to be healthy.

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

PHOTO: JAY FRAM

In the News: Public Education

“Teachers and support staff all over this country are standing up [to federal funding and staffing cuts] and using their voice to say no. We will live up to the promise that this country has made to our students, every one of them. ... You are not taking resources out of our public schools. When we say every student, we mean every student. This is what parents are asking for, and this is what our students need.”

—Becky, on CBS News New York, on Feb. 6.

What I’m Talking About: Solidarity

I recently joined thousands of Colorado Education Association members at the Colorado State Capitol, rallying for public schools and students. Together, we demanded the funding we know our schools, educators, and students need to succeed. This spring has seen so many events like this, with tens of thousands of educators, parents, students, siblings, friends, and neighbors, standing in solidarity. We will not only meet the challenges of today, we will organize for power to create the future our students and educators deserve. Unions are made for moments like this.



My video message to all of you—on the power of solidarity—is available online at nea.org/BeckysJournalMay25.



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Public schools are the heart of our communities. That is why today, educators, parents, students, and more are rallying to defend our public schools from the people in power who want to destroy public education.

Join us: sign the pledge to [#ProtectOurKids](https://bsky.social/ProtectOurKids).

Pledge to Protect Students and Public Schools | NEA
We will be heard at every level of government—from the school board to the Senate—to reject any efforts to gut public schools, expand vouchers, or dismantle the U.S. ...
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NEA Helps Schools Support Immigrant Students

As immigration policies shift under the Trump administration, NEA is working to protect students and uphold their right to public education, regardless of immigration status, according to the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision. NEA urges educators to work with their local union to take immediate action:

- **Declare schools as safe zones:** Ban immigration data collection and establish strict response protocols for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.
- **Empower families with legal knowledge:** Distribute "Know Your Rights" materials (nea.org/Immigration), host information workshops, and promote the Notifica app, which sends alerts during immigration raids.
- **Ensure emergency preparedness:** Help families create guardianship plans and secure legal contacts. Learn more at bit.ly/ILRCFamilyPrep.
- **Equip families with red cards:** This wallet-size card helps individuals invoke legal protections. Order free cards at ilrc.org/Red-Cards.

Take action at nea.org/SafeZones.

NEA Sues Trump Administration

On March 24, 2025, NEA and other advocacy groups sued the Trump Administration for its unlawful attempt to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education (ED)—a move that harms students and blatantly defies constitutional limits on executive power.

On March 5, 2025, NEA, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the New Hampshire affiliates of both

organizations filed a lawsuit against ED for its Feb. 14, 2025, "Dear Colleague" letter, which threatens to withhold federal funds from public schools for engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

The lawsuit argues that the letter imposes unlawful restrictions on what educators can teach and students can learn. At press time, both suits were pending.



NEA Organizes School "Walk-Ins" to Protest Federal Cuts to Education

On March 19, 2025, as President Donald Trump prepared to sign an executive order to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, thousands of educators, parents, students, and community leaders across the country gathered in front of their schools in the morning and "walked in" together in solidarity. Organized by NEA, the walk-ins sent a loud and clear message to elected officials everywhere: The Trump administration is hurting millions of students so they can give tax handouts to billionaires. School communities have had enough and are standing strong to support public schools! Raise your voice at nea.org/Protect.



Educators and parents at a school "walk-in" in Portland, Maine

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ASSOCIATED PRESS; SHUTTERSTOCK; SAM BURDICK

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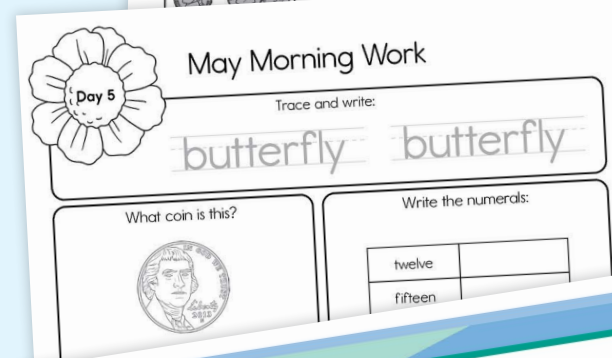
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CUTS TO FEDERAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS HURT STUDENTS

President Donald Trump has issued a series of reckless and destructive directives to dismantle the federal government's role in protecting and strengthening public education. When his administration talks about abolishing the U.S. Department of Education (ED), it uses divisive and misleading rhetoric (such as "ending radical indoctrination") to obscure the fact that students—especially lower-income students in rural, suburban, and urban communities as well as students with disabilities—would lose the most. Dismantling the department would mean defunding programs, such as Title I, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Pell Grants, that feed, educate, and protect our most vulnerable and underserved students. Without these programs, many families and communities will be left reeling. These and other deliberate acts are part of a broader strategy to manufacture crises that justify consolidating power, dismantling federal agencies that help people, and reallocating public tax dollars to fund tax breaks for Trump, his billionaire donors, and Elon Musk, his "CEO" and the world's richest man.

On February 12, parents, educators, community leaders, and elected officials (top, right) from across the country rallied outside the U.S. Capitol to take a stand for students and public schools. Speaker after speaker shared the negative impact that shutting down ED would have on students, educators, and public schools across the country. "The idea of dismantling the Department of Education and the programs that fall under it, it's not just numbers on a page. There's a human piece as well," explained Brian Skinner (right), a special education teacher in Kansas. "Taking funds from a system that serves 90 percent of our kids disproportionately hurts those who either cannot choose or are not chosen by a private school."

TAKE ACTION

Scan the code to find out how you can stand up for schools.



Rural communities would be hit especially hard, as many of its public schools rely heavily on federal funding. Without these resources, small districts, for example, would struggle to keep schools open, leading to school closures. "[Parents] do not want to dismantle public schools and privatize them," said NEA President Becky Pringle. "They want to partner with us—at the state and federal level—to make sure our schools have what they need."



PHOTOS: JATI LINDSEY

How Teachers View Their Pay and Benefits



Too many educators are still facing a challenging financial climate, unable to make ends meet or even afford to live in the communities where they work. It's no surprise then that teachers' perceptions of their pay have not changed—and may have worsened, according to the 2024 "State of the American Teacher Survey" by RAND Corporation. According to the survey, about 1 in 4 teachers who received less than a 3 percent raise said they planned to leave the profession at the end of the 2023 – 2024 school year. Of their counterparts whose pay rose 5 percent to 10 percent in the same period, just over 1 in 10 said they planned to stop teaching. Low pay was cited as a top source of job-related stress for 1 in 3 teachers. The survey revealed that 65 percent of teachers reported taking on extra school duties, such as coaching sports, mentoring, or serving as department chair. Some teachers reported that the extra duties helped boost their pay, but 1 in 4 teachers said they were not paid for this extra work. Better perceptions of pay are significantly more likely in states that allow collective bargaining. In these states, the survey found that teachers reported not only higher pay, but access to a wider array of other benefits than teachers in states that prohibit collective bargaining. Read more about the RAND survey results at nea.org/RAND.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING = HIGHER PAY

Average teacher salaries—and salary increases—are significantly higher in states that require collective bargaining.

Average Salary 2022 – 2023 Average Salary 2023 – 2024



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK; CHART SOURCE: RAND CORPORATION, 2024 STATE OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER SURVEY

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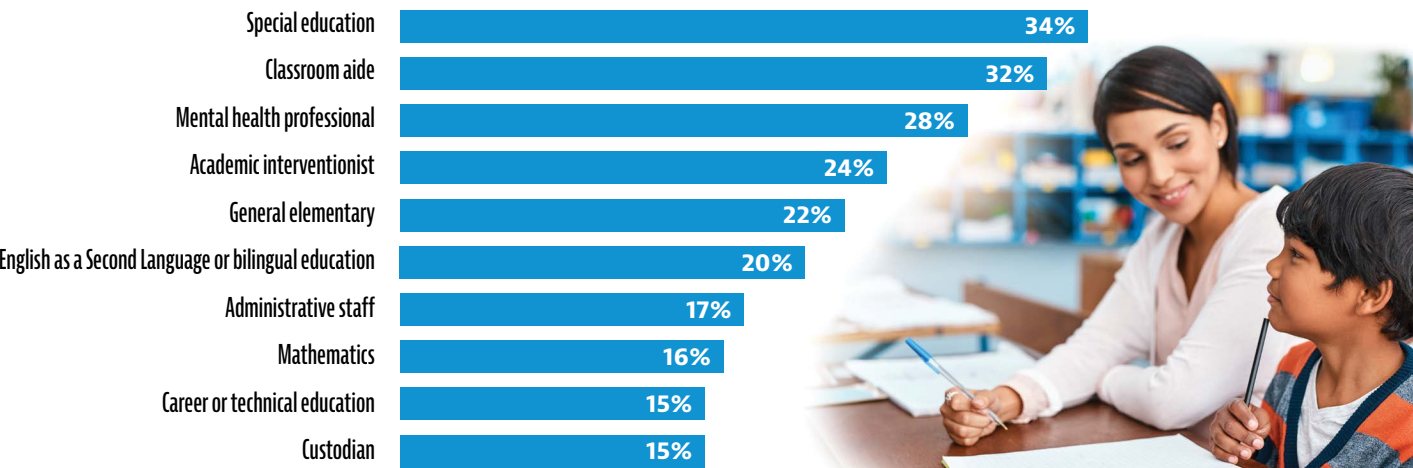
ACME Foundation

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Hy-Vee Foundation

The Most Understaffed Roles in Schools

The percentage of schools that reported being understaffed in these K–12 positions at the start of the 2024 – 2025 school year:



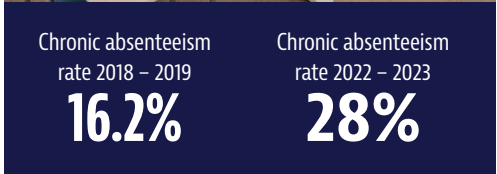
SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

AI Use in Schools Increases



Students’ and teachers’ use of artificial intelligence (AI) notably increased from the 2022 – 2023 school year to the 2023 – 2024 school year, according to a report by the Center for Democracy & Technology. During that period, the percentage of teachers who reported using generative AI rose from 51 percent to 67 percent, while use by high school students increased from 58 percent to 70 percent. Teachers were more likely to tap into AI for school uses over personal uses, while students reported the opposite. Two-thirds of teachers said they have not received guidance from their schools regarding response and discipline procedures when a student uses the technology for prohibited behaviors, such as plagiarism or cyberbullying.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; ADOBE STOCK IMAGES



Chronic Absenteeism Is Still Too High

Student chronic absenteeism is often cited by educators as one of the top challenges facing public schools. Already a problem before the COVID-19 pandemic, it worsened in the subsequent school years. But recent data suggests that at least some progress has been made. According to an analysis by Attendance Works, chronic absenteeism dipped slightly from a high of 30 percent nationally in 2021 – 2022 to 28 percent for the 2022 – 2023 school year. Attendance Works defines chronic absenteeism as when a student misses 10 percent or more school days over a school year—or about 18 days—due to absence for any reason, including those that are excused, unexcused, and suspensions. Research shows that such elevated levels of chronic absence can easily overwhelm school staff and negatively affect teaching and learning for all students. While any decline is welcome, chronic absenteeism is still at historically high levels. The majority of schools still had a chronic absence rate of 20 percent or higher.

What’s Keeping You Up at Night?

We all have problems sleeping at times. We often start thinking about tomorrow and the challenges it may bring. *Education Week* recently asked teachers about the stress that may cause them to lose sleep. Here are the top 10 responses:



SOURCE: EDUCATION WEEK RESEARCH CENTER, NOVEMBER 2024

PHOTOS FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

THE TRUE VALUE OF NO-COST SCHOOL MEALS

By Amanda Litvinov

When Cheryl Cochran started teaching in Tennessee’s Hardin County School District, in the mid-1980s, it nearly broke her heart to know that some of her high school students had to go hungry.

“Back then, on Mondays, students on free or reduced-price meals picked up an envelope with green tickets in it,” Cochran explains. But if something happened to those tickets—like, “My mom washed my jeans and the tickets were in the pocket!”—they might have to go without lunch Tuesday through Friday, she adds.

Even when students did keep hold of their tickets, they had to use them in front of peers, who would then know that those families had financial struggles.

But these problems vanished once the school district adopted the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, says Cochran, who has served as the district’s school nutrition program director for 29 years. The provision allowed the district to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, and the positive effects were immediate: No more meal debt, no more embarrassment, and no more students distracted by hunger pangs.

“Now all students are on a level playing field,” she explains.

How much is a child’s health worth?

Research shows that CEP increases school meal participation, boosts school attendance and test scores, and reduces disciplinary problems. Despite CEP’s popularity and proven benefits, the program could be targeted for spending

cuts. In fact, some politicians in Congress have called to eliminate CEP entirely.

Why? Because to some out-of-touch politicians, easing child hunger is simply not worth the price tag.

“If Congress refuses to fund universal school meals, expanding [CEP] is the next best way to help schools win the battle against student hunger,” says NEA’s Angelica Castañon, an expert in student learning conditions. “NEA continues to advocate for CEP, and all the federal programs that help students get the healthy meals they need.”

How community eligibility works

CEP is available to schools in which at least 25 percent of students come from low-income families. Nearly 60 percent of the 3,275 students in rural Hardin County qualified for free and reduced-price lunch before the district adopted CEP, in 2014, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. As of the 2022 – 2023 school year, more than 362,000 students (36%) in Tennessee had access to no-cost meals through CEP, according to the Food Research & Action Center.

CEP helps educators, too. Well-nourished kids have better focus in class, and educators aren’t paying for students’ lunches out of their pockets.

Cochran can’t stomach the thought that Congress could roll back or eliminate the program.

“We live in a great, prosperous country, and it’s the right thing to make sure all students are fed,” Cochran says. “We provide transportation and textbooks—providing school meals is just as important.” 🍴



Cheryl Cochran

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHERYL COCHRAN

CHEW ON THIS!

We can curb student hunger

The number of schools adopting the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act surged during the 2023 – 2024 school year. Why? Because lawmakers in Congress let the national universal school meals program—funded by the Biden administration’s pandemic recovery plan—expire in 2022, which resulted in a spike in hungry students.

IN THE 2023 – 2024 SCHOOL YEAR:

7,717
U.S. SCHOOL DISTRICTS HAD ONE OR MORE SCHOOLS UNDER CEP, UP 20% OVER THE PRIOR SCHOOL YEAR.



23.6
MILLION CHILDREN ATTENDED A CEP SCHOOL—A 6.2% INCREASE OVER THE PREVIOUS SCHOOL YEAR.



84.7%
OF ELIGIBLE SCHOOLS HAD ADOPTED CEP.



SOURCE: “COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY: THE KEY TO HUNGER-FREE SCHOOLS,” FOOD RESEARCH ACTION CENTER, 2024

1 in 5
CHILDREN IN THE U.S. LIVE IN FOOD INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS—THAT’S 14 MILLION KIDS WHO DON’T HAVE CONSISTENT ACCESS TO MEALS AT HOME.



FOOD INSECURITY RATES ARE FAR HIGHER FOR BLACK AND HISPANIC HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN THAN FOR WHITE HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN.



SOURCE: “HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2023,” USDA (THE MOST RECENT DATA AVAILABLE.)

**TAKE
ACTION**

Call on your members of Congress to keep critical anti-hunger programs intact. Go to nea.org/ChildNutrition.

UTAH SCHOOL CUSTODIAN NAMED 2025 ESP OF THE YEAR

By Cindy Long



A custodian is “one who guards, protects, or maintains,” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, and Andy Markus does all of those things for his students, his school, and his union.

For all of these reasons, Markus earned the title of 2025 Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year. He received the award from NEA President Becky Pringle, in March, at the NEA ESP National Conference, in Louisville, Ky.

Markus, who is assistant facilities manager at Draper Park Middle School, in Utah’s Canyons School District, not only shines in his work, he’s also a dedicated mentor to students as well as a fierce union activist and ESP advocate.

“NEA is proud to recognize Andy’s dedication to his students, his school and his union,” Pringle said. “He consistently goes above and beyond to be a welcoming presence to all. ... He inspires each of the students to be better versions of themselves.”

The award spotlights the work of ESPs across the country and honors one member who demonstrates extraordinary achievements and dedication to public education.

Over his 13 years with the district, first at Midvale Elementary School, then at Bella Vista Elementary School, before starting at Draper Park, Markus has played a critical role in transforming his schools. He not only maintains the building and grounds, he also mentors students and fosters a community.

“The pride and care we put into our environment are reflected in the success of our students, and I’m grateful to be a part of that positive change,” he says.

When he arrived at Draper Park three years ago, the grounds were overgrown, littered with trash, and neglected after years of minimal maintenance. The bushes were full of debris, and the fields had patches of dirt where grass should have grown.

During his first four months, Markus focused on cleaning up the grounds, starting with picking up trash and replacing damaged sod on the fields.

“It breathed new life into the school, with students, staff, and community members expressing their excitement about seeing the grounds looking presentable again,” he says.

Then Markus turned his attention to the inside. With the help of his department, he brought in extra

NEA 2025 Education
Support Professional (ESP)
of the Year Andy Markus
accepts his award at the
ESP National Conference,
in Louisville, Ky.

extractor machines, and they diligently deep cleaned the carpets and floors. The building started to shine again.

“What was remarkable was the impact that these changes had on school culture,” he says.

Students began taking pride in their environment, cleaning up after themselves, and showing greater respect for the building. Teachers reported fewer behavior issues in their classrooms, and students were more engaged.

Even better, the school’s overall grade improved. For the past two years, it’s been ranked among the top five middle schools in Utah.

“It’s been incredible to see how a clean and welcoming environment can make such a big difference for everyone,” Markus says.

After-school mentor

Markus strives to build strong relationships with his students as well.

“Many come to me when they’re having a tough day,” he says. “These connections started through the after-school mentoring program I launched, where students help with tasks around the school as a constructive way to stay out of trouble and earn responsibility. It’s a difficult time for many kids, as they’re still figuring out who they are, and sometimes all they need is someone to listen.”

A school counselor set up what she called “Andy Talk Sessions,” where students would walk the halls with me while I cleaned, using that time to share their struggles.

Markus has had many memorable interactions with students, including one who recently confided in him that he identified as LGBTQ+. “He wanted to say it aloud to me before telling his parents. It was a powerful moment and

a reminder of how much students rely on the adults around them for support,” Markus recalls. “Moments like these are why I believe that everything we do as school employees matters—students notice, and they care.”

In his after-school program, he mentored a student on the verge of dismissal from school because of poor behavior and skipping class.

Over three months, the student’s attitude and approach to life completely changed. He started attending class regularly, stopped negative behavior patterns, and began taking pride in his schoolwork.

“I remember the first time he earned an A. He rushed to share the news with me before telling his parents,” Markus says. “It was a moment I’ll never forget. In just a few months, this student went from failing to passing most classes. He is now on the honor roll in high school.”

Recently, the student visited Markus to share his plans to graduate and pursue a career as a counselor for at-risk youth.

Union activist

Raised by dedicated educators and union members, Markus was immersed in the world of advocacy from a young age—handing out campaign flyers with his dad and standing at intersections holding signs.

He recently joined fellow union members at the state Capitol to fight against an anti-union payroll deduction bill.

“I approached legislators directly, meeting with the bill’s sponsor and other key supporters, and asked them about their understanding of

the bill’s impact, explaining why union and bargaining rights are essential, especially for ESPs,” he explains. “I provided examples of the affordable benefits our part-time employees receive for as little as \$200 per year, including dental, vision, and telemedicine services.”

Unfortunately, the fight continues. Utah’s governor ignored calls for a veto and signed the bill into law. Now, the Utah School Employees Association (USEA) is part of a coalition that seeks to overturn the state’s collective bargaining ban at the ballot.

As president of the Canyons Education Support Professionals

Association, Markus helped negotiate major wins for ESPs over the past five years, including, a 28.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment, step raises, and stipends for employees who are at the top of their current pay scale. He also helped increase night shift differentials by 50 cents an hour and graveyard shifts by \$1.00

an hour; he improved ESP leave policies; and he negotiated a professional development day with pay for all ESPs in his district.

Markus believes in showing respect, too. He ensures that his district recognizes national career days, such as National Custodian Day, National Food Service Workers Day, Administrative Professionals Day, and National Transit Employee Appreciation Day—in addition to celebrating National ESP Day. 🏆



Andy Markus

LEARN
MORE

Check out the other finalists
for ESP of the Year at
nea.org/2025ESPfinalists.

OUR VOICES *close-up*



At the Crow Agency school, in Montana (right), Lucy Real Bird leads preschoolers through a full day of activities in the Apsáalooke language (left and far right).

that often overlooks Indigenous cultures and the needs of her community.

A personal mission

Her story began at the Crow Agency school where she teaches. She became troubled by a pervasive issue: Lateral violence—bullying within Indigenous communities. Rooted in historical trauma, this behavior arises when long oppressed individuals redirect fear and frustration toward their own community members, Real Bird explains.

“It’s usually our own people who are against us,” she says. “We’re like crabs in a bucket. Whenever someone does good, others try to bring them down. I knew I had to do something.”

She reached out to Amanda Curtis, president of MFPE, who recognized the significance of Real Bird’s concerns and connected her with the National Indian Education Association (NIEA). This was the first step in what became a transformational experience.

A call for decolonization

At the 2022 NIEA annual conference in Oklahoma City, Real Bird heard Indigenous education scholar Cornel Pewewardy speak. The co-editor of *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education: The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model*, Pewewardy advocated for school systems designed around Native knowledge, languages, and culturally relevant



teaching methods, rather than settler-centric curricula that often erase or misrepresent Indigenous cultures.

Pewewardy’s message about promoting equity, inclusion, and healing struck a deep chord with Real Bird.

“I realized that our people needed to hear this,” she says. “We needed to understand that the trauma we’re experiencing is not just personal, it’s collective. It’s been passed down from generation to generation. But we can heal, and we can do it together.”

Inspired, Real Bird returned to Montana and worked with Curtis to secure an NEA Community Advocacy and Partnership Engagement grant to conduct a series of professional development events that would share this vision across the state.

Pewewardy led discussions at each event site and explored the relationship between education and Indigenous identity in Montana.

Cultural revitalization in action

Decolonization is the process of reclaiming cultural identity, traditions, and autonomy after colonial disruption. This effort is thriving on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, in Browning, Mont.



A language immersion program in the reservation’s schools is a shining example of success under Montana’s Indian Education for All law, which mandates the inclusion of Indigenous heritage in public school curricula.

The program allows K–12 students

to learn academic subjects in the Ámsskáapiikūni (Blackfeet) language, preserving the language and embedding cultural relevance into education.

Ámsskáapiikūni educator Dana Bremner is president of the Browning Federation of Teachers and a reading interventionist at Stamiksiitsiikin (Bullshoe) Elementary School. She explains that the program’s goal is to integrate traditional Indigenous knowledge systems into mainstream education.

“We need to give educators the freedom to teach in a way that reflects Indigenous cultures,” she says. “Why should we teach from a curriculum designed for someone else’s worldview? We need to create our own curriculum models ... [and] restore our cultural knowledge, family stories, and teach our kids who they are.”

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ

PASSING DOWN OUR STORIES TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

“Sometimes, people think we’re all Navajo because they’ve met one or two people. But we have our own identities ... and stories. It’s time we tell them ourselves.”

—Lucy Real Bird

Last fall, educator Lucy Real Bird found herself traveling across Montana, meeting with distinct Indigenous groups. At each visit, tribal members opened the proceedings with Indigenous prayer. Local drum groups performed a flag song (an Indigenous equivalent to the U.S. national anthem), and participants enjoyed traditional music, dancing, and foods.

Organized by Real Bird, with help from the Montana Federation of Public Employees (MFPE), these visits were part a groundbreaking initiative called Unsettling Montana. This effort brought together educators, community leaders, and activists in a four-day, six-city tour to ensure that Indigenous educators see themselves reflected in their schools and union leadership. The participants developed strategies to integrate Indigenous histories, languages, and worldviews into classrooms.

The tour stopped in Billings, Great Falls, Browning, Pablo, Missoula, and Bozeman, with each event tailored to the needs of local Indigenous communities.

“We have to support our knowledge keepers,” says Real Bird, an Apsáalooke (Crow) language teacher on the Crow reservation, referring to those who hold and protect deep cultural and spiritual information. “They are the ones who hold our histories, our languages, and our wisdom. It’s time to honor them and build pathways for future generations to carry that knowledge forward.”

Before launching the tour, Real Bird took time to reflect on her experiences as an Indigenous person, navigating an educational system

Who is Lucy Real Bird?

Lucy Real Bird is an Apsáalooke educator, cultural advocate, and proud bearer of her family’s rich heritage.

“There are so many misconceptions about who we are as Indigenous people,” she says. “Sometimes, people think we’re all Navajo because they’ve met one or two people. But we have our own identities ... and stories. It’s time we tell them ourselves.”

Named Baachuaigaalaakoosh (Sees Many Berry Seasons), Real Bird’s name was gifted by her great-grandmother, reflecting a legacy of resilience and abundance. Her father, Henry Real Bird, a celebrated cowboy poet and Montana’s Poet Laureate from 2009 – 2011, was raised by his grandfather, Xaxxe Askinneesh (Rides Painted Horses), or Mark Real Bird, and his grandmother, Baahtah (Attends Things), or Florence Medicine Tell Real Bird. Mark Real Bird is a son of Chief Medicine Crow, and Florence is the daughter of Chief Medicine Tail.

Lucy Real Bird’s lineage is deeply rooted in her people’s history. Her maternal ancestry connects her to Chief Grey Bull and Sitting Bull, and she is a member of the Piegan Clan. They are known for their treacherousness like their enemy the Piegan (different from the Piegan Clan), made up of the Pikuni (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), and Siksika. As a child of the Big Lodge Clan through her father, Real Bird embrace the values and traditions passed down through generations. 🌟

OUR
VOICES

quick takes



My team is amazing! The students are diverse and awesome. Public schools educate all!

—Ewa Meoni, Virginia

Everyone is embraced for who they are.

—Anna G.

There's so much to love! Besides the educational opportunities and chance to break generational barriers, I love that we feed every student every day — for free!

—Tamara Madden, Oregon



The diversity of students and families!

—Beth K.

OUR
PENSIONS!

—Mike S.

THE SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY. ANYTIME I ATTEND A BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING, THERE IS ALWAYS MORE THAN ONE PARENT OR COMMUNITY MEMBER WHO PLEADS FOR BETTER PAY FOR EDUCATORS.

— Julie N.

“Our staff: custodians, cafeteria workers, classroom aides, teachers, nurses, office folks! All amazing human beings who give so much!”

— Theresa C.

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ABOUT YOUR PUBLIC SCHOOL?



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THIS**

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.

No Bargaining Rights? You Can Still Win!

boosts to educators' salaries; more funding for pre-K and free and reduced lunches; and improved retirement benefits for bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, and maintenance personnel.

"We use our voice to fight for our working conditions," says Timothy Lyons, a language arts and life science teacher in Hephzibah, Ga. "We are consistently in contact with elected officials to address our concerns across the state." GAE also regularly schedules meetings with district representatives and attends board meetings, Lyons adds.

Similar advocacy by GAE members in Atlanta led to an additional 11 percent salary increase for their district's teachers—the largest ever earned by teachers in the district.

Five Ways to Create Change

- **Be an active member in your local union** so you can be part of a network that includes NEA and your state association. NEA has more than 3 million members, and it has the power to advocate for better pay and benefits, better working conditions, and better learning conditions for our students.
- **Organize members** to address salary concerns and working conditions.
- **Use your voice** to advocate and engage with your local and state elected representatives.
- **Support your association's** political action committee, which works to elect lawmakers who stand up for public education.
- **Work with members** of your school community—teachers, ESPs, parents, and others—to speak out for the pay and respect all educators deserve.

Another key strategy that paid off for Atlanta teachers? Electing a local educator to the school board who voted in their favor. But the salary increase is not enough to keep up with the expensive housing market in the Metro Atlanta area, Lyons says.

Advocacy must continue throughout the state, he explains, because there are counties where the starting teacher salary is still low, and ESPs did not get a raise when the teachers did.

"[ESPs] do not make enough money to take care of basic living needs, so they are forced to work multiple jobs," he adds. "Our ESPs spoke about needing a pay raise when certified employees received one. They are using their voice at meetings with politicians to have this addressed."

Tennessee educators gain negotiating power

Educators in Tennessee are also standing up for what they deserve. "[We] face unique challenges, including limited legal avenues for traditional collective bargaining," says Neshelda Johnson, a professional learning coach at Hamilton K–8 School, in Shelby County, which includes Memphis and is the largest county in the state. "Despite this, we've found ways to stand together, raise awareness, and work toward change."

Back in 2011, Tennessee lawmakers voted to outlaw collective bargaining and replace it with a process called "collaborative conferencing," which allows representatives—designated by professional employees and the management team—to use collaborative problem-solving to discuss and share opinions and

proposals related to the terms and conditions of employment.

Collaborative conferencing is not collective bargaining, because agreements are non-binding, and local associations are not equal partners in it with the school district, Templeton explains.

In 2014, members of the Tennessee Education Association teamed up to form the United Education Association of Shelby County (UEA). Last year, UEA members voted to allow the association

to negotiate with the school district through collaborative conferencing.

"[The vote] allows us to organize and collectively advocate for fair pay, adequate resources, and better working conditions," Johnson says. "It's also important to highlight that better working conditions for teachers directly benefit students. We hope the broader audience will recognize the connection between supporting educators and improving education as a whole."

Another benefit to UEA's efforts, Johnson adds, is that it helps gain respect and recognition for the education profession. ✨

Sundjata Sekou (pronounced Sund-Jata Say-Coo) is a Hip-Hop loving, "dope", Black, male, elementary school teacher in Irvington, N.J., and NEA's 2024 – 2025 writer-in-residence. You can follow him on Instagram @blackmaleteacher and email him at sundjata.sekou@gmail.com.

LEARN MORE

Find out how your school community can create change, even without collective bargaining. Visit nea.org/BCG.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NESHELDA JOHNSON

Welcome to Your Union Neighborhood

IN THIS NEA TODAY GAME, YOU'LL WIN WHEN YOU FIND YOUR UNION ALLIES

By Mary Ellen Flannery, Annie Rosenthal, and Mike Wiser

That postal worker who just climbed your steps to deliver boxes of Kleenex? She's #UnionStrong. That guy fixing the electrical line outside? That's #UnionPower!

Turn on your TV: Every Hollywood Square is union, union, union. Switching to ESPN? Card-carrying union ballers won the Super Bowl, too!

The following two pages feature an illustration of a typical neighborhood. Circle every union member you find and then go online to see if you've caught them all.

Hint: We're everywhere! In hospitals, city halls, fire stations, construction sites, factories, airports, grocery stores (congrats on your contract, Costco siblings!), and coffee shops (#RedforBread).

Get to know them

About one in three U.S. union members belongs to NEA. But have you met the other two-thirds yet? Together, we are facing attacks on our right to belong to unions and to collectively bargain for fair pay and safe workplaces. But we are also growing in numbers and in power.

In 2024, workers unionized at car plants in Chattanooga, Tenn., at REI stores in North Carolina, and at museums in California. Digital journalists in New York City have unionized, and nearly 10,000 Michigan nurses are now Teamsters. Coalitions of union members also helped increase the minimum wage in Missouri and Alaska and improved sick leave for Nebraskans. Boeing workers won 38 percent wage increases! Longshoremen won 62 percent!

"The scariest thing in the world to the CEOs, to the billionaires in this country ... is the idea that we might one day see through [their divisive rhetoric]," says AFL-CIO President Elizabeth Shuler. "That there [will be] a barista and an airport services worker and a fast food worker and a home care provider and a teacher and a warehouse worker and a cook and an electrical worker, all of them together saying, 'Your fight is my fight.'"

Our voices are stronger when they're raised together. Whether you want a show of force at a school board meeting or help with a community event, think about reaching out to the unions in your neighborhood.

Some politicians may seek to divide us. But we have the same goals: fair pay, affordable health care, and a say in our workplaces. Together, we oppose privatization. Together, we demand respect. Together, we are more powerful.

LEARN MORE

Use this QR—or go online to nea.org/UnionJobs—to check your answers and find resources to organize with other unions in your neighborhood.

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Pull out this special section and post it in your break room to encourage others to learn about our union family.





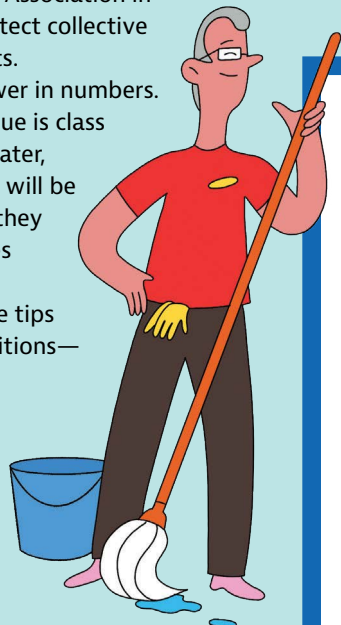
How to Build a Bigger Union Tent!

5 TIPS TO BUILDING COALITIONS—AND POWER

When Denver teachers went on strike a few years ago, you know who cleared the streets for their marches? Teamsters. In Florida, when faculty sought to stop legislation that would have allowed students to carry guns into classrooms, union members in law enforcement joined them at the State House. More recently, Utah firefighters partnered with the Utah Education Association in an effort to protect collective bargaining rights.

There is power in numbers. Whether the issue is class sizes or clean water, union members will be stronger when they raise their voices together.

Here are five tips to building coalitions—and power!



1) Be visible.

Wear your union shirt to the hardware store. Slap on that car magnet. Your visibility might spark a conversation with other union members and lead to new relationships.

2) Be strategic.

Start by asking yourself these questions: What change are you trying to create? Who has the power to make this change? How do we influence them? The answers will help you identify who to reach out to and who to ask them to reach out to, and so on.

3) Create a big tent.

When it comes to building people power, numbers matter. You and your partners don't need to agree on everything to push forward common goals. Reach out to different groups. You may be surprised who will stand with you.

4) Be clear about what you want.

Nobody has unlimited time. So be specific about the concrete actions that will help your cause. Maybe it's attending a specific school board meeting. Maybe it's emailing state lawmakers about a bill that's bad for public schools. (Provide them with sample language, too!)

5) Show up for your partners!

Relationships require give and take. Make sure you're also walking their picket lines and honoring their requests. It's not enough to simply be a worker in a union. Be a union worker!



The Union Quiz!

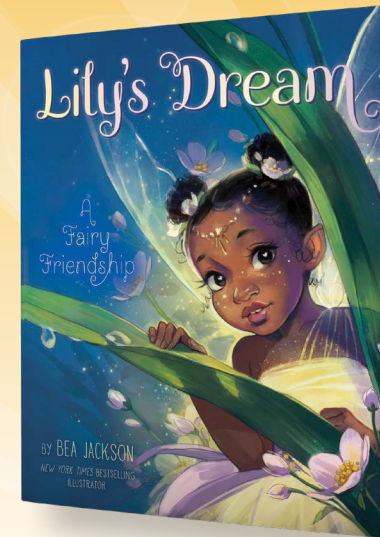
How well do you know your union siblings? Match the logo to the workers.



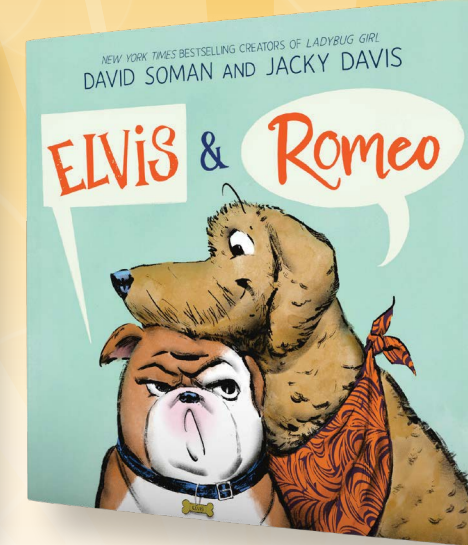
- Their historic 46-day strike in 2023, at locations in 20 states, led to 25 percent wage increases.
- This union won millions of dollars for medical research in its most recent contract.
- Love this union catchphrase, used during recent contract negotiations: "If they don't deliver, we don't deliver."
- Thank these union members for the roads you commute on, the bridges you cross, and the programs that rid our schools of asbestos!

ANSWERS: 1) C. INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF TEAMSTERS; 2) A. UAW (INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AEROSPACE AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA); 3) D. INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OPERATING ENGINEERS; 4) B. NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION

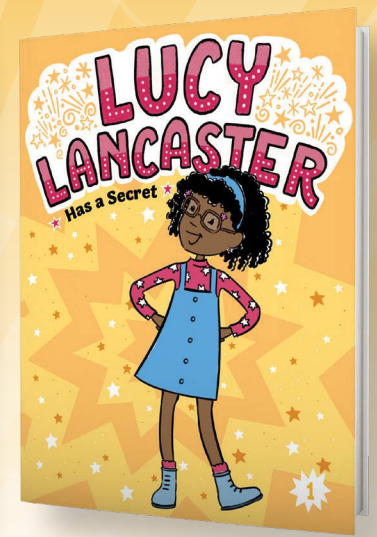
The Perfect Summer Reads for All Ages!



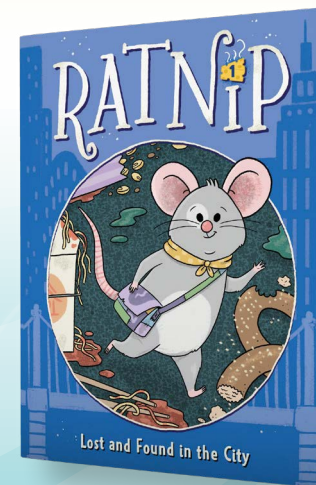
Lily's Dream
By Bea Jackson
HC: 9781665941174
Ages: 4–8



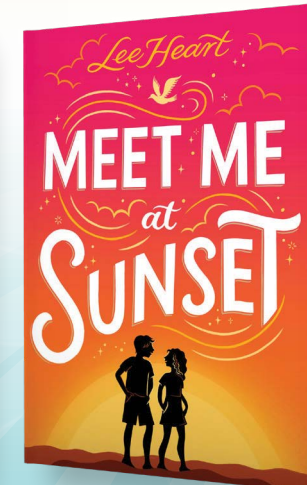
Elvis & Romeo
By David Soman and Jacky Davis
Illustrated by David Soman
HC: 9781665948067
Ages: 4–8



Lucy Lancaster Has a Secret
By Willow Coven
Illustrated by Priscilla Burris
HC: 9781665963978
Ages: 5–9



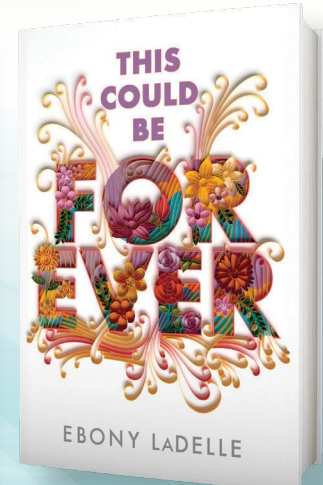
Ratnip: Lost and Found in the City
By Cam Higgins
Illustrated by Allison Steinfeld
HC: 9781665963466
Ages: 5–9



Meet Me at Sunset
By Lee Heart
PB: 9781665971331
Ages: 8–12



Spelling It Out
By Margaret Finnegan
HC: 9781665930116
Ages: 8–12



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‘I can actually retire with security’

By Amanda Litvinov

NEA’S MASSIVE VICTORY ON SOCIAL SECURITY IS CHANGING MANY EDUCATORS’ LIVES FOR THE BETTER. WHAT COULD IT MEAN FOR YOUR RETIREMENT?

“I’ve spent the last 10 years working myself to death, doing every extra duty job I could to make sure my retirement would be enough to sustain me,” says California teacher LaTonya Curlin. “Starting next year, I won’t have to work those four extra duty jobs.”

When former President Joe Biden signed the Social Security Fairness Act into law, on Jan. 5, Curlin’s future suddenly looked a lot brighter.

The law repealed the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP)—rules that became part of Social Security law in 1983, unfairly reducing the benefits that public employees or their spouses earned.

Curlin, her mother, and her twin sisters are all educators in California, one of the 15 states where educators were affected by GPO and WEP. In those states, public employees do not pay into Social Security. But many educators work second jobs and summer gigs, and some are career-changers who earned Social Security benefits that were drastically reduced by GPO and WEP.

“Teaching is my second career, but because of GPO and WEP, I didn’t think I would receive my full benefits from all the years I paid into Social Security,” says Curlin, a middle school math and science teacher and robotics coach in the Compton Unified School District. She expected to work until at least the age of 70, just as her mother did.

“And my mother, who is almost 80 years old, can stop substitute teaching in order to supplement her retirement income,” Curlin adds.

While the victory celebration continues, many educators have reached out to NEA with questions about what this means for them. The following guidance from NEA is based on the information available from the Social Security Administration at press time. For updates, go to nea.org/SSFAQ.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT WAS THE WINDFALL ELIMINATION PROVISION (WEP)?

WEP reduced the Social Security benefits of people who, over the course of their careers, worked in jobs covered by Social Security and jobs *not* covered by Social Security—for example, career-changers or educators compelled to take part-time or summer jobs to make ends meet.

WHAT WAS THE GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSET?

GPO reduced—or eliminated—the Social Security spousal or survivor benefits of people who earned a pension through federal, state, or local government employment that was *not* covered by Social Security. Two-thirds of the pension amount is deducted from the Social Security benefit. More than 70 percent of those affected by GPO lost their entire spousal or survivor benefit.

WHO WAS AFFECTED BY GPO AND WEP?

Educators who worked in 15 states where, as public employees, they paid into their state pension system, but not into Social Security, could have been impacted. Those states are Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas. Spouses of public employees may also have been affected since their spousal or survivor benefits would also be reduced.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM ALREADY RETIRED AND MY SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS WERE REDUCED OR COMPLETELY OFFSET?

At this time, you do not need to take any action except to verify that the Social Security




LaTonya Curlin will no longer have to work four extra duty jobs, thanks to the repeal of GPO and WEP.

administration has your current mailing address and direct deposit information. Most people can do this by visiting ssa.gov/MyAccount.

IF I HAVE NOT YET RETIRED, HOW WILL I KNOW IF THIS CHANGE IMPACTS ME?

The first step is to review your employment history. These provisions typically affected state and local government employees who also worked in jobs that required them to pay into Social Security. For example, a teacher employed in a GPO/WEP state who works at a store every summer would see their Social Security benefits reduced.

The next step is to contact the Social Security Administration, which can provide personalized information about how the Social Security Fairness Act may impact your benefits. They can also help you calculate your new monthly benefits. Visit ssa.gov for more information and resources. 

TAKE ACTION

Scan the QR code for more NEA guidance and resources, or go to nea.org/SSFAQ.

MORE LIVES CHANGED

Members across the country have shared with NEA how the passage of the Social Security Fairness Act has transformed their lives. Here are some of their stories:

Twila Keaveny, Alaska

I have been working for the Sitka School District for 25 years, first as a para-professional and currently as a school secretary. Before and during my school career, I worked over 30 years of side jobs where I paid in to Social Security. This victory of

the repeal of WEP means I can actually retire with security for myself and my family. Thank you, NEA, for encouraging all of us to continue the fight for 40 years!

Antoinette Smith, Georgia

This possibly means that I can finally stop working to add to my income. It also means that I will have survivor benefits if my husband passes before me. That’s life-changing.



TWILA KEAVENY



ANTOINETTE SMITH



DAVID BEANE

David Beane, Maine

This victory means that at the age of 68, I can finally think about retirement. I lost my wife to cancer in 2013 and subsequently lost my home of 18 years, as we put every penny we had into her treatment. I’ve been rebuilding my life and my finances since then.

I worked in private industry for 20-plus years before becoming a teacher 25 years ago. If GPO

and WEP hadn’t been repealed, I wouldn’t be able to retire.

I’m thankful for the work of NEA and our allied public sector unions.

FIGHT FOR EQUITY? EDUCATORS SAY YES!

By Amanda Litvinov

THE MOVEMENT IS GROWING: EDUCATORS ARE PUSHING BACK AGAINST RECKLESS CUTS THAT WOULD HURT SCHOOLS EVERYWHERE.

The Trump administration has wasted no time embarking on its agenda to shutter the U.S. Department of Education (ED), despite the agency’s critical role in helping schools meet student needs.

In March, President Donald Trump issued an executive order directing Secretary of Education Linda McMahon to do everything in her power to shut down the agency.

By that time, the administration had cut the staff at ED by nearly 50 percent—that’s around 1,900 employees whose tasks included conducting research on student success; supporting teacher development; enforcing accountability in how districts spend federal funds; and investigating and helping to resolve civil rights issues in public schools.

Educators, parents, and administrators know how profoundly public school students will be hurt if Trump’s ultimate goal to shutter the

agency becomes a reality. More than 50 million students across the country rely on programs funded through federal dollars.

“If you believe students in every ZIP code deserve access to a quality public education, then you believe in the work of the federal Department of Education,” says Susana O’Daniel, NEA’s manager of federal partnerships.

“One of the agency’s core functions is protecting students’ civil rights, and its programs—including Title I, Pell Grants, and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)—are important for Black and brown children, lower-income families, and students with disabilities,” O’Daniel says.

Is our country about to roll back progress on equity in public education? Not if educators have their say.

Raise your voice

Educators, parents, and allies across the country are mobilizing and speaking out

against potential federal education cuts.

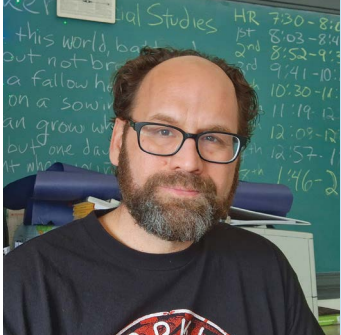
“We won’t be silent as anti-public education politicians try to steal opportunities from our students, our families, and our communities to finance tax cuts for billionaires,” says NEA President Becky Pringle.

There’s no better way to speak out than through your union, says Janice Dwosh, a retired educator who taught in a Title I school in Arizona.

“We can all stand up to these cuts by telling our story,” she says. “Your voice matters!” Dwosh’s top suggestions:

- Speak up at local school board meetings.
- Meet with state legislators.
- Contact members of Congress.
- Participate in town halls, school walk-ins, and other union-planned events.

On the next page, educators share how cuts to federal programs would hurt them and their students.



Title I

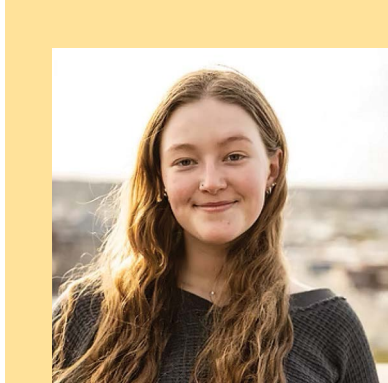
The Big Picture:

More than half of U.S. schools receive Title I funding. This funding helps schools in lower-income communities hire additional staff to provide tutoring, small group instruction, after-school programs, and parent-engagement initiatives.

How Cuts Would Hurt:

“I’VE HAD UP TO 42 STUDENTS IN MY CLASSROOM. WHAT IF WE LOSE TITLE I FUNDING? SOME STUDENTS WILL LOSE THE ONLY MEALS THEY GET DAILY. ALL WILL FACE LARGER CLASS SIZES, LESS ONE-ON-ONE ATTENTION, AND FEWER AFTER-SCHOOL AND SUMMER SUPPORTS—DEVASTATING.”

—Joe Decker, alternative middle school teacher, Ohio



Pell Grants

The Big Picture:

About 1 in 6 college students currently rely on Pell Grants to pay for college tuition and expenses. The Pell program has helped more than 200 million people from low-income families go to college since the program launched in 1972.

How Cuts Would Hurt:

“I HAVE THREE ROOMMATES, AND WORK THREE PART-TIME JOBS. I DON’T BUY EXPENSIVE GROCERIES, LIKE STRAWBERRIES OR CHICKEN. BUT NO MATTER HOW FRUGALLY I LIVE, IF I LOST MY PELL GRANT, I COULD NOT CONTINUE SCHOOL.”

—Alayna Nance, junior at Illinois State University, studying special education



IDEA Funding

The Big Picture:

The number of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act reached an all-time high of 7.5 million in 2023, the most recent year for which data is available.

How Cuts Would Hurt:

“AS A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER IN A TITLE I SCHOOL, I’M AFRAID THAT SOON I WON’T HAVE A JOB. I’M ALSO A SINGLE MOM WITH TWO HARD-WORKING CHILDREN IN COLLEGE ON PELL GRANTS. IS THIS COUNTRY GOING TO ABANDON ITS COMMITMENT TO HELP EVERY CHILD REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL?”

—Sonya Allcock, middle school special education teacher, Georgia

What were schools like before the Department of Education?

Equity in education was not the norm before Congress created the Department of Education (ED) in 1979.

Jim Crow laws segregated White and Black students, preventing them from going to school together. Native American students were often sent to boarding schools to assimilate into White culture. Girls were often taught different curricula with fewer opportunities for higher education.

And most students with disabilities were shut out of schools.

“Students with disabilities weren’t educated in most cases,” says Jack Schneider, a professor and director of the Center for Education Policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. “They were turned away, and their families were told that the school didn’t have the facilities [or] the resources to serve their kids.”

Some students with disabilities were in school, but with few accommodations or none at all. No one counted the number of young people with disabilities who were entirely left out of the education system.

Before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed, many state laws said schools only had to educate students with disabilities if they were aware of them.

“They tried not to find the kids, because if they found them, they had to do something with them,” says Edwin Martin, the first assistant secretary of education for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, which opened when ED was founded. “So, we wrote ‘Child Find’ into the law as a requirement.”

A section of IDEA, Child Find, specifies that states must identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities who are in need of special education services. Read more about schools before IDEA at nea.org/BeforeIDEA.

—KALIE WALKER

**TAKE
ACTION**

Join the movement to stand up to reckless education cuts at nea.org/PushBack.

PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

‘We Need Federal Funding’

By Cindy Long

CUTS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WILL HARM VULNERABLE STUDENTS AND PUT SPECIAL EDUCATION JOBS AT RISK

Jackson Tuell is an energetic 5-year-old who loves waffles, jumping on the trampoline, and playing with his sister, Charlie. Jackson is also autistic, non-verbal, and struggles in most academic and social environments.

“But don’t let that fool you,” says his father, Nick Tuell. “Jackson shows a desire to learn, play with his peers, and always tries again after failure.”



Nick and Lauren Tuell with their daughter, Charlie, and son, Jackson, who has an IEP to address his needs.

Tuell and his wife have been optimistic about Jackson’s education, thanks to their Lebanon, Ohio, public school and Jackson’s Individualized Education Program (IEP)—the written plan that outlines the special education services, accommodations, and goals tailored to meet the needs of a public school student with a disability.

“He is empowered to grow and is able to communicate his needs to those around him,” Tuell says.

But with the Trump administration’s efforts to gut the federal role in education, their optimism has dimmed.

Nick and Lauren Tuell shared their family’s story in an op-ed for the *Ohio Capital Journal*. They write: “Our story isn’t unique, families across the country depend on these programs to ensure our kids receive the tailored services they need to succeed in school and beyond. Yet today, these programs and Jackson’s future face significant threats.”

What’s at stake?

Like many parents, the Tuells worry about the impact of eliminating or drastically shrinking the U.S. Department of Education (ED). One of ED’s primary roles has been to supplement state resources for the nation’s 7.5 million public school students with disabilities, through the Office of Special Education Programs.



Educators, students, and parents attended a March 19 “walk-in” at Maryland’s Takoma Park Middle School, one of several around the country to protest cuts to federal education funding.

Through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enforced by ED, parents of public school students with disabilities are guaranteed the right to advocate for and help develop IEPs for their children, which are tailored to each student’s specific needs.

Private schools are not required to offer the same services covered by an

IEP. Many of them can’t accommodate students with significant disabilities or complex support requirements, let alone guarantee that students’ rights are upheld. And in rural communities, private schools are rare or nonexistent. As a result, many parents of children with disabilities rely on their neighborhood public school.

Without ED, however, it’s unclear if their public schools will have enough money to staff special educators and continue providing the supports and services guaranteed under IDEA.

And if states get block funding, who will make sure it goes toward special education?

In a February *New Yorker* article, Dan Stewart, who is the managing attorney at the National Disability Rights Network, writes that with no federal

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‘We Need Federal Funding’

funding or oversight, the likely outcome will be “fewer teachers, fewer funds, delayed funds, and less certainty.”

Students with disabilities could lose access to specialized support services, such as speech and occupational therapy and behavioral interventions. And a lack of oversight for legal protections against discrimination would open the door for schools to segregate or exclude them.

In fact, the majority of discrimination complaints filed with ED are about the denial of special education services. ED works to resolve those complaints through voluntary compliance agreements, not lawsuits. If ED goes away, that expertise and focus on compliance would disappear as well, making it far less likely that parents could secure an effective and timely remedy, according to NEA’s Office of General Counsel.

The loss of federal funding could force districts to lay off teachers, particularly special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

‘Our daughter would be lost in the shuffle’

Christine Matthews admits it’s not easy being a parent of a child with a disability. “We worry about how they will do in the classroom, at recess, in the lunchroom, and anywhere they may venture during their school day,” she says.

Matthews’ daughter, Cate, has an intellectual disability, a progressive neurological condition, and sensory impairments, but her public school in the Avonworth School District, outside of Pittsburgh, puts Matthews’ mind at ease.

“She’s integrated into a regular classroom because of the outstanding educational support offerings at our school district,” Matthews says. “She



Instructional paraprofessional Becky Marszalek is a tireless advocate for special education students.

learns alongside her neurotypical peers with the support of amazing special educators and paraprofessionals who make and implement modifications for her that ensure her success in the classroom.”

Matthews knows that the positions of these special education paraeducators are made possible in part by federal funding.

She points to instructional paraprofessional Becky Marszalek, who worked daily with Cate from kindergarten through fourth grade. Marszalek helped Cate communicate with assistive technology and taught her to read and write her name, add and subtract, and interact with peers.

“Becky had endless patience and went above and beyond to care for our daughter, quickly becoming one of the most trusted adults in her life,” Matthews says. “Simply put, our daughter would be lost in the shuffle of the busy school day without the commitment of our dedicated special education and support staff. Losing funding, and the current oversight that

goes with it, would devastate special education services and the families that rely on them.”

Pennsylvania received \$428 million for IDEA programs in the 2022 – 2023 fiscal year, supporting special education services for hundreds of thousands of the state’s students up to age 21.

“Students with disabilities and their families living in rural, suburban, and urban communities count on federal investments to support their public education,” says Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) President Aaron Chapin.

They deserve more support, not less, he says, cautioning that families will pay a steep price if ED is dismantled.

“If you reassign ED’s responsibilities to oversee services for students with disabilities across different federal agencies with no expertise in this area, it is a recipe for chaos,” Chapin says. “We do not want to see funding or services for students with special needs delayed or impeded.”

NEA, PSEA, and the other NEA state affiliates across the country hear parents’ concerns and will fight for ED and federal funding.

“With legal action, we will protect our students; using legislative action, we will protect our educators,” says NEA President Becky Pringle. “We will rise up in every community across this nation.”



Learn more about how federal funding cuts will hurt students with disabilities and what NEA is doing to fight for them at nea.org/SpecialEdFunding.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BECKY MARSZALEK

NEA MEMBERS INSURANCE TRUST® AND PLAN - 2023 SUMMARY ANNUAL REPORT

(Plan Year Beginning September 1, 2023)

The following is the summary annual report for the NEA Members Insurance Trust® and Plan (collectively Trust), Employer Identification Number 53-0115260, providing information on the insurance programs sponsored by the National Education Association (NEA) including the NEA Life Insurance® Program, NEA Accidental Death & Dismemberment Insurance Program, NEA Complimentary LifeSM, and NEA Retiree Health Program for the period beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024. The annual report has been filed with the Employee Benefits Security Administration by the NEA as Plan Administrator, as required under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA).

BASIC NEA MEMBERS INSURANCE TRUST FINANCIAL INFORMATION

The value of Trust assets, after subtracting liabilities of the Trust, was **\$173,136,125** as of August 31, 2024, compared to **\$183,156,204** as of September 1, 2023. During the Trust year, the Trust experienced a decrease in its net assets of **\$10,020,079**. This decrease includes unrealized depreciation and depreciation in the value of plan assets; that is, the difference between the value of the plan’s assets at the end of the year and the value of the assets at the beginning of the year or the cost of assets acquired during the year. During the Trust year, the Trust had total income of **\$120,305,061** including participant contributions of **\$105,164,765**, a net appreciation in the market value of investments of **\$10,226,361**, and earnings from investments of **\$4,913,935**. Trust expenses were **\$130,325,140**. These expenses included benefits paid to participants and beneficiaries, administrative and other expenses.

INFORMATION FOR NEA LIFE INSURANCE PROGRAM

The Trust has a contract with Minnesota Life Insurance Company to pay all NEA Preferred Term Life Insurance claims and The Prudential Insurance Company of America to pay all other NEA Life Insurance claims incurred under the terms of this program. Because they are so called “experienced rated” contracts, the premium costs are affected by, among other things, the number and size of claims. The total premiums for the Trust plan year beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024, made under such “experienced-rated” contracts were **\$57,874,423** and the total of all benefit claims paid under the contracts during the Trust year was **\$62,541,533**. The total number of participants was **386,045**.

INFORMATION FOR NEA ACCIDENTAL DEATH & DISMEMBERMENT (AD&D) AND ACCIDENTAL INJURY PROGRAMS

The Trust has a contract with The Prudential Insurance Company of America to pay all NEA AD&D and NEA AD&D Plus claims incurred under the terms of the Trust. Because it is a so called “experienced rated” contract, the premium costs are affected by, among other things, the number and size of claims. The total premiums for the Trust plan year beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024, made under such “experienced-rated” contract were **\$4,660,768** and the total of all benefit claims paid under the contract during the Trust year was **\$4,501,666**. The Trust has a contract with The Prudential Insurance Company of America which allocates funds toward group insurance certificates for the NEA AD&D Advantage Program and the NEA Accidental Injury Program. The total premiums for the Trust plan year beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024, was **\$1,220,860**. The total number of participants was **175,727** in all AD&D and Accidental Injury Programs.

INFORMATION FOR NEA COMPLIMENTARY LIFE INSURANCE PROGRAM

The Trust has a contract with The Prudential Insurance Company of America to pay all NEA Complimentary Life Insurance claims incurred under the terms of the Trust. The NEA Complimentary Life Insurance Program is self-supporting and paid by premiums from the NEA Members Insurance Trust funds rather than from Member contributions. Because it is a so called “experienced rated” contract, the premium costs are affected by, among other things, the number and size of claims. The total premiums for the Trust plan year beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024, were **\$1,854,893** and the total of all benefit claims paid under the contract during the Trust year was **\$1,604,929**. The total number of participants was **3,125,376**.

INFORMATION FOR NEA RETIREE HEALTH PROGRAM

The Trust has a contract with United American Insurance Company to pay all NEA Retiree Health Program (“NEA RHP”) claims incurred under the terms of the Program. The total premiums for the Trust plan year beginning September 1, 2023, and ending August 31, 2024, were **\$19,548,687** for NEA RHP. The total number of participants was **6,964** in NEA RHP.

Your Rights to Additional Information

As a participant, you have the legally protected right to receive a copy of the full annual report, or any part thereof for a reasonable charge or you may inspect the Annual Report without charge at the office of NEA Members Insurance Trust, Attn: NEA Member Benefits, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 or at the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C. upon payment of copying costs. Requests to the Department should be addressed to: Public Disclosure Room, Room N-1513, Employee Benefits Security Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210. You also have the right to receive from the Trust Administrator, on request and at no charge, a statement of the assets and liabilities of the Trust and accompanying notes, or a statement of income and expenses of the Trust and accompanying notes, or both. If you request a copy of the full annual report from the plan administrator, these two statements and accompanying notes will be included as part of that report. The charge to cover copying costs given above does not include a charge for the copying of these portions of the report because these portions are furnished without charge.

Send in the HOUNDS!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

THERAPY DOGS CAN BE EDUCATORS' BEST FRIENDS WHEN IT COMES TO CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT. JUST ASK THESE ARIZONA UNION MEMBERS.

When Lindsay Dominguez's principal heard about the Paws & Peers therapy dog program, she dashed off an email to Dominguez: "With all the dogs in your house, you must have one that would work for this!"

Everybody knows Dominguez is a dog person. And she had the perfect pupper for the job.

When she first adopted Hotch, he was a wild-haired, all-legs puppy with a sweet disposition. Today, he's one of more than 80 active therapy dogs with Paws & Peers, and a member of the third-grade teaching team at Jefferson Elementary, in the Mesa, Ariz., school district.

Before school starts, he greets every grown-up. After the bell, he walks third graders to specials, stopping for pets from students along the way. (Does Dominguez dip him in oxytocin? No. But research shows that petting dogs boosts feel-good hormones while reducing production of the stress-hormone cortisol.)

After lunch, Hotch "oversees" learning projects like a Zen instructional coach. That is ... he naps under the desk.

"He's maybe shepherd or chocolate lab? Maybe cattle dog? He's a mystery dog, but 100 percent good boy," Dominguez says.

Paws & Peers, the nation's largest school therapy dog program, is full of good boys—and girls! What's more, these bushy-tailed, canine "co-teachers" pack a pedagogical punch. Indeed, Arizona State University associate professor Kathleen Farrand's ongoing research shows a positive impact on students and educators.

'She brings joy!'

Schools swirl with hard-to-manage emotions. There's the stress of teaching in a red-hot political climate. Plus, the increasing, post-pandemic volatility of students. Mental health issues—among both students and staff—are more prevalent. Workloads are soaring. School shootings are a terrifying backdrop.

None of that fazes Gizmo, a possible Chigi (Chihuahua plus corgi). Found abandoned at a park 10 years ago, Gizmo is a 20-pound lovebug with deep brown eyes. "My principal will come in, or teachers will come in, and they'll say, 'I need some Gizmo time,'" says Stephanie Solis, a sixth-grade teacher at Mesa's Salk Elementary School.

Preschool teacher Monica Massey says her chunky rescue pug, Alice, spreads good vibes, too.

"She brings joy!" says Massey, of Adams Elementary. (FYI: Alice's favorite snack is chicken nuggets.)

"My principal will come in, or teachers will come in, and they'll say, 'I need some Gizmo time.'"

—Elementary school teacher Stephanie Solis

In 2020, Mesa piloted Paws & Peers in five schools, with the goal of improving students' mental health. Today, it's in 45 district locations. Each dog-and-educator team goes through six weeks of basic training and eight weeks of specialized training, and must pass an official evaluation. Unlike programs that send in dogs after traumatic events, Mesa's dogs typically go to school two days a week, every week.

And yes, they have helped students' mental health. But that's not all.

Animal intuition

Bear and Olaf motivate students, notes Kino Junior High School STEM teacher Nancy Parra-Quinlan. Recently, her engineering students used 3D-modeling software to design dream houses for their classroom canines. A key incentive? The chance to measure the magnificent tail of Olaf the rescue husky.

They also teach responsibility. Who wants to walk Olaf? Can somebody check on Bear's water?

Olaf is Mr. Personality and flops among students' desks, demanding they step over him. Bear is a mix of herding breeds—what locals call

a "rez dog." He's shyer, but Parra-Quinlan sees him leaning against the students who most need his emotional support.

Dogs often know more about people's needs than we do, notes Tommy Tomlinson, author of the book *Dogland*. For thousands of years, they've been watching and learning about us.

Not long ago, Dominguez noticed how Hotch paused at the same cafeteria table every day to lean against the same second grader.

"I reached out to his teacher and was like, 'I don't know, maybe I'm being weird because I'm a dog person, but what do we know about this kid?'" It turns out his family had recently lost their home. "We may not have known of his need without Hotch," Dominguez says.

Susan Osman

Mesa school psychologist Susan Osman sees how intuition guides labradoodle Mazie. "Even as a puppy, when somebody was upset, she'd go and sit on their lap," she says.

Today, Osman and Mazie meet with students with emotional and behavioral issues, and Osman notes how Mazie attaches to the children who most challenge adults. "She's so unconditional in her love."



During morning classes, Arizona teacher Lindsay Dominguez's canine "co-teacher," Hotch, moseys between students for calming pets. He opts for a nap during afternoon class.



Send in the HOUNDS!

It's like the dogs have a sixth sense for kids on the verge of meltdown, Farrand says. They'll get up, walk over, and lean against their side. Situation defused. Often, students with emotional issues learn to take themselves out of a situation and go to a calming corner.

"A minute later, the student has a hand on the dog," Farrand says. "And a minute later, the student is able to turn around and talk to the teacher."

Thank you, Hotch!

These benefits to students aren't shocking. After all, that was the point. "But I'm noticing the impact is as great—or even more so—for faculty and staff," Farrand says. "So many staff members talk about how [seeing the dogs] motivates them to come to work. Adults have bad days too, right? And the dogs lift them up."

Another unexpected effect: a growing sense of community. Dogs like Olaf say hi to everyone. He is the guy you want at every party, sparking conversations among the unlikeliest friends and building relationships.

All of this is hard work! At the end of the day, Hotch may earn a pup cup. More often, he and Dominguez go straight home where, like a lot of educators, Hotch flops on the couch. "I can hear him snoring!" Dominguez says. 🐾



Nancy Parra-Quinlan with Bear and Olaf

FOR MORE

To watch Paws & Peers teams at work, visit nea.org/TherapyDogs.

Meet the Team!

NAME:
Gizmo

HUMAN PARTNER:
Stephanie Solis, sixth-grade teacher

FAVORITE SNACK:
Chicken, beef, and pork kebab



Gizmo

NAME:
Bear

HUMAN PARTNER:
Nancy Parra-Quinlan, STEM teacher

FAVORITE PASTIME:
Staring into students' eyes



Bear

NAME:
Olaf

HUMAN PARTNER:
Nancy Parra-Quinlan

FAVORITE WORDS:
"Do you want to go to school?"



Olaf

NAME:
Mazie

HUMAN PARTNER:
Susan Osman, school psychologist

JOB EXPERIENCE:
Therapy dog in hospitals, before working in schools



Mazie

Your No. 1 Question, Answered

Q: Would my dog be a good school therapy dog?

A: Maybe! "A successful dog is extra-friendly, but remains calm," says Paige Kistner, Paws & Peers support specialist. "They want to be pet by people. ... We test our dogs next to a neutral dog, and a successful therapy dog will typically ignore the other dog and look to the people in the room."

Interested in Racial and Social Justice Trainings and Resources?

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THEN AND NOW:

A Pregnant Teacher Changed Family Leave Laws Forever

By Joel Berger

TEACHER JO CAROL LAFLEUR TOOK HER PREGNANCY DISCRIMINATION CASE ALL THE WAY TO THE SUPREME COURT. HER HISTORIC WIN, IN 1974, STILL ECHOES AT THE BARGAINING TABLE TODAY.

THEN

Just over 50 years ago, Jo Carol LaFleur was teaching at Lakewood High School, in the Cleveland suburbs, when she heard the news. “A student came to my class and whispered to me that I had a phone call from a radio station,” she writes in a 2006 article for the *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law*.

After hurrying out to call her lawyer, LaFleur said she “leaped back” to her classroom, doing “one grand jeté after another” down the hallway. “We won, we won, we won!” she exclaimed to her students, and the students began cheering.

The win? A 7-2 victory in the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court case *Cleveland Board*

of Education v. LaFleur, which struck down the common requirement at the time that pregnant teachers leave their classrooms.

LaFleur’s victory was a turning point for women’s rights in the workplace.

Half a century later, the ruling still serves as a building block for family leave policies won at the bargaining table and in state legislatures. A common thread throughout the years? The power of NEA’s representation.

‘One teacher’s fight for all’

At the time of LaFleur’s victory, the *NEA Reporter*—the precursor to *NEA Today*—ran a feature story about her entitled, “One Teacher’s Fight For All.” The article begins: “LaFleur discovered before Christmas 1970 that she was

two months pregnant.” Yet, when she shared the exciting news with her principal, he told LaFleur she must abide by policies in the teacher handbook that forced pregnant teachers to take unpaid leave after the fourth month of their pregnancies.

LaFleur told the *NEA Reporter*, “I never saw a copy and was unaware of the forced unpaid leave rule.”

In the law journal article, Jo Carol Nessel-Sale (formerly LaFleur), describes her response to the policy: “Alternately angry and incredulous, I complained that it was not fair or right, that I did not want to leave, and I would not fill out any request for leave papers.”

Today, Nessel-Sale hasn’t lost any righteous outrage. “You just have to stand up to wrong-headedness, or

“These men were making these awful decisions, stereotypical decisions ... that [pregnant teachers] weren’t capable of teaching, and ... we couldn’t stand erect anymore, or our center of gravity would be so off that we would be tilting over.”

—Jo Carol Nessel-Sale



(Left) Jo Carol Nessel-Sale (formerly LaFleur) today. (Below) In 1974, LaFleur was featured in the *NEA Reporter*, for her role in the Supreme Court case that allowed pregnant teachers to stay in the classroom; LaFleur with her son, Michael, the baby at the center of the case.

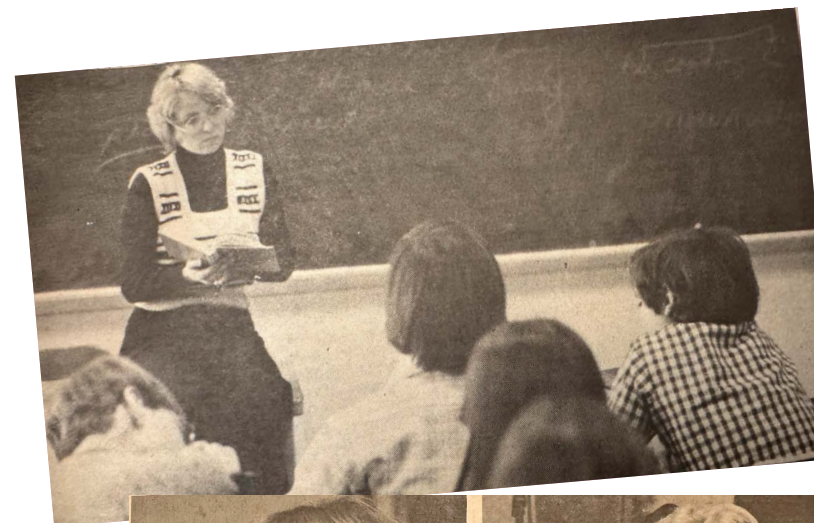
“I reminded [the principal] that my students had already lost one teacher that school year, and it was not in their best interest to have to lose a second one, especially when there was no reason for it,” Nessel-Sale wrote in the law review article.

The principal responded coldly: “He gave me a copy of the teacher’s manual and a maternity leave form. The meeting ended.”

She appealed to her building representative for the Cleveland Teachers Union. Unfortunately, he wasn’t supportive. Nessel-Sale still remembers what he said: “Just go home, have the baby.”

She reflects, “These men were making these awful decisions, stereotypical decisions ... that [pregnant teachers] weren’t capable of teaching, and ... we couldn’t stand erect anymore, or our center of gravity would be so off that we would be tilting over.”

Undaunted, she called the library of Cleveland’s newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, and asked for the name of a women’s liberation group. This led her to Jane Picker, a lawyer who took her case pro bono on behalf of the Women’s Law Fund Inc.



wrong-headedness wins,” she explains in a recent interview with *NEA Today*. “I didn’t want to be someone who didn’t try to stand against ignorance and sexism and discrimination,” she says. “I just couldn’t bear it if I didn’t do everything I could.”

Her anger was not only about how she was being treated. She was also deeply concerned about the impact of her midyear departure on her 25 students—a group of seventh-grade girls who had been identified as being at high risk of dropping out of school.

Nessel-Sale recalls that throughout the year, the girls had tested and challenged her, but she had gained their trust. The idea of leaving in the middle of the year? She couldn’t think of anything worse for her students.

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Initially, they drew a conservative federal district court judge. “To no one’s surprise, but to my great dismay,” Nessel-Sale later wrote, the judge ruled against her in May 1971.

NEA gets involved

Despite the fact that she wasn’t an NEA member (Cleveland’s union was part of the American Federation of Teachers), NEA jumped in to support the appeal.

“Although NEA does not usually support non-members,” explained the *NEA Reporter* back in 1974, the association entered the cases of LaFleur and two other teachers, Susan Cohen and Elizabeth Nelson,

“because of their nationwide implications for teachers.”

NEA invested \$25,000 in these cases (nearly \$170,000 in today’s dollars) and filed an amicus brief on LaFleur’s behalf. While the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in her favor, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against Cohen. The U.S. Supreme Court took up the case to resolve the dueling circuit court opinions.

It was at this point, Nessel-Sale says, that she began to understand that her case was “kind of a big deal.” In February 1974, *Time* magazine ran a picture of her. “You don’t get your picture in *Time* magazine if you don’t have a little something going for you,” she laughs.

Ultimately, legal and financial support from organizations including NEA and the ACLU’s Women’s Rights Project (headed by a young Ruth Bader Ginsburg) helped pave the way for the Supreme Court victory—and inspired Nessel-Sale to become a lawyer herself.

She told the *NEA Reporter* that soon after she won the case, she overheard a conversation in an evening art class: “A teacher there expressed delight that teachers no longer have to resign at a specified time early in their pregnancy because ‘some teachers’ won a Supreme Court case. I didn’t tell [the teacher] it was me, but I just beamed on the inside.”



Ohio teacher Annelise Taggart—shown with her daughter, Bea, son, Franklin, and husband, Michael—successfully advocated for paid family leave through her local union.

Educators Unions Are Winning Paid Family Leave Across the Country

These NEA affiliates took a stand for paid family leave—and won!

- In the 2022 contract ratified by the Malden Education Association, in Massachusetts, teachers get six weeks of paid leave after the birth or adoption of a child. They can also use 6 more weeks of accrued sick leave, for a total of 12 weeks.
- In 2023, members of The South Carolina Education Association wrote emails, made phone calls, and met with state legislators, urging them to pass paid family leave legislation for school employees. Their advocacy paid off:

LEARN MORE

South Carolina passed a law providing every school employee with six weeks of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child.

- Education Minnesota was a key member of Minnesotans for Paid Family and Medical Leave, a coalition of health, faith, labor, business, and community organizations that fought to establish paid

family leave statewide. The new law, signed by Gov. Tim Walz in 2023, provides up to 12 weeks of paid leave for all Minnesota workers after the birth or adoption of a child, as well as for other qualifying events, such as family caregiving needs or military deployment. Workers who need leave from both categories can take up to 20 weeks. The law takes effect in 2026.

Want to learn more about paid family leave benefits in your state? Visit the Bipartisan Policy Center at bit.ly/BPCFamilyLeave.

NOW

Nessel-Sale’s victory was a watershed moment in advancing women’s rights in the workplace. Educators today are building on her success, as they advocate for paid family leave that will give them the adequate time off to care for their new children.

Ohio art teacher Annelise Taggart is among the educators carrying on Nessel-Sale’s fight. Taggart was part of the Columbus Education Association (CEA) bargaining team in 2022, and championed the inclusion of paid family leave in the union’s contract.

“We need this,” she would repeat at CEA town halls and at the bargaining table.

CEA eventually went on strike for three days before agreeing to a new contract that included paid family leave for the first time.

A Columbus teacher can now use her sick bank for the first 10 days after the birth of her child. The district covers 20 additional paid days, for a total of 6 weeks. (Non-birthing parents get three weeks.)

Taggart had a personal reason to be excited about the new contract: She was 10 weeks pregnant. “When we finally came to an agreement, it was 3 a.m.,” she recalls. “One of my teammates turned to

me and said, ‘So now you can start working on having another kid.’”

Taggart responded: “Well, actually, I’m going to be one of the first people to be able to utilize our paid family leave because, *surprise*, I’m pregnant!”

After the birth of her daughter, Taggart was especially grateful for the new contract because she experienced post-partum anxiety.

She says: “Realizing I have this paid family leave that we won in our contract and not having that additional stress, when I was already having all kinds of emotional stuff that I was working through, ... that was really, really wonderful.”



“We need this.”

—Annelise Taggart’s words to her union and at the bargaining table about the need for paid family leave.

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Game On! Unified Sports Build Fun and Friendship

There's no mistaking game day at Billingsley Elementary, in White Plains, Md. Every Saturday for seven weeks in February and March, the gym fills with the sound of a dribbling basketball, the chirp of sneakers on the court, and the excited cheers of fans. But the best sound of all is the laughter of the players, like Raevyn Mapson. A member of the Mattawoman Middle School Unified Sports team, Mapson is one of six Charles County elementary and middle school teams that play each week.

"I love it," says Mapson, who has an intellectual disability and epilepsy. "Shooting baskets with my team makes me happy."

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the law that requires a free, appropriate education for millions of students with disabilities. Unified sports help achieve the goals of IDEA by fostering inclusion and removing barriers to school activities.

The program brings students with and without disabilities together to play basketball, soccer, track and field, and other sports. The rules and scoring are the same, but it's not about who wins. It's about building community and understanding.

The students with disabilities learn about sports, teamwork, and belonging. The other students, called partners, learn about leadership and empathy. Everyone learns about friendship.

"If you want to put a smile on your face, come to a unified sports game," says Steven Baldo, a Charles County ESOL teacher who volunteers at the games. Learn more at nea.org/UnifiedSports.



(Clockwise from top, right) Maryland educators Steven Baldo and Marissa Murdock volunteer with the Unified Basketball team at Indian Head Elementary; students dribble down the court; an adaptive hoop provides baskets at different heights; student Raevyn Mapson gets a hug from her niece; Jalin Medina celebrates a basket!



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