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August 2025

neaToday



Erika Ryan
is a bilingual
family
specialist in
Virginia.



**LET'S GET
LOUD!**

**YOU HAVE THE
RIGHT TO SPEAK UP
FOR YOURSELF AND
YOUR STUDENTS**

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inside

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the Answer** PAGE 36

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SPECIAL PULLOUT SECTION

Know Your Rights

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EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

One Job Should Be Enough

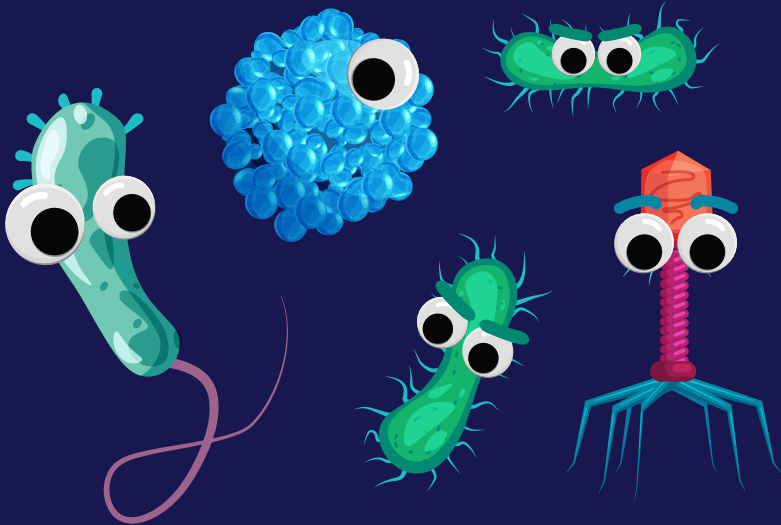
18 NEA's ESP Bill of Rights campaign is catching on across the country, helping NEA state affiliates advocate for better pay, safer working conditions, and affordable health care.



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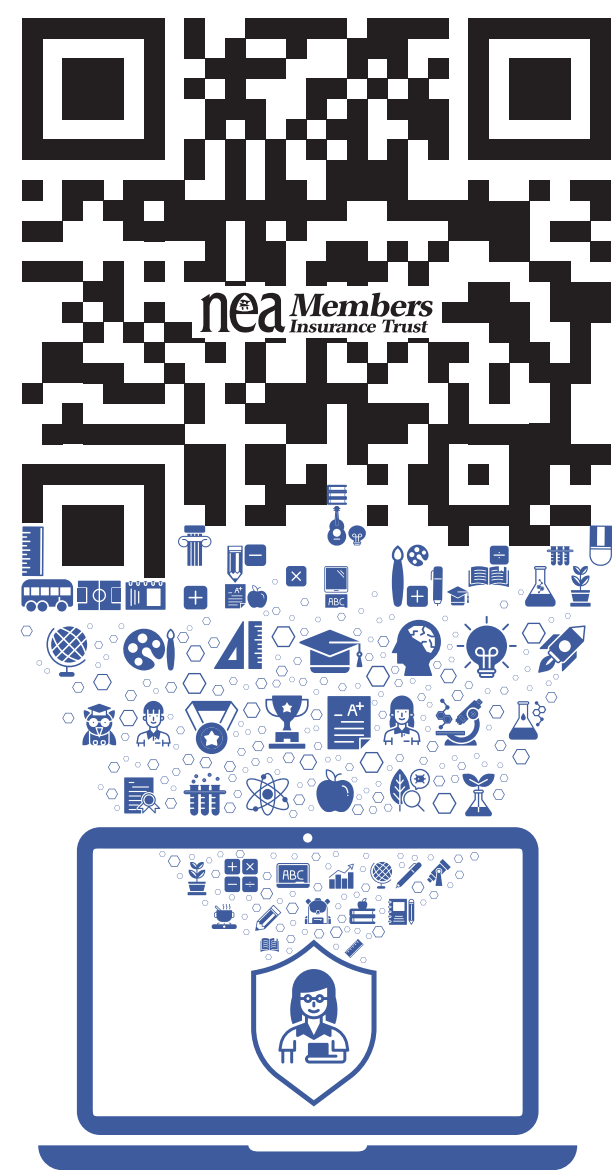
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COVER: JATI LINDSEY; ABOVE FROM LEFT: CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION; JENNIFER POTTHEISER; EDWARD CALDWELL

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

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

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

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CLOSE TO *home*

Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!

Meet these inspiring educators and many others in this magazine.



A. JACKSON



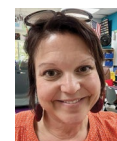
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T. JACKSON



SOTELO



HUGHES



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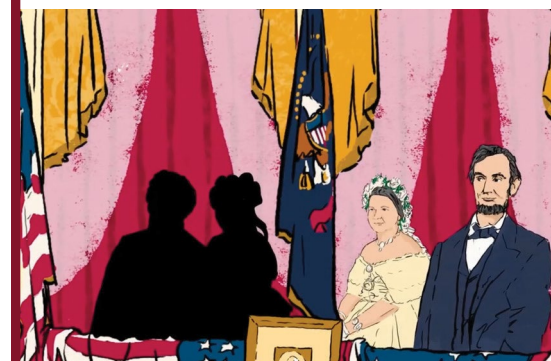


Photo: Makematic

- Learn about what happened at Ford's Theatre.
- Follow the investigation and the trial of the conspirators.
- Explore how Lincoln's living legacy continues to impact our nation.



Visit the Teaching and Learning
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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



“

“Enough of the ICE raids. Enough of the cruelty and hate. Enough of the division and disrespect. ... We will not scapegoat immigrants. We will not stand by and let you do that.”

—Becky, in June, calling for the release of David Huerta, president of the Service Employees International Union California, who was arrested while protesting immigration raids in Los Angeles.

Face to Face with NEA members

On May Day, with educators from all over the U.S. by my side, I marched to within a few hundred yards of the White House to demand that all working people be respected, safe, and celebrated—and not terrified and dehumanized, as is currently happening across the nation. I am so inspired by and grateful for the NEA members who are rallying across the country for our core values: diversity, inclusion, access, and equity. I'm also grateful for the NEA members who uphold these values in their worksites and classrooms, like the one I visited in an Anaheim, Calif., community school this spring. Find out how you can join the movement for justice at nea.org/EdJustice.



(Top) In Washington, D.C., I marched with NEA members from around the country. We will not let billionaires further line their pockets with funds that should be going to our schools! (Bottom) In Anaheim, Calif., I visited Veronica Lopez's class at Loara High School. Thank you, Veronica!

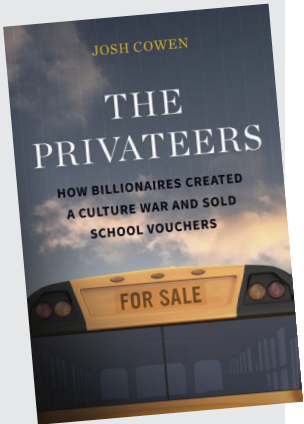
In the News: Community Schools

“I recently visited a classroom in California where students were learning about *Mendez v. Westminster*, the Supreme Court school desegregation case that preceded *Brown v. Board*. It was such a joy to see the teacher preparing students for really high-level conversations and to see them have those discussions, in English and Spanish. ... Teachers are not walking away from the core values of this country, which are diversity, inclusion, access, and equity.”

—Becky, on MSNBC's *Katy Tur Reports*

What I'm Reading: On Vouchers

“I did not want to write this book.” That's the first line of *The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers*, a new book from NEA's 2025 Friend of Education, Josh Cowen. He continues, “My fear is that the weight of evidence against the schemes I write about in this book is already so heavy—and seemingly to no avail, ... but I hope not.” (Me too, Professor Cowen!) In this book, Cowen provides all the evidence we need to show that vouchers aren't about helping kids, but are all about helping billionaires. And yet, politicians persist. And yet, so do we. Learn more about how to stop the spread of vouchers at nea.org/Vouchers.



JOIN ME 3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

- 1. Keep up and speak up!**
Federal attacks on public education—on you, your students, and our profession—are unrelenting. Find NEA's latest resources and take action at nea.org/Protect.
- 2. Stand up for immigrant students.**
As so many of our families are targeted for illegal deportations, you can help by sharing free, pocket-sized “red cards,” which list the rights afforded to all people under the U.S. Constitution. For example, we all have the right to remain silent when questioned by immigration officers. Download the cards at ilrc.org/Red-Cards.
- 3. Make a date!**
Now is the perfect time to take note of the calendar of events hosted by your local and state unions—and get them into your personal planners. Your involvement will make us all stronger!

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



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On Father's Day I remember the legacy of my father—a dedicated history teacher both in the classroom and at home. I honor that legacy every day by speaking out, fighting book bans, and teaching truth.

June 15, 2025 at 12:31 PM

Everybody can reply

HUGE WIN!

NEA Defends Inclusive Education

NEA and its partners sued the Trump administration over efforts to squash inclusive education. In a huge victory, in April, a federal court granted a preliminary injunction blocking the policy while the court case is ongoing. The ruling's impact included:

- **Halting enforcement** of the Department of Education's (ED) Feb. 14 "Dear Colleague" letter, which threatened to cut federal funding from schools supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.
- **Blocking the April 3 deadline** for schools to sign the letter.
- **Prohibiting use** of the "End DEI" portal—where people could report DEI teachings—in any school that has at least one NEA member. This victory signals that ED's actions likely exceeded its authority.

NEA Challenges Collective Bargaining Bans

The Federal Education Association, an NEA affiliate, filed a lawsuit challenging President Donald Trump's executive order banning collective bargaining for federal workers,



including educators on military bases. The suit argues the order violates the First and Fifth amendments and is an abuse of power.

NEA President Becky Pringle affirmed the union's strong support, stating that silencing educators harms students and democracy. "We're not going to sit by silently," Pringle says.

NEA Grant Boosts Leadership in Arizona

With support from an NEA Great Public Schools Fund Grant (nea.org/GPSFund), the Arizona Education Association (AEA) is expanding leadership development opportunities. By strengthening its union, AEA is advancing racial and social justice, retaining educators, and creating inclusive schools for all students. The grant funding will go toward:

- Providing **resources and trainings** in Spanish that will empower bilingual members to get more involved in the union.
- Offering **coaching to affinity groups**—formed around a shared interest or common goal—to support diverse voices.
- Training leaders to **facilitate tough conversations** about race, including topics such as decolonization, dismantling and disrupting racism, and educational inequities.
- Building **safe spaces** where all educators feel a sense of belonging.



324,000+ signatures were gathered—more than twice the required 140,748.

18 NEA state affiliates helped Utah members gather signatures, process packets, and coordinate media efforts.

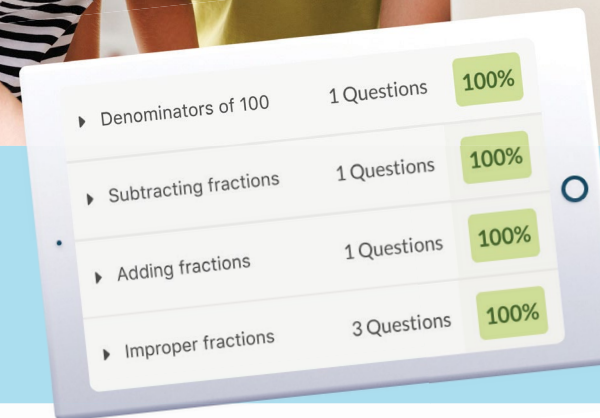
5,000+ volunteers mobilized.

NEA Helps Utah Educators Get a Referendum on the 2026 Ballot

The Utah state legislature recently passed a law banning collective bargaining for all public workers—including educators—stripping them of the right to negotiate over wages, benefits, and working conditions. In response, the Utah Education Association and the Utah School Employees Association mobilized as part of the Protect Utah Workers Coalition.

In just 30 days, the coalition led the most successful signature-gathering effort in Utah's history to qualify a referendum for the 2026 general election.

The coalition collected signatures in **all of Utah's 29 state Senate districts.**



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MEET THE 2025 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Ashlie Crosson, an English teacher in Lewistown, Penn., has been named the 2025 National Teacher of the Year by the Council of Chief State School Officers. Crosson's story is a testament to the impact educators can have on their students' lives. As the 2025 National Teacher of the Year, Crosson will spend a year representing educators and serving as an ambassador for the teaching profession. "It feels like a big responsibility, but it's also this incredible chance to share my kids and community with our country," she told *CBS Mornings*. "Ashlie embodies our core belief that public schools and educators spark imagination, cultivate curiosity and critical thinking, and open doors for every student," said NEA President Becky Pringle.

A passion for journalism

Crosson teaches English 10 and Advanced Placement language and composition at Mifflin County High School. She's also a member of the Association of Mifflin County Educators, the Pennsylvania State Education Association, and NEA. Growing up in Lewistown, Crosson found inspiration in her teachers and counselors and dreamed of teaching English in her hometown. Later, as a first-generation college student, she earned her bachelor's degree in English with a minor in journalism from Pennsylvania's Susquehanna University. She went on to earn a master's degree in educational leadership at Penn State as well as a gifted endorsement from Pennsylvania's Millersville University.



In 2020, Crosson returned to her hometown where her passion for teaching and journalism helped shape the work she is doing today. After reviving the journalism program at her school, Crosson began advising the production of the school newspaper and district magazine, respectively. Former student Mina Phillips told *CBS Mornings* that Crosson taught her everything she knows about writing. "Miss Crosson [is] a huge part of who I am professionally," said Phillips, who now writes for Lewistown's local newspaper, *The Sentinel*.



"I aim to cultivate a classroom where all students feel empowered to succeed."

—Ashlie Crosson, National Teacher of the Year (above)

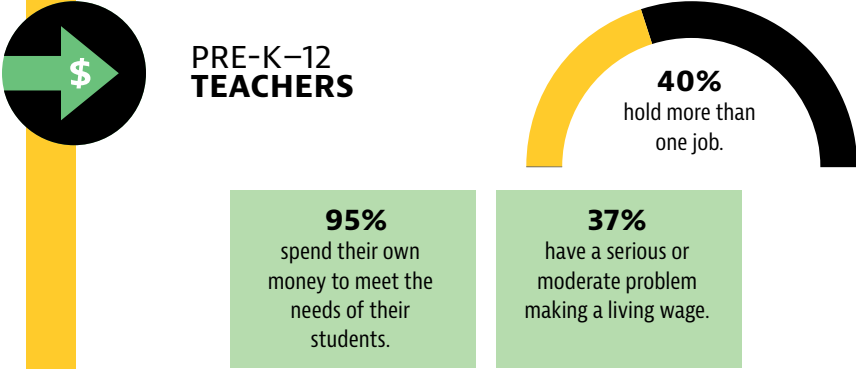
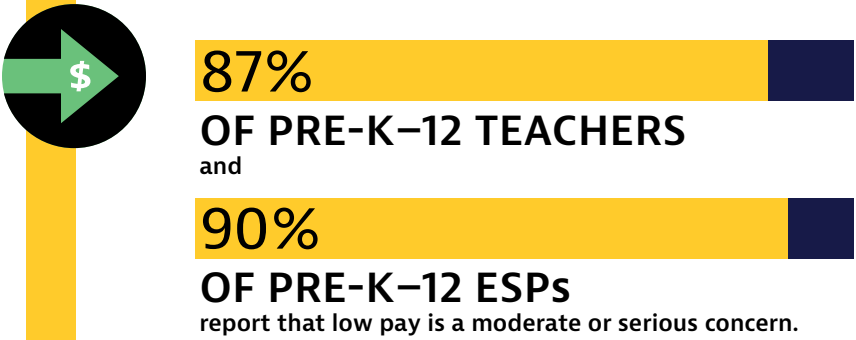
A global perspective

In 2018, Crosson participated in the yearlong Fulbright Teacher for Global Classrooms Program, which trains educators to equip students with a global perspective. The fellowship helped Crosson reframe curricula to foster students' global citizenship. She also teaches Survival Stories, an elective that looks at global humanitarian crises from a youth perspective. "I aim to cultivate a classroom where all students feel empowered to succeed and to become informed, compassionate individuals who are prepared to navigate the complexities of our global society."

—TAKIER GEORGE

PHOTOS: BRETT SIMS

AT A GLANCE: ESPs' AND TEACHERS' FINANCIAL HEALTH



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WORKING CONDITIONS ARE STILL A CHALLENGE

Working conditions are a top issue for teachers across the country, according to a recent study by University of Missouri researchers Sofia P. Baker and Cory Koedel. The study found that teacher working conditions have declined significantly in the last few years, especially around key indicators of safety, student disruptiveness, innovation, the quality of classroom discussions, and trust among teachers, parents, and administrators. The rate of the decline was the same at schools with high and low rates of student poverty—although teachers at wealthier schools reported better working conditions overall. And the rate of decline was worse at schools that stayed online longer during the pandemic, especially on issues of trust and on some student-focused measures, such as the quality of student discussions and reflective dialogue. So, what’s driving these declines? “We don’t have data into what exactly is causing teachers to report that their working conditions are deteriorating,” Koedel says. “But the data is certainly



consistent with it being more difficult for teachers to manage their classrooms.” But through their unions, NEA members are addressing these issues. They are winning smaller class sizes in Washington state; additional duty-free time in Massachusetts; and more funding to hire specialized educators who work on student behavior and mental health. Local and state unions have also won greater professional autonomy. Learn more about improving your working conditions in the “Know Your Rights” special section (Page 25).

Starting Teacher Salaries Increase

According to the 2025 NEA Teacher Salary Benchmark Report, released in April, the national average beginning teacher salary was \$46,526—a 4.4 percent increase over the previous year. That’s the largest increase in the 15 years that NEA has been tracking teacher salary benchmarks. However, inflation over the past 16 years has eroded salary increases, so inflation-adjusted starting salaries are now \$3,728 less than during the 2008 – 2009 school year. The percentage of school districts paying new teachers a starting salary of at least \$50,000 increased significantly to 30 percent, up from 23.2 percent in the prior year.

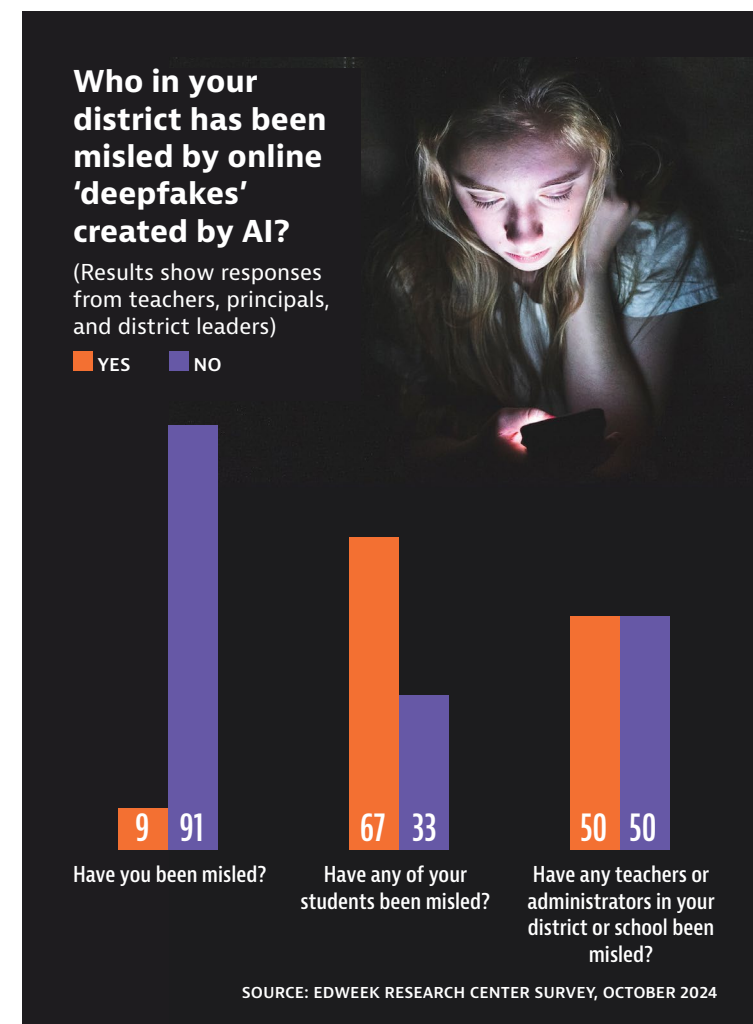


PHOTOS FROM TOP: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK

AI DEEPFAKES: A DISTURBING TREND IN SCHOOL CYBERBULLYING

“Deepfakes” have been making their way into middle schools and high schools across the country. A deepfake, as defined in NEA’s policy statement on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in education, is an “AI-generated image, video, or audio file that convincingly replaces one person’s likeness and/or voice with another person’s.” These deepfakes, along with “revenge porn” (non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit images), doxing (sharing private information about someone), and swatting (prank calls to emergency services), have a severe impact on students’ lives and their mental health. The number of AI deepfakes have been growing, and more students—mostly girls—are being exposed to them, says Laura Tierney, the founder and CEO of The Social Institute, which educates people on responsible social media use. In a 2024 *Education Week* survey, two-thirds of educators reported that their students had been misled by deepfakes. “One photo posted online is all that’s needed to create a deepfake, so this is an issue that can impact nearly every student,” Tierney says.

—KALIE WALKER



“Comics and graphic novels allow students to connect with curriculum more deeply, especially if they see themselves in the story. Comic books serve as a time capsule that reflects the news of the day, as history is happening. History isn’t just kings and queens, battles and dates; it’s made up of stories from a time and place. Comics, which come out weekly, can be used as historical artifacts from different eras.”

—Tim Smyth, high school social studies teacher in Pennsylvania.

Learn how teachers across the country use comics and graphic novels to supplement classroom lessons and engage students at nea.org/comics.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES; TIM SMYTH

READY ... SET ... ADVOCATE FOR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS!

By Amanda Litvinov

Beryl Torrence knows how to get her crew organized. As assistant director of transportation operations for Kannapolis City Schools, in North Carolina, she figures out the routes and keeps a stable roster of drivers and subs.

As president of the Kannapolis Association of Educators, Torrence puts the pedal to the metal when organizing members to advocate for their students and their profession. One of their many successes was increasing bus driver pay from \$12 to \$18.50 per hour, in 2022, which helped them avoid the bus driver shortage that has frustrated communities across the country.

Now, Torrence and her members are accelerating the North Carolina Association of Educators' campaign to pass a statewide ESP Bill of Rights. (What is this? Flip to Page 18 to learn more.)



Beryl Torrence

Her advice to other union members: "Do not be afraid to speak out. Whether you are speaking to building leaders or going to school board meetings or sending messages to elected leaders, your voice needs to be heard," Torrence says. "When you tell decision-makers about your job, your students, and your school, they will be more likely to listen to your feedback on how policies would help or hurt."

As attacks on public schools come from every level of government, your voice is needed now more than ever. What follows are five tips for how to tune up your skills, plus more words of encouragement from some of NEA's all-star activists! 🌟

How to Dial Up Your Advocacy

1.

Get the latest activist alerts in NEA's Action Center.

Check out your state association's website. Sign up for email updates, read articles, and identify tools to help you reach out to the elected leaders who represent you. Get started at nea.org/action.

2.

Become more active in your local and state associations.

Participate in meetings and volunteer for committees or roles on issue campaigns. Attend rallies and lobby days—and invite others to join you!

3.

Walk the walk!

Build community support by organizing a "walk-in" sponsored by your union. At these positive events, community members and educators gather at local schools and enter the building in unison to show solidarity.

4.

Cultivate more public school advocates.

Invite colleagues, friends, and family to join the fight for strong public schools. Activist voices are stronger together!

5.

Counter misinformation the right way!

Don't comment on online content that smears public schools. Even if you disagree, your comments only boost the bad posts! Instead, create social media posts or articles that give an accurate picture of what's happening in schools and call out enemies of public education.

Get inspired by these all-star activists!



JASSMIN CLARK
Elementary school teacher, Nash County, North Carolina,
District Teacher of the Year

Most meaningful win: Spoke up when the school district took away educators' health coverage for the summer months. She helped organize members to protest and eventually persuaded the board to reverse its decision.

Her best advice:

Turn to your union for guidance and support. "My union helped me realize how I could contribute when



Jassmin Clark

it came to speaking up for our students," Clark says. "My local also supported me and made it possible for me to take time to heal after my father's passing. ... Remember that your union is full of people who care about your professional and personal well-being!"



ERIN BRAUNE
English teacher, Silver Creek School Corporation, Sellersburg, Indiana

Most meaningful win: Launched a members-only Facebook group that gained more than 20,000 members and helped the Indiana State

Teachers Association defeat a bill that would have banned teaching "divisive concepts" in schools.

Her best advice:

If an elected leader introduces a harmful bill, don't think of them as your opposition, think of them

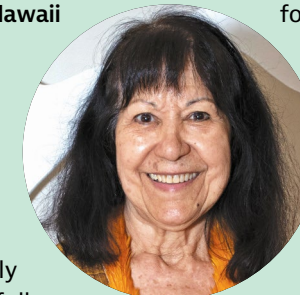
as someone who needs more education on the issue. "A lot of our state lawmakers don't necessarily realize what the bills they propose are going to look like when they're applied in a school setting," Braune says. Educators are best positioned to explain to lawmakers and the broader

community how proposed legislation could undermine public education.



LAVERNE FERNANDES MOORE
Retired in 2024 after 55 of years teaching; past president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, Honolulu Chapter

Most meaningful win: Among Moore's earliest victories, in the late 1970s and early 1980s she successfully pushed Congress to add ethnic subgroups to the designation of Asian people on the U.S. Census. More recently, in 2022, she lobbied the state leg-



Laverne Fernandes Moore

islature to restore movement on the salary scale and secure funding for Native Hawaiian programs in schools.

Her best advice: Get involved in your union, and don't take anything for granted!

"Remember that those who came before you sacrificed for the wins that you enjoy today," Moore says. "The union leaders who came before me mortgaged their homes to get the union off the ground here in Hawaii. I'm standing on their shoulders, and the next generation stands on mine."

ONE JOB SHOULD BE ENOUGH

12 STATES ADOPT NEA'S
ESP BILL OF RIGHTS,
CALLING FOR FAIR
PAY, BETTER WORKING
CONDITIONS, AND
RESPECT

By Cindy Long

Averie Jackson's connection to her school community goes back five generations.

Her great-grandfather Patrecio worked as a custodian at West Middle School, in Kansas City, Kan., thinking it would be a stepping stone toward providing a better life for his family. Over time, he would teach himself English, work his way up to head custodian, and stay in that position until he retired.

Today, Jackson is a preschool teaching assistant in the same district, but she doesn't experience that kind of security and upward mobility. She is not alone. Most education support professionals (ESPs) don't earn enough to support families, so it's difficult to stay in the jobs they love until retirement, unless they have second or even third jobs.

ESP Bill of Rights in Kansas

As a member of Kansas NEA, Jackson helped launch a statewide ESP Bill of Rights campaign to advocate for higher salaries and improved benefits for herself and fellow ESPs in her state.

Now she feels more optimistic about a long career in the district, which is so intertwined with her family history. Her grandmother also worked in the city's schools, and Jackson and her parents all attended school there as well. Today, her own children are students in the district.

"With membership in the union and our ESP Bill of Rights, NEA has given me a larger platform to advocate for my community," Jackson says. "I want children who grew up just like me to see what I am doing as something possible—for them to believe

Averie Jackson

tells them that young Black and brown kids can be."

A growing movement

In 2023, NEA President Becky Pringle called upon state affiliates around the country to join NEA's ESP Bill of Rights campaign, which outlines the needs and wants of ESPs.

Today, Kansas is one of 12 NEA affiliates that have adopted or are preparing to launch the Bill of Rights in the near

Maryland State Education Association (MSEA) ESP members sign the state's ESP Bill of Rights. MSEA offers presentations to other states interested in launching their own Bill of Rights campaign.

future. States are using the campaign to advocate for issues like fair compensation, safe working environments, and access to affordable health care.

The campaign is in full swing in Massachusetts, Maryland, and Illinois, where ESps are already reaping the benefits. Maryland's Howard County school district paid for its 2,500 paraeducators to have access to devices. In Massachusetts, Weymouth ESps won a 35.5 percent wage increase!

Vermont launched an Educators' Bill of Rights that includes ESP and certified members. Arizona, Kansas, Wisconsin, and North Carolina have kicked off their ESP campaigns; and Colorado, Delaware, Michigan, and Washington, are preparing to kick off their Bill of Rights as well.

By banding together for collective action, these ESps are demanding respect and fairness.

Support from Congress

Amid the Trump administration's attacks on public education, U.S. Sen. Edward J. Markey, from Massachusetts, reintroduced the Paraprofessionals and Education Support Staff Bill of Rights—a national resolution calling for dignified wages, benefits, and working conditions for paraeducators, classroom assistants, bus drivers, custodial workers, and other essential school staff.

The resolution is co-sponsored by Sens. Cory Booker, of New Jersey; Martin Heinrich, from New Mexico; Jeff Merkley, of Oregon; Alex Padilla, from California; Bernie Sanders, from Vermont; and Elizabeth Warren, from Massachusetts.

"ESps play a critical role in ... ensuring students are safe, healthy, and ready to learn every day," Pringle says. "Unfortunately, they often don't receive the compensation, benefits, or recognition they truly deserve. Passing the [resolution] would show that Congress recognizes and values the essential contributions of these dedicated workers." 🌟

NEA's ESP Bill of Rights

All ESps deserve:

Fair compensation—One job should be enough! ESps should not have to work multiple jobs to maintain financial independence.

Recognition and respect—ESps play a vital role on the education team and in students' lives inside and outside the classroom. They keep our schools running and our students safe, healthy, and ready to learn every day. They deserve to be respected and recognized as accomplished professionals.

A safe and healthy work environment—ESps deserve a safe and healthy workplace that is free of violence, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, and free of exposure to hazardous materials. ESps deserve clear safety protocols, appropriate supplies, safely maintained equipment, training on workplace regulations, and whistleblower protections.

Affordable health care—ESps should have access to affordable health insurance.

Paid leave—ESps deserve paid leave, including personal days, sick days, parental/caregiver leave, and Family and Medical Leave Act benefits.

Professional learning and career advancement—ESps deserve high-quality, job-related professional learning and accessible opportunities for career advancement. Seniority rights must be protected when ESps pursue promotions and request transfers, and at times of layoffs or furlough.

Workload and staffing—ESps have the right to a workload that allows them to excel in their assigned positions. ESps deserve a voice in establishing fully staffed shifts, clear work protocols, and resources that support their careers.

Retirement—ESps have the right to a secure retirement. All their years of service should count toward a pension.

Protection from privatization—ESps should be free of the threats of privatization that risk the stability of school communities, silence the voice of employees, and further undermine the value of the services they provide in their jobs.

Right to bargain—ESps deserve a strong voice in their workplace that includes the right to join their union and advocate for the rights and protections they deserve. Bargaining and advocacy ensure they enhance student learning and improve educator working conditions—benefiting students, schools, and the community as a whole.

Launch an ESP Bill of Rights campaign in your state

Find sample bargaining language, sample legislation, webinars, and all the tools you need for a successful campaign at nea.org/ESPBillofRights.

TAKE
ACTION

TRY
THIS

engage

FOLLOW THE WISDOM OF TED LASSO

THAT’S MY ADVICE TO FELLOW TEACHERS

By Steve Kucinski, English teacher, Ohio Education Association



In the Apple TV+ comedy *Ted Lasso*, the title character—played by Jason Sudeikis (left, center, and below)—is an American football coach turned British soccer coach who often wins more hearts than matches. (Bottom, left) Lasso’s team in the locker room.



I am entering year 31 in education, so I have certainly been around the block (a lot of blocks). But I believe that some teaching advice can and should apply to all educators—including new teachers and veterans, like me. For guidance, I often turn to the wise words of fictional TV soccer coach and fan favorite Ted Lasso.

‘Be a goldfish’

Ted Lasso reminds his soccer (or “football,” as the Brits call it) team that goldfish are the happiest animals on Earth because they have a 10-second memory. Each day, you will make mistakes or find yourself thinking of ways you could have done something better. That can be overwhelming. You must move on to the next moment, next student, next class, next lesson. Greet them at the door with a smile even though your mind wants to analyze something you want to do differently next time. Monitor and adjust, yes, even on the fly—but don’t dwell on mistakes and paralyze yourself. Mistakes will happen. Think this is smug advice from a veteran teacher? No way! My 30th year was one of the toughest of my career



precisely because I fell into this way of thinking and felt that someone of my experience should never allow this to happen. Very toxic. Be a goldfish.

‘Be curious, not judgmental’

Ted Lasso invokes this quote—often misattributed to Walt Whitman—that’s all about balance. New teachers do not have to choose either the, “keep your mouth shut and listen,” or the, “monopolize the meeting so you are heard” extremes. Read the room; pick and choose the right times. Absolutely keep your ears open when those with more experience are talking. But that does not mean every word applies 100 percent to you. And you have a lot to offer, or you would

not have gotten the job. Be patient and contribute as occasions arise. To this day, I remember my first team meeting as a brand-new teacher. A topic came up, and I saw my chance to speak with authority. It did not go over well, and that was on me for the poor timing and the arrogant delivery. My learned teammate provided me with an “adjustment.” She was older than me and spoke with a Southern drawl: “We do not need you coming in here telling us how things are with your zero years of experience.” Later, my mentor told me, “Yeah, don’t do that.” I needed to consider balance. But I also needed those veterans around me to be patient and coach me, not to silence me. They did, and soon I was able to contribute meaningfully and at the right times. For that, I am grateful. “Be curious, not judgmental” applies to all of us.

‘Taking on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse, isn’t it? If you’re comfortable while you’re doing it, you’re probably doing it wrong.’ Teaching is a challenge, and the first few years can be especially so. Some will advise you just to focus on your teaching

and not take on any extras ... at all. I will suggest the opposite (within reason), even if it’s a bit uncomfortable. Join committees, volunteer for small tasks, get in “the room where it happens” as often as you can. You will meet people, form a positive impression, and often see doors open to you that you would never have known existed.

‘I feel like we fell out of the lucky tree and hit every branch on the way down, ended up in a pool of cash and Sour Patch Kids.’

You are going to have bad days. I was given the finger by a student on my very first day of teaching, in 1993. You will recover. But you would not be here if you were not qualified, and you would not be here if you didn’t want to be. Like all teachers, you have the talent and ability to do many things as a career. You chose this. You are joining, as a colleague, a huge group of amazing humans. And we get to help a whole bunch of amazing, younger humans to learn, grow, and develop. You may not see the pool of cash, but I do hope you see the lucky tree.

‘We don’t not care. We care very much. We care about who you are and what you must have been going through. And from now on, you don’t have to go through it by yourself.’

This line is from a very powerful episode centering on acceptance and how we should show it. In teaching, not interfering with someone is oddly sometimes a way we

convey that what they are doing is okay—as in, “we don’t care” if that’s what they choose to do and how they choose to do it. But as Ted points out, that’s not enough, because it may be perceived as unsupportive. There may be times when you feel isolated, so seek out those colleagues who make you feel seen and heard. Look for those marigolds. And consider your potential to be one of them, too.

‘I hope that either all of us or none of us are judged by the actions of our weakest moments, but rather by the strength we show when and if we’re given a second chance.’

This one is for everyone: students, teachers, parents, custodians, office staff, and administrators. It goes nicely with remembering that everyone has battles they are fighting, some of which we know nothing about. Be kind and be available. You may not always be the person who can help, but you can always be the person who cares. Finally, I hope you find a colleague who lifts you up like Ted Lasso does for his team. In his words, “You beating yourself up is like Woody Allen playing the clarinet. I don’t want to hear it.” Good luck, remember to have fun, and thanks for being a teacher.

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Steve Kucinski (left) is a National Board Certified Teacher and has taught at Ohio’s Dublin Coffman High School for 25 years. He was selected as the District 7 Ohio Teacher of the Year for 2024.



TRY THIS Technology

6 WAYS TO ORGANIZE YOUR DIGITAL CLASSROOM

THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR IS THE PERFECT TIME TO SET UP NEW TIME-SAVING SYSTEMS

By Jeff Bradbury, technology teacher, Connecticut Education Association



As educators head back to school, one of their biggest challenges is managing an ever-growing mountain of digital files, resources, and student data. Consider this: How many times have you spent precious minutes searching for that perfect worksheet you created last year? Or how often have you re-created a resource because finding the original seemed more time-consuming than starting from scratch?

These moments of digital disorganization add up, stealing precious time from our school days. Try these strategies to overcome digital chaos and run a well-oiled teaching machine.

1. Create a standardized filing system.

Begin your school year by organizing your content into main folders based on subjects, units, or grade levels. Create an intuitive system that allows for easy access to all of your teaching resources:

- **Make** color-coded folders to visually organize different subjects or units.
- **Develop** a consistent naming system for all files (e.g., Subject_Unit_LessonNumber_Description).

- **Set up** separate folders for administrative tasks, student work, and teaching resources.

2. Implement a digital task management system.

Set up a tracking system that helps you manage both immediate and long-term projects:

- **Use** a task tracker application such as Google Tasks or Microsoft To Do to organize daily, weekly, and monthly responsibilities. Many of them integrate directly into your email or calendar platform and send notifications to your mobile devices.
- **Create** digital checklists in Google Docs or Microsoft Word to break down recurring tasks and procedures.
- **Set up** email rules in Gmail or Microsoft Outlook to automatically sort and organize incoming messages.

3. Establish a data dashboard.

Transform how you track and analyze student progress by creating a centralized data dashboard that gives you quick access to important information:

- **Try** applications such as Google Sites, Notion, or Microsoft Excel to input, track, and present valuable data.
- **Track** student progress and performance with Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.
- **Create** dynamic charts and graphs to visualize class data in Google Slides or Microsoft PowerPoint.
- **Maintain** digital records of student work samples and assessments.

4. Build a digital resource library.

Organize your teaching materials in a way that makes them easily accessible and shareable with colleagues and students:

- **Sort** resources in Google Drive or Microsoft OneNote by subject area, unit, or learning objective.

- **Create** a system to track which resources work best for different learning styles.
- **Use** bookmarks in your web browser to organize frequently visited websites or online files.

5. Develop a communication hub.

Streamline your communication channels to ensure important information is easily accessible and well-organized:

- **Set up** templates for common email communications to students and parents.
- **Create** organized spaces for student and parent communications.
- **Maintain** a digital log of important meetings.



6. Set yourself up for success.

The key to successful digital organization is consistency. Set aside time each week to maintain your organizational system and make adjustments as needed. As your comfort with digital organization grows, you'll find more opportunities to streamline your workflow and enhance your teaching practice.

Start small and build gradually. Choose one area to organize first and expand your system as you become comfortable with the new routines. The goal is to save time and reduce stress, not create additional work.

Ready to dive deeper? Visit the productivity section at [TeacherCast.net](https://www.teachercast.net) for more tips and resources. 🌟

Jeff Bradbury (left) is an instructional technology teacher and coach, and the creator of the TeacherCast Educational Network.

Transforming teaching and learning about Native Americans

Access these new digital lessons and resources at AmericanIndian.si.edu/nk360

- The Impact of the Gold Rush on California Native Americans
- The “First Thanksgiving”: How Can We Tell a Better Story?
- California Native American Survival and Resilience During the Mission Period



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

NATIONAL MUSEUM of the AMERICAN INDIAN

Image: Maitaillong Du

Smithsonian



What's one small thing educators can do for their students every day?

OUR VOICES quick takes

"Take time out to recharge and fill your own cup, so you can share with others."

— Lucy W.

"Not vote for people who choose to defund education on a whim."

— Stephanie S.

"Show up!"

— Barbara H.

"Say hello. Use their names. Notice something about them. Remember them enough to ask about their lives. We are their 'mental detectors.' The world would be different if every kid had at least one adult who noticed when things aren't right or noticed when things are."

— Amy McNally, Pennsylvania



— Ellen H.

"EVEN IF THEY STRUGGLE ACADEMICALLY, FIND SOMETHING THEY DO WELL AND TELL THEM THAT YOU CAN SEE HOW HARD THEY ARE TRYING. LET THEM KNOW THEY MATTER."

— Rachel K.

"Ask them if they're hungry."

— Kathy F.

"See them for who they are and let them know they are seen ... and valued."

— Diane Rener, Illinois



SHARE
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.

August 2025

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS



By Brenda Álvarez, Mary Ellen Flannery, and Sundjata Sekou

Do you know when to raise your union voice? From academic freedom and personal safety to advocacy, fair pay, and more, this guide highlights key rights that every NEA member should know about and defend this year. You'll discover real stories of educators using their voice, power, and union to protect students and shape public education.

WHAT'S INSIDE:

- p26 Speak Out for Your Students and Your Profession
- p27 Feel Safe at School
- p28 Act Like a Union Member
- p29 Keep Immigrant Students Safe
- p30 Make Space for Every Voice
- p32 Earn a Fair Wage

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Spread the word! Educators have rights! Pull out this special section and post it on your union bulletin board.



Speak Out for Your Students and Your Profession

I know this sounds alarmist, but I'm literally teaching World War II today and what happens when people don't stand up," says Colorado high school teacher Wendy Bergman. "If we aren't the ones fighting for our kids and communities, then no one is."

In spring, Bergman and other Colorado Education Association (CEA) members organized a "No More Education Cuts" rally that drew more than 8,000 supporters to Denver.

It was so big that districts closed schools for the day. It was so powerful that not only did lawmakers cancel the cuts, they increased funding to schools.

"We have the power!" says Bergman, a high school teacher in the Poudre School District.

They also have the ability and motivation, says Bethany Fritz, an occupational therapist in Westminster, Colo. "I'm sure people are already going to their principals to ask for resources for students. That's advocacy. It's all about getting what your students need," she says.



Know your rights

While advocating for yourself and your students, keep a few things in mind.

- When you are off duty, you generally have the same rights as other citizens to attend protests, sign petitions, etc. But be clear you are speaking for yourself or your union, not on behalf of your employer.
- Your speech rights are more limited at work. Public employers generally have the right to control what employees say on the job.
- Have a question? Consult your union!

Read more! Check out NEA's guide to union voice at nea.org/Union.

Colorado schools are already underfunded. This spring, union members took to the streets to call for a stop to education cuts.

A Case Study: The Power of Telling Your Story



"If we can't afford to live, how can we afford to teach?" University of Minnesota-Duluth graduate Caitlin Efta (above) asked state lawmakers at a committee hearing last year.

She and her classmates spent their few dollars on cheap food and gas to get to their student teaching assignments. Efta, a special education major, also worked nights and weekends. After hearing from her and other Aspiring Educators, Minnesota's legislature approved a \$7,500 stipend for student teachers.

Efta's advice? "Tell your story from the heart. ... Legislators aren't going to understand our side of the story unless they can see it through our eyes."

PHOTOS: SYDNEY SLIFKA (RALLIES); COURTESY OF CAITLIN EFTA (CASE STUDY)

Feel Safe at School

When New York lawmakers expanded the state's Workplace Violence Prevention Act to include educators, in 2023, Syracuse teaching assistant Mark Warner was ecstatic. "We need this protection so much," he says, in a 2023 video. "It shows that, yes, we understand we have problems—and the union is doing something about it."

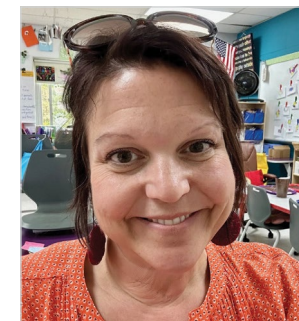
Warner—whose student-related injuries have included concussions and a fractured nose—joined other NYSUT (New York State United Teachers) members in advocating relentlessly for school employees to be protected by law. Now NYSUT staff is training hundreds of members statewide on how to implement the new rules.

Federal law entitles all workers to have safe and healthy workplaces. If this isn't happening for you, your union can help.

Thanks to the expanded New York law, Saratoga Springs union leaders are ensuring that members report behavioral incidents and are using that data in conversations with administrators, says Rana Hughes, a third-grade teacher and local union co-president.



Mike Modleski

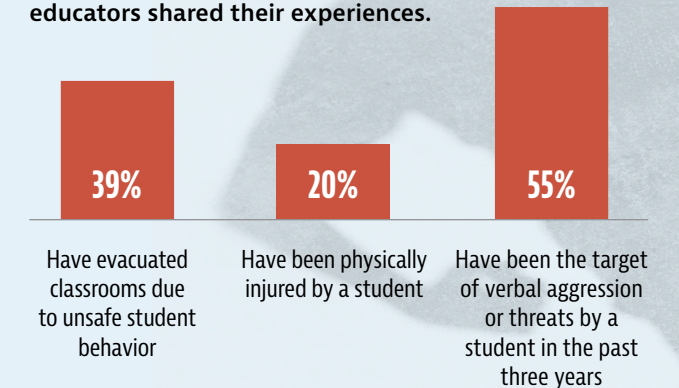


Rana Hughes

When educators are reluctant to report, she tells them: "It's not just for you.

Hit, Slapped, Threatened

Student behavior is a pervasive issue across the U.S. In this survey, Delaware educators shared their experiences.



SOURCE: 2024 DELAWARE STATE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION SURVEY

It's for your students. ... This data collection is about getting your students what they need."

They are still kids, says Mike Modleski, a high school teacher and union president in Victor, N.Y. "The more heightened the behavior, the

more help that kid needs," he says. "The best solutions obviously come when all the stakeholders come together and move in the same direction. That's what union leaders do. We force conversations to happen."

3 Solutions to Student Violence

1) Collect and report data.

Accurate data is necessary to secure additional safety and support measures. It's also essential for obtaining employee benefits for long-term care, such as workers' compensation as well as toxic stress and wellness supports. Access to these resources often requires documentation of the incident and injuries.

2) Bargain for safety provisions.

In Washington, the contract for the Kent Education Association (KEA) says, "Any student found to have assaulted, made a threat against, or harassed an employee will not be returned to the employee's classroom

or instructional area without mutual approval of the employee and building administrator." Additional language enables a KEA representative to leave their classroom to assess and support the staff member's emotional well-being.

3) Take it to the board!

Use NEA's sample resolution language to ask your school board to create a labor-management health and safety committee, which can tackle issues like workplace violence, extreme temperatures, poor indoor air quality, and more. Visit nea.org/HealthySchools.



Act Like a Union Member

"Y'all, bear with me. This is the first time I'm speaking out in public. I'm Patricia Crews. I'm head custodian at Bugg Elementary, and I am a proud NCAE union member."

The North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) is one of the fastest growing unions in the nation. Crews is a member through her local union, Wake NCAE, representing educators in the state's largest school district.

A few months ago, Crews was fed up. She could no longer sit back and watch her students suffer from a lack of air-conditioning and heat in school. So she agreed to speak at her local union's health and safety town hall meeting.

"There have been times when I've gone out and purchased fans out of pocket," she told the crowd. "Kids ask me, 'Ms. Crews, when are we going to get heat or air-conditioning?' A lot of times, I don't have an answer—and that's why I'm here tonight."

Unions have power, no matter where you live

The South has got something to say, and it's that unions are here. They're here in Wake County and across

North Carolina, and also in every Midwest or Mountain state that might be called "right-to-work." (A more accurate label? "Anti-worker.")

What does the law say?

There is no state in this nation where unions are illegal. No matter where you live, every educator has the right to join a union—and act like a union member.

States differ in how educators can advocate for pay, benefits, and student learning conditions. In most states, collective bargaining is legal. In others, educators can still leverage political and community power by speaking up and working with parents and allies.

Last year in Wake County, more than two dozen public schools closed for at least a day because of unsafe indoor temperatures, impacting 20,000 students and staff.

The problem: Students can't learn when they're wrapped in blankets or begging to lie down on the cool tile floor. The solution? Union members want county commissioners to put a multimillion-dollar school maintenance bond on the ballot in fall 2026—and they're using their collective voice to make it happen.

"We are building our power as a union," says Wake NCAE President Christina Cole, "and we will do all the things it takes to win."



Head custodian Patricia Crews is a proud member of Wake NCAE, the union representing educators in North Carolina's largest school district.

You Are the Union

1) Connect with your local.

Make sure you know who your building or worksite rep is. Put your building and local meetings on your calendar and bring a friend!

2) Show your union pride!

Wear your union T-shirt. Hang a new NEA poster. (They are beautiful! Find them at the link below.)

3) Talk about the union with your colleagues.

When you talk about the difference the union is making in your life, you are helping to grow your union—and our power.

Get everything you need to act like a union member—including posters, conversation guides, and more—at nea.org/UnionBulletin.



PHOTO: ALEX BOERNER

Keep Immigrant Students Safe

It was a routine grocery run—until it wasn't. A family raced through the aisles, each child sent to grab a single item with strict orders to return within one minute.

The reason for the sudden rush? To avoid getting caught in a raid by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), says Virginia school bus driver Ivis Castillo. It's a fear immigrant families live with every day.

To protect her students, Castillo created her own bus protocol, aligned with district policy: "No one is going to enter. If they want to talk, ... [they'll] have to talk to me by my ... driver's window," she says, adding that she'll only release students to parents at school.

In Federal Way Public Schools, in Washington, a high school teacher—who asked to remain anonymous—sees how fear disrupts learning.

"Undocumented students and students with undocumented family members are staying in my classroom after school, watching ICE agents on their doorbell cameras,

afraid to go home. Many of them are falling asleep in my class," she says. "They can't sleep at night because of their worries. [The stress is] creating a tidal wave of dread, hopelessness, and exhaustion amongst all of the students and staff."

Around the country, educators and support staff are stepping up in quiet yet profound ways to protect undocumented students.

What does the law say?

Educators who protect students are backed by legal protections.

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that schools cannot deny a free, public K–12 education based on immigration status.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act bars schools from releasing student records—immigration status included—without parental consent, except in limited circumstances.

The First Amendment and civil rights laws strongly protect educators right to speak out for their students' liberties outside of working hours. In class, those protections are more limited.

Earn families' trust

Erika Ryan, a bilingual family specialist in Arlington,



Erika Ryan

Va., has found ways to support families under pressure. "The goal is to keep kids safe at school and [share] ... what actions the school system is taking to [help] all the immigrant families," Ryan says.

But she's had to adapt, explaining that families are hesitant to attend public

events held at school about immigration. "They are afraid that ICE will show up," she says.

So she shares information privately—helping them access food pantries, legal resources, and trauma support.

Make schools safe zones

Local unions have turned advocacy into policy.

Arlington Education Association President June Prakash helped the school district adopt NEA's Safe Zone resolution, which outlines how to respond if ICE shows up.

"The responsibility isn't on a principal or an educator," she says. "If somebody identifies themselves as an ICE agent and says they have a warrant, then the administrator at that school is supposed to call the legal counsel of our school system."

Safe Zone Protections

NEA has created school board policies and resolutions to help districts adopt inclusive protections for marginalized communities—reinforcing the role of collective bargaining at the local level.

Learn more at nea.org/Sample-Resolutions.

To keep students safe from unlawful or harsh immigration enforcement, use NEA's Safe Zone resolution and model policy as a template for your school district. The language is closely tied to the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plyler v. Doe*, which is the foundational precedent establishing that access to K–12 education is a civil right.

Go to nea.org/SafeZones to learn more.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF IVIS CASTILLO; JATI LINDSAY

Make Space for Every Voice

In Zach Fisher's class, students know exactly where they stand: "Whoever you are in this moment, you are always welcome in here," Fisher says. "That's the expectation."

As a special education teacher and LGBTQ+ advocate, in Louisville, Ky., Fisher sees inclusive education as a cornerstone of safe and effective learning. That sense of belonging, he believes, should be the standard in every school.

"The educator code of ethics in Kentucky states that we must protect the health, safety, and emotional well-being of students," Fisher says. "That gives me both the responsibility and the right to make sure every kid in my room is seen, valued, and respected."

Educators across the country share that goal. They want to create classrooms where all students—regardless of race, gender, identity, or ability—can see themselves in the curriculum and feel safe to learn.

What does the law say?

According to a joint report from NEA and the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance, culturally responsive and racially inclusive education not only improves academic outcomes, it also aligns with federal and state laws protecting free speech and equal protection.

Inclusive education also boosts critical thinking, engagement, and graduation rates across all student groups, the report says.

For Fisher, it's not only policy—it's a matter of principle. "If I'm willing to take a bullet to protect my students, I'm also going to stand up for these policies," he says. "These kids are our future. Whether we agree with who they are or not, we owe them dignity, respect, and a chance to learn in peace."

That, he insists, is the assignment. "And we can't get distracted. We have to stay with the assignment."

Yes, you can teach that

But that aspiration is under attack. Since 2021, anti-public education lawmakers in more than 20 states have passed or proposed laws to censor discussions of race, gender identity, and U.S. history in public schools. Many of these efforts are



Zach Fisher

tied to a broader movement to roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices at the K-12 and higher education levels.

In January 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that leaves educators to wonder whether teaching about slavery, civil rights, or LGBTQ+ figures could be illegal.

NEA, the American Civil Liberties Union and their New

Hampshire affiliates sued the U.S. Department of Education over its anti-DEI policy. In April, a federal court blocked the executive order from taking effect while the case moves forward.

Yet, the chilling effect remains. During a February hearing in the U.S. Senate, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon refused to clarify whether schools that teach African American history

could lose federal funding. "I would like to look at these programs to fully understand the breadth of the executive order and get back to you on that," she said.

America Sotelo, a bilingual teacher in Passaic, N.J., says this kind of evasion illustrates the problem.

"When leaders refuse to give clear answers about what we're allowed to teach, it creates fear and confusion. ... Teachers start second-guessing whether telling the full truth is safe—and that's where the harm begins," she says. "Our students ... know when something is being left out. And our students, especially those from marginalized communities, feel that erasure deeply."

The stakes are high

"Inclusive history doesn't just teach facts. It affirms identity, builds confidence, and invites students to think critically about the world and their place in it," Sotelo adds. "I've watched bilingual students light up when they recognize their own heritage, struggles, and resilience in the stories we teach. They see themselves as part of the American story, not outside of it."

Despite mounting pressure, educators are refusing to back down. Many are leaning into their professional

training, union support, and personal conviction to keep inclusive education alive.

Fisher, who offers professional development sessions, including "Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students," teaches fellow educators how to navigate today's charged environment.

"You don't have to be LGBTQ to be an ally," he says. "It's about using your privilege to speak up at tables where others are not represented." He walks educators through understanding identity, gender versus



Tamar LaSure-Owens

sexuality, and how a small act—like a rainbow sticker on a laptop—can serve as a lifeline. "That can be their little glimmer of hope," he says. "Those little things can snowball into something powerful."

Tamar LaSure-Owens is working with her union, the New Jersey Education Association, to teach the hidden history of the Underground Railroad in the state.

"Black history is American history," says LaSure-Owens, a third-grade teacher in the town of Pleasantville. "To understand history truthfully and accurately, it must include the perspectives, struggles, and achievements of Black people."

Defending Honest Teaching

NEA encourages local unions to negotiate protections that affirm an educator's right to teach honestly and to use inclusive material in the classroom. Consider the following and ask your union these questions:

1) Can our union work with the district to create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that protects our ability to teach inclusive, standards-based content without fear of discipline?

Why this matters: Even in states without collective bargaining

rights, local unions can sometimes negotiate informal agreements or MOUs with school districts to establish expectations and protections—especially around curriculum and academic freedom.

2) Do the agreements provide educators with safe harbor (clauses that protect educators from punishment) if their instruction is in line with state standards or prior practice?

Why this matters: Collective bargaining agreements can ensure that instruction that follows state or national standards—and the educators who teach them—are protected. Even without a union contract, educators can document that their instruction

is aligned with state-approved standards. This provides a defensible position if they're challenged.

3) Do the agreements require notice before discipline? Do they provide independent review of terminations?

Why this matters: Strong collective bargaining agreements ensure due process and impartial hearings before discipline—which is especially important in politically charged cases. In Kentucky, for example, an independent tribunal is comprised of an attorney from outside the district, as well as a district teacher and administrator.

BARGAIN THIS!

Earn a Fair Wage

A few years ago, Santa Cruz, Calif., was named the least affordable place in the U.S. for teachers. While rents for a typical home surpass \$4,000 a month, teacher salaries sit 30 percent below the state average.

On top of that, Kelly Liebenthal, a transitional kindergarten teacher, pays \$1,300 a month for health care for her family. "It's just really, really unaffordable to live and work as a teacher in Santa Cruz County," she says.

And it's not only there. At the southern end of the state, San Diego high school teacher Eduardo "Kiki" Ochoa says his newer colleagues may never know the satisfaction of home ownership. "Our wage isn't a livable one."

All educators should be able to live and work in their communities. Yes, it's a job "of the heart," notes Colorado teacher Isabel Rodriguez, but shouldn't it cover basic bills, too?

One in four teachers across the country struggle to buy food, NEA research has found. Often, the only option for survival is to walk away from the profession, leaving students with a revolving door of inexperienced educators.



In February, San Francisco Bay-area educators rallied for better wages and fully resourced schools. The "We Can't Wait" campaign involves 77,000 teachers across California.

The time is now

Through the "We Can't Wait" campaign, spearheaded by the California Teachers Association (CTA), members in 32 CTA locals—who serve more than 1 million students—are demanding pay that matches their value to society.

It's time for "wages that will truly humanize the teaching experience," Ochoa says.

In addition to better pay, the campaign also calls for safe and stable schools—or an end to layoffs and frequent funding cuts—and fully staffed schools with counselors, librarians, social workers, nurses, school psychologists, and all the instructional specialists that students need.

"We're a small union and we love that there is this

big energy and big effort that we can be part of," Liebenthal says. "I am feeling hopeful!" 🌟

Learn More!

To find out more about fair pay in your state, visit nea.org/FairPay.

A Case Study: 40% Raises!

What would a 40 percent raise mean? For the secretaries, library assistants, school nurses, and other members of the Classified Administrative Professionals Association (CAPA) of Sumner-Bonney Lake, in Washington, it means one job is enough, says administrative secretary and union leader Dawn Palumbo.

About five years ago, CAPA members were driven to unionize by their lower-than-McDonald's pay. In their first contract, in 2021, they won 25 percent raises, on average, with some getting as much as 36 percent. In 2024, they tacked on another 15 percent, or more if inflation rises. "It's unfortunate we've had to fight so hard, but we were like, 'Nope, we're not taking this anymore,'" Palumbo says. With help from the Washington Education Association, union members persevered. "Our bargaining team knew what our members needed—and it has been amazing!"

PHOTO: BROOKE ANDERSON



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California educator Mike Tinoco (left, center and below) leads with the heart, helping students develop skills, heal from trauma, and find their voice through community and connection.

Bringing Heart and Healing to the Classroom

For California English teacher Mike Tinoco, teaching is about more than helping students learn skills and prepare for college and career. It's about people. It's about relationships. And, at its core, it's about love. His approach challenges the idea that love and care are "extras" in education. For Tinoco, they're the foundation. Drawing from his experience as a nonviolence trainer and educator at Yerba Buena High School, in San Jose, Calif., Tinoco works to disrupt violence and help schools replace punishment with empathy, connection, and care. He offers a vision of education grounded in love, justice, and community.

What is nonviolence pedagogy?

Nonviolence pedagogy, explains Tinoco, isn't only about resolving conflict or adding a mindfulness practice to the school day. It's about transforming the way educators show up in schools. "Nonviolence is a spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical way of being," Tinoco says. "It is not a program, nor can it be reduced to quick fixes."

That mindset touches every part of his work—from how he responds to student behavior, approaches lesson planning, orients himself to time, takes care of himself, and practices interdependent care.

For example, rather than trying to control students, he makes requests of them, holding care for their needs as well as his own. His lessons treat students' lives as primary

text, inviting healing and community building through storytelling. He also practices collective care by co-creating professional development with colleagues that centers on dialogue, empathy, and praxis.

In Tinoco's view, love, hope, and community are essential threads in the fabric of a humanizing and liberatory education.

And while Tinoco's approach might sound lofty, he is deeply practical. He encourages educators to create regular opportunities for students to share their stories and reflect on their experiences.

"Joy is our birthright," he says. "Students deserve to see how the



Mike Tinoco



"Joy is our birthright. Students deserve to see how the content they are learning can be infused into who they are and want to become."

—Mike Tinoco

content they are learning can be infused into who they are and want to become."

He also invites educators to consider the different needs (emotional, social, and intellectual) behind students' and teachers' behaviors. "By taking a pause, breathing, and connecting with the feelings and needs alive in ourselves, we model how to retain our power as humans," Tinoco says.

Voluntary suffering, explained

Tinoco speaks openly about the emotional toll of teaching—such as

addressing injustice in the world while attending to the demands of teaching—and connects the concept of "voluntary suffering" to educators. This idea of voluntary suffering stems from civil rights leaders like Bernard LaFayette Jr. and John Lewis, who didn't choose the systemic violence they faced, but they did choose to put their bodies on the line in the name of justice.

That choice gave them power, explains Tinoco, who sees parallels in education today.

"There are teachers who are putting their jobs on the line to teach the raw truth of history," he says. "Doing so meets needs for integrity, purpose, and supporting students' understanding of the world."

But he's also clear: This is not a call to burn out for the cause of a liberatory education.

"We must make sure that we are not suffering to the point of agony," he shares. "We must ensure that we are caring for ourselves and each other."

For Tinoco, self-care and collective care aren't buzzwords—they are survival strategies. In a world where teachers

are stretched thin and constantly asked to do more with less, slowing down becomes a radical act, he says. He suggests mindful walking before school, during your break, or after school—aligning slow steps with slow breaths and being fully attuned to the present moment. But slowness is also an important practice in one's pedagogy, as it disrupts the frenetic pacing of school that tends to cause immense stress for students and teachers alike.

"It's harmful," he notes. "We need to normalize moving at a pace more aligned to the breath."

So where should educators start?

Tinoco says the answer is simple: Return to the vision.

"Think about the kind of classroom you dream of. Let that vision guide you," he suggests. "When we hold firmly to our vision and care for our needs, we can remain creative, hopeful, and connected to the heart." ✨

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ

LEARN MORE

Learn more about Mike Tinoco's work at nea.org/Q&A-Tinoco.

Who is Mike Tinoco?

When Mike Tinoco was young, he had a hard time trying to make sense of the world. Beatboxing—an art form he discovered in high school—was the first thing that made him feel capable and smart. It was in those hours of self-taught practice, trying out beats on the bus and in the school library, that Tinoco began to rebuild something essential: His belief in himself.

"I had never received applause for anything as best as I could remember. ... It was exhilarating and life-altering," he writes in his book, *Heart at the Center: An Educator's Guide to Sustaining Love, Hope, and Community Through Nonviolence Pedagogy*. That spark of joy, self-worth, and being truly seen became the foundation for everything that followed.

His journey from a wounded and lost young person to an educator grounded in healing and nonviolence isn't just personal—it's a blueprint for how learning can transform lives when the heart is at the center.

The Price We Pay for Vouchers

By Amanda Litvinov

VOUCHER PROGRAMS HARM PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ENTIRE COMMUNITIES. WHY ARE SOME ELECTED LEADERS FORCING THEM ON US?

The Paradise Valley Unified School District sounds idyllic—but it has been far from picture-perfect for math interventionist Stasia Stoffey.

She has endured two school closures in five years. The first, in 2019, was Aire Libre Elementary—a Title I school that felt like a second home to Stoffey.

“The staff was extremely close-knit, and we had an amazing principal,” she says. Just talking about the loss of that community—which she was part of for 14 years—still makes her cry.

The second closure in 2024, Sunset Canyon Elementary, was even more abrupt. Also a Title I school, the students had dramatically improved their math scores, and the school had earned an “A” under the state’s grading system.

“I had only been there three years when it closed, but it was still devastating,” Stoffey says. “I was surrounded by grieving staff who had been there 20-plus years.”

Sunset Canyon was one of three district schools shuttered that year, along with another elementary school and a middle school, despite the

outcry from parents. The surface-level explanation is that drops in student enrollment forced a financially hamstrung district to make tough decisions.

But vouchers are the biggest contributing factor. The most devastating of Arizona’s five voucher programs is the one lawmakers made universal in 2022, which offers vouchers to anyone—regardless of income—and has peeled students and funding away from the state’s public schools.

Shortly after the Sunset Canyon closure was announced, in late 2023, the stress caught up to Stoffey, setting off a form of colitis that left her struggling to eat and critically underweight. Though she is better today—and determined to keep teaching and earn her full retirement benefits—her loved ones still worry about her.

“The closure affected all of us differently, but so profoundly,” Stoffey says. “Some of the staff retired early or quit teaching. Some families went to try a charter or left the public school system.”

Paradise Valley is just one district in the greater Phoenix area that has recently faced closures. From 2021 to 2023, the Glendale Elementary School District closed five schools, and the Roosevelt Elementary School District was set to close five schools at press time. Three more campuses across the Phoenix Elementary #1 and Cave Creek Unified districts will also close this year.

The voucher wrecking ball

In December 2022, Arizona became the first state in the nation to enact a universal school voucher program (despite the fact that voters had already rejected the idea when it appeared on the ballot in 2018).

The “Empowerment Scholarship Account,” as the state calls it, gives families roughly \$7,500 in taxpayer



Arizona math specialist Stasia Stoffey lost her school community twice due largely to vouchers. “We worked so hard to protect the kids from the sadness,” she says.

money per child to cover “educational expenses.” These costs can include private school tuition, homeschooling, and fees for private lessons in sports, art, and music, for example, with little to no oversight.

As with most voucher laws, accountability is almost entirely lacking. Private schools are not required to disclose their finances and operations, and many are not transparent about how they measure student achievement. In many states, they do not even require educators to have teaching credentials.

The number of students receiving school vouchers soared from 12,000 to 80,000 students after Arizona enacted the universal voucher law. The expense of the program has greatly exceeded all estimates—it is on track to cost the state \$1 billion this year alone.

“We’re losing all this money out of the general fund and closing schools as a result,” says Heather Schmitt, a preschool special education teacher who currently serves as president of the Paradise Valley Education Association.

“What gets me is that 75 percent of these vouchers are going to kids who were never enrolled in the schools in our district,” Schmitt says. “I have an issue with taxpayer dollars paying for a religious school or a private education with a significant lack of oversight. I have an issue with money that should go to public schools being used for scuba diving lessons and grand pianos.”

Like Schmitt, educators around the country are seeing firsthand how voucher programs siphon already scarce resources from the public school system that 90 percent of families with school-age children rely on.

Ready to push back?

Voucher schemes have proliferated in the past few years. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia have limited

A VOUCHER BY ANY OTHER NAME... Is Still a Voucher!

Vouchers are any form of public payment to help parents send their children to private schools, including religious schools. They may take the form of direct government payments to parents, tax credits for tuition payments, or “scholarships” from nonprofit organizations that receive donations for which the donors, in turn, receive tax credits.

Voucher supporters use terms with marketing appeal such as “opportunity scholarships,” because they know the word “voucher” costs them public support.

Educators know these are all just fancy names for vouchers:

- Education savings accounts
- Education scholarship accounts
- Personal learning scholarship accounts
- Individualized education account programs

Regardless of what they are called, all voucher programs divert public funds into private hands and undermine principles of equity and accountability, while doing nothing to improve the quality of education.

The Price We Pay for Vouchers

voucher programs (which have some parameters, such as family income or student disabilities, for example), and 18 now have universal school vouchers available to anyone, including affluent families whose children already attend private school. In those states, leaders have chosen to pump taxpayer money into programs that primarily benefit middle-class and wealthy families at the expense of the public education system.

But that is at odds with what the majority of voters want. Vouchers have appeared on state ballots 17 times—and every time, voters have rejected them. The most recent votes, in November 2024, were in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska.

In some states, educators, parents, and other community members have successfully demanded that legislators vote down universal voucher schemes. Last year in North Dakota,

educators led the charge in rejecting a universal voucher proposal under consideration by state lawmakers. Wins like this one require allies, says Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University.

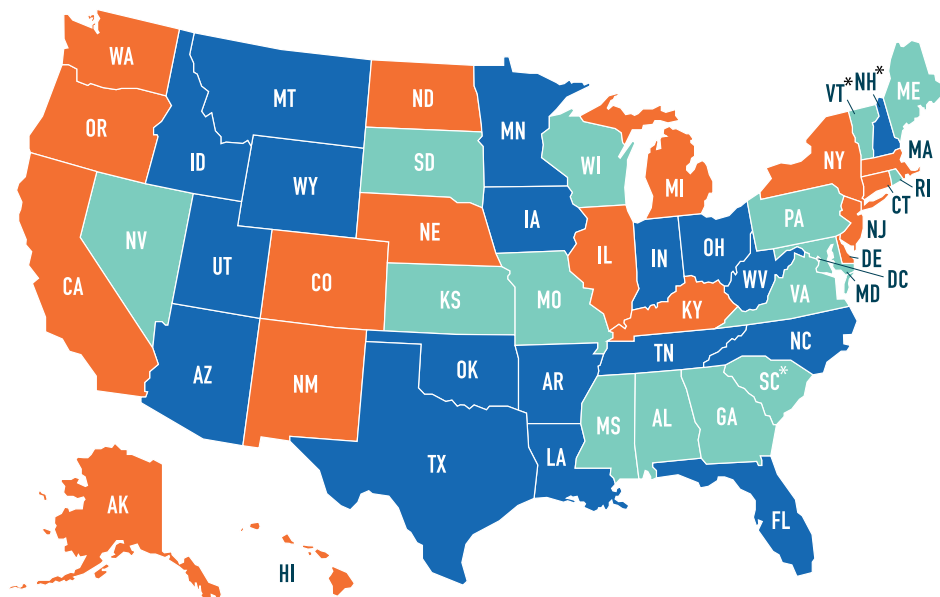
“It’s hard to overstate how much these schemes are opposed by many rural Republicans in state legislatures,” he says. “Parents, school boards, and superintendents in rural areas support their public schools, and have helped keep these bills at bay.”

You can help educate others on the true cost of vouchers by explaining how they are a threat to public schools.

Start here: Share the facts on the opposite page with your family and friends. Get NEA’s voucher toolkit—with talking points and social media content—at nea.org/VoucherToolkit.

Voucher Map

- States with universal school voucher programs (available to all, regardless of income)
- States with limited school voucher programs (has parameters such as income or disability)
- States with no voucher programs



“What gets me is that 75 percent of these vouchers are going to kids who were never enrolled in the schools in our district.”

—Heather Schmitt (above), Paradise Valley Education Association President

NEW NATIONAL VOUCHER LAW: A TAX BREAK FOR THE RICH

In July, Congress passed a spending bill that establishes the first major federal voucher program, which is guaranteed to weaken public schools. In return for donations to organizations that grant scholarships to private and religious schools, wealthy individuals will receive up to \$1,700 in dollar-for-dollar tax credits—a reimbursement rate far exceeding that of any other charitable contribution. There is no cap on how much the federal government will spend on this tax giveaway, and it is now a permanent part of the federal tax code. NEA estimates that it will cost at least \$25 billion per year.

Thanks to the work of NEA and other advocacy organizations, the program was not forced upon all states; instead, they must opt into the program.

LEARN MORE

Find out more about vouchers at nea.org/Vouchers.

5 Reasons Vouchers Are *Not the Answer*

THE FACTS:

Why Vouchers Don’t Work

Fact #1: There’s no link between vouchers and gains in student achievement.

Independent studies in the District of Columbia, Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio show vouchers had negative impacts on student test scores on par with the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, no scientific study has shown a positive impact.

As Josh Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, puts it, “If the right wing is using test scores to criticize and condemn public school performance, I’m going to put it back on them and say, ‘OK, how do these voucher schools do?’ The answer is horribly.”

Additionally, there is no validity to claims that by creating a “competitive marketplace,” vouchers force public schools to improve. The most dramatic improvements in student achievement have occurred in places where vouchers do not exist, according to the Learning Policy Institute. Connecticut, for example, does not squander public funds on vouchers; the state boosted student performance by focusing on teacher quality and tutoring.

Fact #2: Vouchers lack accountability and enable fraud.

Private schools have almost complete autonomy in how they operate, including who and what they teach; how they teach; how they measure student achievement (if at all);

and what they disclose to parents and the public.

The absence of public accountability has contributed to rampant fraud, waste, and abuse, such as extravagant spending on ski resorts and Disney tickets and the creation of “ghost students” who don’t exist. One scheme in Arizona made sure that these non-existent students had documented disabilities to prompt the highest level of payout.

Fact #3: Vouchers do not reduce public education costs.

“Vouchers saving a state money? How would the math work on that, exactly?” asks Kentucky high school math teacher Harsh Upadhyay. “Vouchers essentially force taxpayers to fund two school systems—one public and one private.” Upadhyay was one of thousands of Kentucky educators who spoke up to help defeat a voucher ballot measure in the last election.

Research by the Economic Policy Institute shows the financial strain on public schools caused by vouchers. As educators know, when vouchers are enacted, public schools wind up with less funding, leading to larger class sizes and fewer resources such as textbooks, school nurses and counselors, lab equipment, and music and athletic programs.

A significant body of research also shows the majority of voucher users are students already enrolled in private schools. In other words, universal voucher programs force taxpayers to pay for a private school education for families who can already afford it.

Fact #4: Vouchers are rooted in racism and perpetuate discrimination.

Vouchers were invented after the U.S. Supreme Court banned school segregation in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. School districts allowed White students to use vouchers to attend private schools, referred to as segregation academies. As a result, the schools that had served those White students were closed, and schools that served Black students were chronically underfunded.

By design, voucher programs operate with impunity. Unlike public schools, private schools can still limit admissions based on race, gender, sexual orientation, family income, and disabilities.

Fact #5: Voucher programs too often fail students with disabilities.

Many families do not realize that when they accept a voucher, their children lose rights and protections, as private schools are not bound by many key provisions of federal laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

North Dakota teacher Sheila Peterson explained to her state legislature, in March: “My family didn’t have a choice. My daughter was kicked out of three private preschools” because of challenging behaviors.

Fortunately, her public school system, in Mandan, N.D., offered early intervention screening and diagnosed her daughter with autism at age three. The district provided supports such as occupational and speech therapy and a classroom aide.

Today, Peterson says, her daughter navigates high school independently and has made the honor roll, “all because of the public school educators who never gave up on her.”



Harsh Upadhyay



Sheila Peterson

MIC CHECK: ONE, TWO, ... ONE,

Rap out!

FROM MULTIPLICATION
BARS TO LITERACY
STARS, TEACHERS ARE
TRANSFORMING LEARNING
WITH HIP-HOP

By Sundjata Sekou, third-grade
teacher, New Jersey Education
Association

*I like salsa and chips, and I like six,
Gimme six!
"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey."
Gimme six!*

*Alright class,
It's time to get busy. Follow me.*

*6 times 1 is no trick,
'Cause 6 times 1 is 6.*

*6 times 2 does it ring a bell?
'Cause 6 times 2 is 12.*

*6 times 3 I don't want to, make me,
OK, 6 times 3 is 18.*

*6 times 4, uh, never snore,
'Cause 6 times 4 is 24.*

*6 times 5 you'll chirp like a birdy,
'Cause 6 times 5 is 30.*

Rap these words like an emcee, and you would fit right into my classroom. I'm a third-grade teacher in Irvington, N.J. I'm also a hip-hop head. For 10 years now, I've been using my favorite kind of music to teach science, social studies, language arts, life skills, and math.

It all started when a colleague introduced me to [Flocabulary.com](https://www.flocabulary.com), a learning program that uses educational hip-hop music to engage students at all grade levels and increase achievement.

I was captivated.

The next day, during my math block, I closed my classroom door and played a math hip-hop song from the website. The students didn't miss a beat. They started rapping and giving division and multiplication answers with joy.

Over time, I saw how students picked up concepts faster than when I taught from textbooks alone. I realized that I had a tool to motivate students and liven up my classroom.

The students are so enthralled with the videos that I even use them as a classroom management technique.

Fourth-grade teacher Toney Jackson connects with students through hip-hop. To check out his back-to-school rap, scan this QR code or go to bit.ly/BacktoSchoolRap.



If I say I won't play the videos that day because of behavior problems, the students correct their behavior immediately.

Teaching with hip-hop has been so successful that I created a workshop for educators, called "Racial Literacy Circles: Hip-Hop Edition," where I talk about cultivating genius in Black and brown children. And through NEA, I've had the opportunity to teach the workshop to colleagues around the country.

These are some of the fellow hip-hop heads that I've met along the way, and how they bring their love of the art into their classrooms:

**Allow me to introduce myself
Hi, I'm your teacher Mr. Jackson,
I'm here to teach you how to add and
how to do subtraction, multiply,
divide, and fractions,
But the main attraction is the rapping.**

**We accept everybody here,
No matter what you're looking like,
No matter your race, religion, or
hobbies,
No matter what books you like.**

That's how fourth-grade teacher Toney Jackson introduces himself to his class at the beginning of the year. His students at Nellie K. Parker Elementary School, in Hackensack, N.J., rap along with him to learn English language arts, math, and other subjects. The students learn his lyrics, repeat them quietly when recalling facts, write their own lyrics, and sometimes freestyle original lyrics on the spot.

Jackson began using rap in his classrooms more than 20 years ago. He recalls, "When I used to substitute teach in a middle school, I would freestyle with students to connect with them. In high schools, I would talk to the kids about artists they listened to."

When Jackson landed his first full-time teaching job, he started writing rhymes to go with the lessons.



How to use hip-hop as a teaching tool

1. First and foremost, do not use hip-hop songs with racial epithets or misogyny. You should always use the clean version of songs, which are available online.
2. Start by learning what your students like to listen to.
3. Mix and match hip-hop with your educational materials. For high school English classes, for example, you can pair the dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury with the song "Western Education is Forbidden" by Billy Woods. (Listen at bit.ly/WesternEdForbid.) The following lyrics can connect the two:
**Fahrenheit was set in '99, but it wasn't fire this time,
The touch screen cold, glow, shine
Couldn't read a book if I tried.**
4. For elementary and middle school students, go to YouTube and search "Flocabulary" for free videos about everything from math to literature to science and mental health. For more inspiration, you can sign up for a paid subscription to [Flocabulary.com](https://www.flocabulary.com).



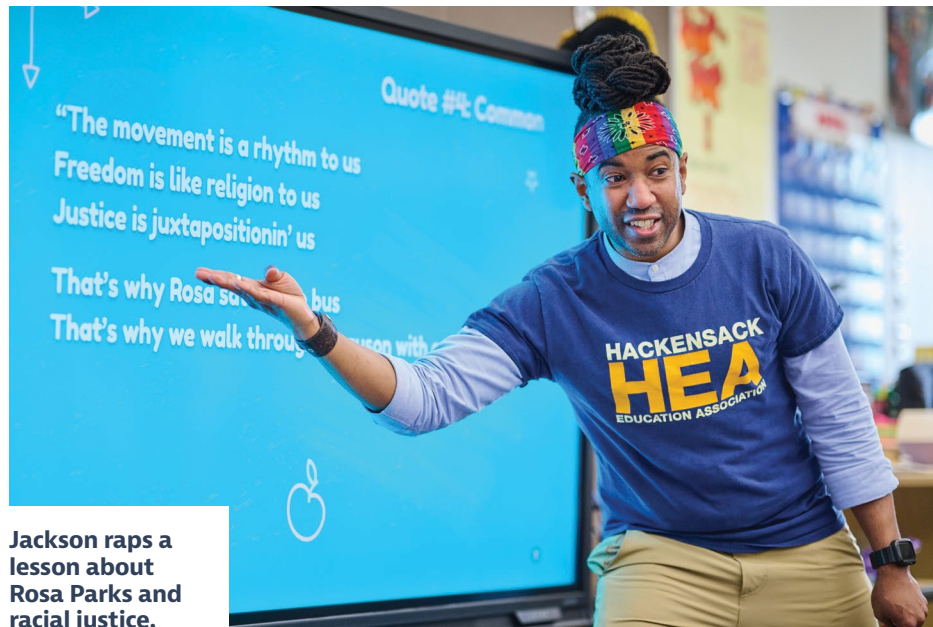
Jackson says his school community supports his use of hip-hop as a teaching technique, but that's not the case in all schools. He shares: "I do see resistance in the education space to ideas that are non-traditional, or that center narratives of groups that have been historically oppressed and marginalized, or that depart from the standard practices."

As for his students, their response is usually exuberant. But what happens if a student isn't a fan of rap? "That's OK," Jackson says. "They come to see that this is how their teacher shares his authentic self with them, and in the best cases, they feel more free to share their authentic selves as well."

Sing about me
Promise that you will
sing about me
Promise that you will sing
about me
I said when the lights shut off
And it's my turn to settle down
My main concern
Promise that you will sing about me
Promise that you will sing about me
—KENDRICK LAMAR

Gabriel "Asheru" Benn, a high school English teacher in Washington, D.C., pairs these Kendrick Lamar lyrics from "Sing About Me" as an opening to Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." He relates how Lamar's description of growing up in a neighborhood that lacks resources can lead to destructive choices. He then cross-references that song with the Frost poem, which is often interpreted to be about choices.

Benn is not only an educator, he's also the Peabody award-winning hip-hop writer and performer of



Jackson raps a lesson about Rosa Parks and racial justice.

the theme song to *The Boondocks*, a show formerly on the Cartoon Network. He is also the creator of the Hip-Hop Educational Literacy Program (HELP).



Dwayne Sheppard

"[When I started teaching], all of us were trying to figure out how do we teach kids that can't read the content that we're supposed to teach them? My instinct was to go straight to hip-hop," he says. "Sometimes I'll take one lyric, and I'll put it up on the board and have them write a brief constructive response, and then ask, 'What do you think about that verse?'"

This often opens up discussions about social issues and what's going on in the world, he adds.

Peace, unity, and having fun
My students got plans of traveling
like performers,
The world will absorb ya if you let it in
your mental,
Just do ya very best, to impress what
you get into,
Don't stop, just continue on your
journey,
This for those thinking the gift
wasn't worthy.

Dwayne L. Sheppard wrote these lyrics for his sixth- and seventh-

grade students at Martin Luther King Jr. School 6, in Passaic, N.J. By day, Sheppard is a social studies teacher; by night, he's a professional hip-hop artist who goes by the stage name Venomous2000. But his passion for hip-hop shows up in his classroom, too, where he incorporates Nintendo orchestra music, Wu-Tang instrumentals, Afrobeat drums, Brazilian funk, and other musical genres into his lessons.

"I'm mindful of parents who might think I'm trying to push my musical influence on their kids. Instead, I create random, fun songs about things like missing assignments, student achievements, or even the cafeteria food," Sheppard shares.

"Hip-hop has the power to unite or divide depending on how it's presented. Its core principles—love, peace, unity, and having fun—are timeless," he says. "Hip-hop connects the past, present, and future, and embraces all things and people. ... Hip-hop is life—just listen to the rhythm around you. That's hip-hop!" 🎧

Sundjata Sekou (pronounced Sund-Jata Say-Coo) is a "dope" 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.



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Getting Kids Back to Class

By Cindy Long

HOW SCHOOLS ARE TACKLING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

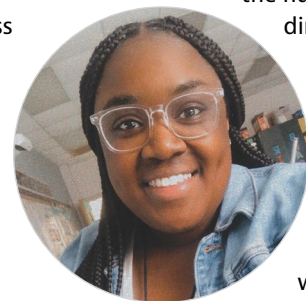
"You have to be here to get there." That's what Brittany Jones tells her second graders, instilling in them that strong attendance at school is the path to achieving great things in school and life. It's never too early to start talking about attendance, says Jones, who teaches in Charlotte, N.C.

When Jones asks her class who wants a bright future, hands shoot into the air.

"Okay," she says. "That's why we have to be in school daily."

Chronic absenteeism—when a student misses 10 percent of school days or more in one academic year—is a persistent nationwide problem that peaked during the pandemic. And many schools are still working to get students back to the classroom.

Some 30 percent of U.S. public school students were chronically absent during the 2021 – 2022 school year, while the pandemic was still raging. That was up from 16 percent before the pandemic,



Brittany Jones

according to a 50-state analysis by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Fortunately, schools are making progress. Data from the Department of Education shows that the rate of chronic absenteeism fell to 20 percent during the 2023 – 2024 school year, the most recent year for which data is available. Though the number is going in the right direction, it's still well above pre-pandemic levels.

Educators know that chronic absenteeism takes a toll on students' achievement and social and emotional well-being, among other negative impacts. But what are the root causes? And what can we do about it?

"The vast majority of kids aren't missing school because they don't care," says Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center. They're missing school for many reasons, he explains, which could include bullying, not getting the academic support they need, or a lack of health care or reliable transportation.



In Dover, N.H., Lisa Dillingham creates a welcoming classroom for her middle school students.

Schools with large populations of students who experience poverty have especially high rates of chronic absenteeism. During the 2022 – 2023 school year, more than half of schools in which at least 75 percent of students receive free or reduced-price meals had "extreme" levels of chronic absence, according to an analysis by Attendance Works. The report defines extreme chronic absence as when 20 percent of students in a school miss almost 4 weeks during the academic year.

2. Provide clothes and hygiene products.

Poverty can impact attendance in unexpected ways. Most students want to fit in and wear the latest fashions, but when they have dirty or ill-fitting clothes, they may feel ashamed and fear being teased. Staying home may feel like the better option.

That's where educators like Jones and Prorok say paying close attention to students can help. If they wear a lot of the same things, or if a few students don't have clothes that seem to fit, put a flyer up about local clothing donation sites or thrift stores where everyone in class can see it.

Some schools, especially community schools, offer clothing closets or rooms with everything from shoes and socks to winter coats and personal hygiene products. Jones' district offers Classroom Central, a free store where teachers collect items students need.

"I go a couple of times a week and grab things like socks, toothbrushes, and toothpaste," she says. "I can get kids a new backpack so they don't feel embarrassed that they might be the only one without a backpack." (To start a program like this in your school, explore online resources, such as catiescloset.org or josiescloset.org.)

Attendance Works, a nonprofit focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, identifies four core reasons that kids miss school: Barriers to attendance, aversion to school, disengagement from school, and misconceptions about the impact of absences.

"Each student is different, and each has their own story," says Vanessa Prorok, an attendance interventionist at Mundelein High School, in Illinois. "Educators need to work together and get to know our students. Some have crippling

anxiety, others have challenging home lives, or they don't get the help they need and feel they'll never catch up."

Prorok recommends that educators spend the first month back at school getting to know each student.

"That way, if we see a pattern of low attendance, we can more quickly get to the why and intervene," she says.

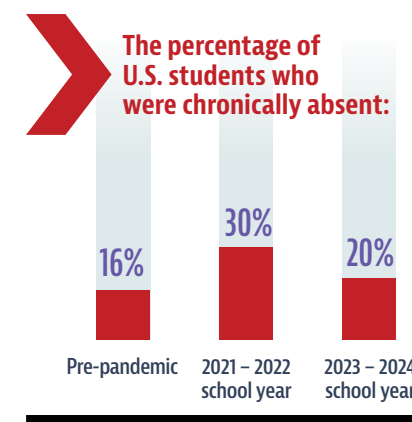
These are some of the ways educators across the country are working to understand the barriers students are facing and provide solutions that keep kids in schools.

1. Make schedules flexible.

At the high school level, some students miss school because they have to work during the day.

"I had a student whose family was about to lose their home and the student had to start working immediately," Prorok says. "That's where offering some flexibility is critical."

For students who must work, Prorok partners with her team on flexible schedules where they can leave early or come late and take classes on a computer.



Getting Kids Back to Class

For kids who experience homelessness or who can't afford a laundromat, some schools provide washers and dryers on-site, paid for by local businesses or grants from manufacturers like Whirlpool. (Learn more at [whirlpool.com/care-counts.html](https://www.whirlpool.com/care-counts.html).)

3. Help students get to school.

Transportation is another major barrier, especially for students living in homeless shelters or who frequently move residences.

California's Coalinga-Huron Unified School District uses vans and provides gas cards to families to get some students to school. Last year, the district had enough students living at a local motel to include it as a school bus stop.

Other students miss school because of neighborhood violence or dangerous intersections along their route to the campus. Some schools and communities create "walking school buses," among other approaches to keeping kids safe. (Learn more at saferoutesinfo.org.)

As bus driver shortages persist nationwide, safer walking routes are even more important, says Donna Christy, president of the Prince George's County Educators' Association, in Maryland, and a member of the county's Truancy Study Workgroup.

"In our district, walking radiuses expanded because of the shortage, so we need to make sure those routes are safe and that we have enough crossing guards," Christy explains.

4. Ease anxiety.

Lisa Dillingham, a middle school teacher in Dover, N.H., says students have more anxiety than ever.

"Their anxiety can be physically debilitating," she says. "Last year, a student had an anxiety attack, was

flapping her hands wildly, and said she couldn't breathe." When a student experiences that level of anxiety, their risk of skipping school skyrockets, Dillingham says. "It's critical to get the person access to mental health providers, but also to ease the student's mind throughout the school year," she says.

"Students ... put a lot of pressure on themselves, so I remind them that it's OK if they don't get perfect scores or perform lower than expected on a test or project," Dillingham explains. "What's important in the long run is that you're here, your friends are here, and the fun parts of the school day are just as important as the rest."

Dillingham's aim is to let her kids be kids and to help take self-placed burdens off their shoulders.

"Students need to learn as early as possible how to cope with anxiety, ... or their risk of chronic absenteeism and not graduating snowballs in high school," Dillingham cautions.

5. Provide a school within a school.

Prorok had one student who was absent for 300 days because of anxiety about coming to school. When students miss that much school, she says, the anxiety builds up, making it feel

"Without a sense of belonging or someone to talk to, [school] can be unbearable at any grade level."

—Lisa Dillingham



impossible to return. Some figure there's no point in even trying.

Prorok and her team of counselors, school support staff, and case managers, are able to get students who miss dozens, even hundreds, of days to come back by agreeing to learn in a classroom designed for chronically absent students. This space allows them to work on their credits without the anxiety or distraction of a regular classroom.

"We have only 9 or 10 students at a given time, and it's quiet with low lights," she explains. "They catch up on their work and credit recovery, and we modify their schedules so that they can eventually return to some or all of their classes. Maybe they come for one class. ... Others stay all day. The main goal is to get them to graduation."

The girl who missed 300 days now comes to school every day. She uses a district computer program for her coursework and attends English class in person. She also took an elective in

(Below) In Milwaukee, the Lincoln Avenue Community Elementary School created a walking school bus that "picks up" students and escorts them safely to school. (Right, both) Educators shop for free supplies, including backpacks, for students at Classroom Central, in Charlotte, N.C.



person with her sister, who made her feel more comfortable.

Creating this "school within a school" has been remarkably successful. Mundelein High now has a 95 percent graduation rate. (To find out if your district offers a similar program, ask your administrator or district office.)

6. Create a sense of belonging.

"Let's face it, middle school is a very challenging time in a student's life," Dillingham says. "But without a sense of belonging or someone to talk to, [school] can be unbearable at any grade level."

Getting kids into clubs and activities, she says, is a proven way to lessen chronic absenteeism. A variety of studies, including one by the National Center for Education Statistics, show that participation in clubs and extracurricular activities reduces absenteeism and builds a stronger sense of connection to school.

"They offer an opportunity for students to be with people with similar

interests who care for them, which is especially true for kids in the LGBTQ+ community," Dillingham shares. "They build relationships with a trusted adult, or small group of kids, and that's huge for making school a supportive place."

7. Make classes meaningful.

"How can we keep students engaged if all we teach them can be found on Google?" asks Christy. "A lot of students decide they're wasting their time in a classroom that's not teaching them what they need."

She notes that schools must adapt curriculum and standards to make them more relevant to students today.

In history class, for example, rather than teaching and testing on facts and figures and who was on what side of a war—all information that can be found online—Christy recommends getting to the causes with questions that spur critical thinking and discussion.

"Let's dig deep on logic and reasoning and make lessons relevant

to the times we're in by exploring the rise of AI, different technologies, and disinformation," she says. "Make it relevant, relatable, and collaborative. Let students get up from their desks so they can walk around and work together."

Jones agrees. She knows she must meet certain standards, but she infuses lessons with her own materials to make them culturally relevant to her students. She avoids endless worksheets and embraces technology and the online learning games her students love.

Her bottom line: "Make school more fun, and create a place where they want to come and learn." 🚀

SHARE THIS

If chronic absenteeism is a problem in your school, share this article with your colleagues and administrators, and try some of the programs on these pages.

THE SURVEY SAYS:

'WE'RE AT A CRISIS POINT'

By Cindy Long

NEA MEMBERS SEEK COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Student behavior has nearly overtaken pay as the top concern among educators—and it's driving some out of the profession.

Today, 4 out of 5 teachers and education support professionals find student behavior to be a serious problem, according to an NEA nationwide poll of 2,889 educators on student mental health conducted last year. Some 81 percent of educators surveyed said students are acting out and misbehaving.

The result for educators? Stress, burnout, and persistent staffing shortages. In a 2024 survey by the RAND Corporation, funded in part by NEA, 44 percent of teachers cited student behavior as the top source of job-related stress.

In a study by Pew Research that same year, 80 percent of teachers reported they have to address students' behavioral problems "at least a few times a week," with 58 percent saying this happens every day.

Member surveys conducted by several NEA state affiliates mirror these national findings, proving behavior concerns to be pervasive and almost universal. For example, in a 2024 Idaho Education Association survey, 59 percent of members identified student behavior as a serious concern.

An Iowa State Education Association survey that same

year found that 62 percent of its members considered student discipline and behavior to be a very serious concern.

Outbursts, aggression, and wasted time

In Delaware, a similar pattern emerges. Behavior challenges are leading to a loss of instruction time and are exacerbating the teacher shortage, according to a 2024 survey by the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA).

Rather than focusing time on classroom instruction, the average public school teacher in the state now spends 7 hours per month managing student outbursts and other behavioral health issues, with middle school teachers losing closer to 10 hours of instruction time per month, according to the survey results.

"We're at a crisis point in public education that's only going to get worse—until administrators, school boards, and state legislators take corrective action to restore our schools to safe and healthy learning environments," says DSEA President Stephanie Ingram.

More than 75 percent of educators surveyed reported a lack of parental support in dealing with student discipline, while 60 percent said they lack support from administrators.



Stephanie Ingram



Elsa Batista

The Kids Are Not All Right

National and state surveys of NEA members strike a common theme—student behavior problems are taking a toll on educators, and they need big solutions.

Challenges:

Physical injuries from student aggression.

Verbal abuse from students, including threats.

Violence toward classmates.

Outbursts during instruction.

Defiance and rule-breaking.

Solutions:

Cellphone policies.

Smaller class sizes.

Administrative and parental support.

More para-professionals.

More mental health staff.

"We are strong, resilient, and creative, but we need support, we need help in our classrooms. Right now, that's not happening, and we cannot afford to lose more teachers."

A 2024 survey by the NEA Rhode Island found that 74 percent of members said students are acting out and misbehaving, and 40 percent reported that students are more violent toward staff and peers.

Educators say students' behavior outbursts have grown more serious, according to a 2024 EdWeek Research Center study. Most teachers (68%) say they have experienced verbal abuse from their students, such as being yelled at or verbally threatened. About 1 in 5 say this happens at least a few times a month.

The search for solutions

Cellphone bans have helped. Educators across the country also call for limiting class sizes and for administrators to create clear policies for addressing student behavior.

But to achieve lasting solutions, says CEA Vice President Joslyn DeLancey, "we have to make an investment in public education. It is the single most important investment we can make."



Joslyn DeLancey

Educators were clear about changes they believe would address student behavior issues, including: Smaller class sizes; better disciplinary support from administrators; more co-teachers in classrooms with larger numbers of high-needs students; better administrative communication with parents; mental health professionals who have time to provide more services; more paraprofessionals; and clear cellphone policies for the whole building or district.

The risk of burnout

The Connecticut Education Association (CEA) wanted to learn more about the persistent educator shortage in their state. A 2024 member survey found that stress and burnout topped their list of concerns. The cause? Challenges with student behavior and discipline.

"Teaching has become mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting," said CEA member Elsa Batista at a press conference calling on state lawmakers to address the educator shortage.

"Teaching has become mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting. We are strong, resilient, and creative, but we need support."

—Elsa Batista, Connecticut teacher

DO THIS!

NEA Today wants to hear from you.

We want to know what has worked to improve student behavior in your school? What should your district do to help resolve the problem? Scan the QR code to share your ideas, or go to nea.org/BehaviorTips.



LEADING THE WAY FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE

By Takier George

MEET THE 2025
NEA HUMAN AND
CIVIL RIGHTS
AWARD WINNERS

Ohio educator and NEA member **Leshun “Ship” Collins** has spent the last two decades mentoring young African American men, helping them to reach their full potential and connect pride in their identity to academic achievement.

Collins, who is a health and physical education instructor at Orange High School, in Pepper Pike, Ohio, founded an after-school mentorship program called the Male Minority Leadership Group. The program offers a safe space for young Black men to bond over their commonalities and embrace their differences. His goal is to inspire students to take control of their destiny.

As a board member of the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center, he leads the White Ribbon Campaign, which aims to end violence against women.

For his exemplary work as an advocate inside—and outside—his community, he is one of nine extraordinary individuals and organizations that received a Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Award, NEA’s most prestigious honor.

Breaking glass ceilings

Marissa Winmill is one of the nation’s most influential figures in advancing academic opportunities for young women.

She is an NEA member as well as a board member for the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, where she advocates for a diverse educator workforce.

While teaching at Washington’s Kent-Meridian High School, Winmill started a Girls Who Code club, giving female students access to the tools needed to succeed in STEM fields. Winmill’s goal is to nurture greatness in young women.



Leshun “Ship” Collins



Imara Jones



Marta Silva



Jesús Valle



Marissa Winmill



Maude Dahme



Elise Carter

Creating change across communities

The following NEA allies and partners also received HCR awards for leading with courage, creativity, and a commitment to advancing social and racial justice:

Imara Jones is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning journalist and founder of TransLash Media, a nonprofit dedicated to challenging bias against transgender people through storytelling. She is a prominent voice on gender, race, and policy. Named one of Time’s 100 Most Influential People of 2023, she hosts the award-winning TransLash Podcast and has produced acclaimed films and documentaries.

Maude Dahme, a Holocaust survivor and educator, is committed to teaching young people to stand up for what they believe in. As a Jewish child in Holland during WWII, Nazis ordered Dahme and her family into a concentration camp. Dahme and her siblings were intercepted by humanitarian aid workers and taken to safe houses. But they were separated from their parents, who were also in hiding until the war ended. Fortunately, the family was reunited three years later.

In 1950, Dahme immigrated to New Jersey, where she started a career in education. For 20 years, Dahme sat on the New Jersey Board of Education, including serving 5 years as president. In this leadership role, she implemented a Holocaust education curriculum in the state’s public schools. Today, she continues to travel to concentration camps and then shares her learnings with students when she returns to the States.

Marta Silva is a heritage language instructor at Olathe North High School, in Kansas. She created the district’s heritage language program—an initiative that levels the playing field for Hispanic students. By promoting translation and interpretation skills along with career training, she empowers Latino students to pursue higher education and overcome barriers.

Elise Carter is one of only a few African American educators in her school district, in Fort Thomas, Ky., and is committed to providing students with rich, honest, and accurate African American history.

Carter created an innovative social equity course and stood firm against community members who disagreed with her teachings.

After years of persistence, she ensured that Black history and diversity, equity, and inclusion remained part of her district’s curriculum.

Jesús Valle is a tenured professor of Native American studies at American River College, in Sacramento, Calif. He established the school’s Native Resource Center for Indigenous youth, and he helps strengthen Native communities by advocating for inclusivity, pride, and dignity.

Showing Up for Racial Justice Kansas City (SURJ KC) is an organization that consists of White educators in the Kansas City metro area—in both Kansas and Missouri—who are committed to examining the impact of racism and White supremacy in public schools. SURJ KC also hosts public forums and panel discussions led by diverse speakers. Their work exemplifies the true allyship needed to dismantle harmful systems and ideologies.

The Mississippi Minority Farmers Alliance of North Mississippi, founded by a small group of Black farmers, supports marginalized farmers and works to bring equity to the world of agriculture.

Ke Kula ‘O Nāwahīokalani‘ōpu‘u Iki Lab Public Charter School is a Hawaiian-language immersion public charter school where educators help Asian American and Pacific Islander youth to embrace their culture by keeping the Hawaiian language alive. The school rejects assimilation and instead celebrates students’ Hawaiian identities. 🌺

LEARN
MORE

Turn to Page 54 to learn how to
nominate a colleague for the NEA
Human and Civil Rights Awards
or go to nea.org/HCR Awards.

Get Ready to Fight Forward

AT THE NEA REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY, DELEGATES PREPARE TO MOBILIZE AGAINST ATTACKS ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

By Tim Walker

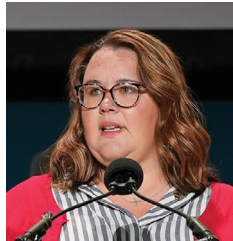
Nearly 7,000 determined educators assembled in Portland, Ore., July 3 - 6, for NEA's Annual Meeting and Representative Assembly (RA). Against the backdrop of an unprecedented, ferocious assault on public education, the assembly convened with a sense of great urgency.

Over the four-day meeting, delegates were briefed on the perilous threats facing our schools and institutions—devastating education budget cuts, school privatization, and attacks on immigrant students and LGBTQ+ students, to name just a few. In an unprecedented move, they voted to turn the final day of the RA into an all-day training to elevate their advocacy and their voices when they return home.

'Demand justice and preserve democracy'

In her keynote address, NEA President Becky Pringle urged the delegates to continue to lead the way against the Trump administration's multipronged attack on our democracy and our schools. The next 12 months—leading up to the 2026 midterm elections—will be pivotal, she said.

"This is an intentional, coordinated campaign to strip away the very tools that challenge power, demand justice, and preserve democracy," Pringle said. "As [the Trump administration] works to destroy public education, and then profit from the wreckage, they want to lock in policies that will take generations to undo. ... Delegates, I need you to understand that we are in a prolonged fight—one that cannot end on the last day of this RA."



(Clockwise from top): NEA President Becky Pringle, Education Support Professional of the Year Andy Markus, Higher Educator of the Year Teresa M. Hodge, and National Teacher of the Year Ashlie Crosson.

Show up for your students

NEA members are no strangers to challenges, and they will meet the moment, said 2025 Education Support Professional of the Year Andy Markus in his address to the assembly.

"No matter what curveballs people throw at us, we are still showing up every day to care for our students, colleagues, and communities," Markus said. "We are at school board meetings, statehouses, rallies, and more, doing everything we can to advocate for better learning environments for our students and better working environments for ourselves."

The 2025 National Teacher of the Year, Ashlie Crosson, addressed the crowd, saying everyone in the

convention hall and all public school educators know what is at stake for American education—and that we must come together to preserve it.

"We are the guardians—not just of our curricula and our classrooms—but of the conditions that allow our schools to thrive," she said. "I say this with full conviction, every day, but especially today: Protecting education is how we protect our democracy."

The 2025 Higher Educator of the Year, Teresa M. Hodge, echoed these inspirational messages in her address. Hodge pledged, "[I will] boldly and unapologetically shine the light of truth where there are lies and use my voice to bring awareness to and for higher ed issues across this nation."

Learn and lead

In keeping with their earlier vote, delegates spent the fourth day preparing to organize and take action for public schools and democracy.

The day's training covered a wide range of topics: Maximizing digital and in-person lobbying and organizing; taking action against vouchers and school privatization; protecting immigrant students and LGBTQ+ students; building power for the common good through collective action; and countering attacks on democracy.

"We are building the capacity for the actions that will be required ahead. Lean in to today's training and conversation," Pringle exhorted the delegates. "Let's use this time to gain the knowledge and critical skills that we then take back to our communities. Learn, so you can teach. And lead, so you can encourage others to organize and mobilize millions in your states." 🌟

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59th Annual NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards

CALL FOR 2026 NOMINATIONS

Know of an individual, organization, or affiliate that champions racial and social justice and civil rights within their community?

Show your support and uplift their good work to the national stage by submitting a nomination for a 2026 Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Award.

Honorees are recognized during the annual HCR Awards program, held in July prior to NEA's Representative Assembly.

- **Identify and honor** exemplary individuals, organizations, and affiliates for their contributions to human and civil rights, and racial and social justice.

- **Celebrate** NEA's multicultural roots and commitment to justice.

- **Recognize** today's human and civil rights victories and chart the path forward.

- **Honor** the rich legacy of the merger between the American Teachers Association (ATA) and NEA, from whence the HCR Awards program began.

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

Identify your nominees now! It is never too early to begin profiling nominees and potential HCR Award winners! Find information on past winners and submit nominations for the 2026 HCR Awards at nea.org/hcrawards. Nomination forms and instructions will be available online Oct. 7, 2025 – Dec. 6, 2025. For more information, email NEAHCRAwards@nea.org.



Educators, let's elect the leaders our students deserve.

PAC

GIVE.VOTE.WIN!

Your contribution to the NEA PAC helps elect pro-education candidates up and down the ballot. Scan to get started.



Contributions to the NEA Fund are not deductible as charitable contributions. Contributions to the NEA Fund are voluntary and will be used for political purposes. Making a contribution is neither a condition of employment nor membership in NEA, and members have the right to refuse to contribute without reprisal. A member may contribute more or less than the suggested amount, or may contribute nothing at all, without affecting membership status, rights, or benefits in NEA or any of its affiliates. Federal law requires NEA to use its best efforts to collect and report the name, address, occupation, and employer for each individual whose contributions aggregate in excess of \$200 in a calendar year.

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GRANTS TO EDUCATORS

STUDENT SUCCESS GRANTS support projects that promote critical thinking and real-world application of learning.

ENVISION EQUITY GRANTS empower educators to advance students' cultural understanding, anti-racism commitments, and understanding of civic engagement and democracy.

LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP GRANTS allow educators to participate in professional development opportunities that are specific to their individual needs and interests.

GRANTS UP TO \$5,000

APPLICATION DEADLINE: SEPTEMBER 15TH



SCAN TO APPLY



Educators Make Noise Nationwide!

From Anchorage to Albuquerque, Los Angeles to Des Moines, and up and down the Eastern Seaboard, thousands of educators and their allies took to the streets on May Day (May 1) to raise their voices in a powerful chorus of defiance and hope. Marchers rallied against immigrant raids, billionaire tax breaks, attacks on workers and educators, and deep cuts to public education—many driven by policies and rhetoric from the Trump administration.

In cities across the country, protesters carried signs like "Protect Workers, Not Billionaires," "Everyone is Welcome Here," and "Defend Democracy," as chants rang out in English and Spanish, "*¡Sin miedo!*—without fear."

The powerful display of solidarity proved once again that educators will always speak out. We're making so much noise, the public and press are taking notice!



Congratulations

TO THE 2025 AWARDS FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE HONOREES



JACQUELINE BROWN

HORACE MANN AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
High School Business and Technology Educator
Okolona High School in Okolona, Mississippi
Mississippi Association of Educators



REVA LOBATOS

HORACE MANN AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
Second Grade Educator
Fremont County School District #25 in Riverton, Wyoming
Wyoming Education Association



JOE NAPPI

HORACE MANN AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
High School and University Social Studies Educator
Monmouth Regional High School in Tinton Falls, New Jersey
New Jersey Education Association



MARIBEL VILCHEZ

HORACE MANN AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
Third Grade Educator
Lydia Hawk Elementary School in Lacey, Washington
Washington Education Association



MATTHEW HAMILTON

NEA Member Benefits Award
for Teaching Excellence

Seventh Grade Social Studies
Educator & Middle and High School
Video Production Educator

East Jordan Public Schools
in East Jordan, Michigan

Michigan Education Association

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VISIT NEAFoundation.org TO LEARN MORE

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