For the latest news, sign up for our e-newsletter at **nea.org/signup**.

October 2025

neaToday

for NEA HIGHER ED

An edition of *NEA Today*

The $alary Issue

Who's Climbing the Salary Scale?

GET THE FACTS ON FACULTY PAY

PAGE 30

John Hasegawa teaches ceramics at Mount Hood Community College, in Oregon.

inside

I Can't Afford to Live Where I Work PAGE 28

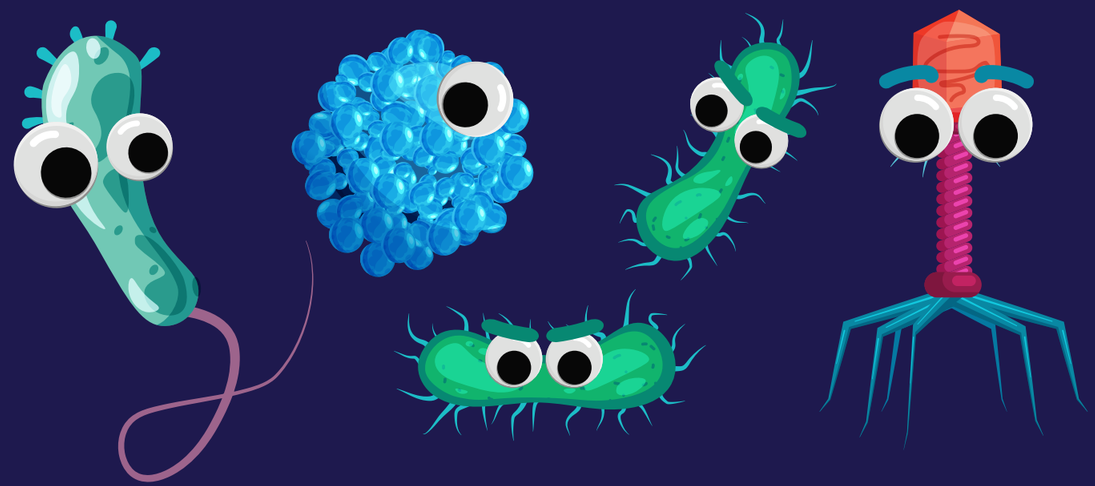
How to Plan for a Secure Retirement PAGE 38

Federal research cuts are killing innovation PAGE 44

nea NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Lysol HERE
For Healthy Schools

Lysol's HERE for Healthy Schools program is intended to reduce school absenteeism through creating hands-on activities that are fun and engaging while teaching the science of germs and better hygiene behaviors.



FREE DOWNLOADABLE RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE AT

https://www.TheGiantRoom.com/LysolMinilabsDigitalKits

THE GIANT ROOM

1 Lysol MINI LABS

twinkl

Disney

Watch learning fall into place

No more raking through resources to find one that works

Whether you're nurturing emotional skills in fall, boosting phonics confidence in spring, or crunching into core math and science – there's a classroom-ready Disney activity for it, at Twinkl.

We've got you!

Standards are our standard
Designed for real classrooms by real teachers.

Get your break back
Plan faster with ready-to-teach lessons.

Your go-to all year long
Every season, every subject, every grade.

Ready to make teaching a little lighter?
Scan to explore Twinkl's exclusive Disney collection
Visit twinkl.com/getdisney

CONTENTS

For NEA Higher Ed Members

October 2025

Volume 44, number 2

The $alary Issue

In this special edition, we dive into the topic on every higher ed member's mind: your paycheck!

COVER

Everything You Need to Know About Faculty Pay

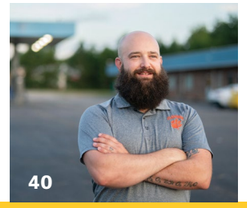
30 NEA's latest research on educator pay gives you all the facts about higher ed salaries at public colleges and universities across the country. Find out how your salary stacks up, and how unions make a difference.

I Can't Afford to Live Where I Work

28 A Northern California professor shares how far she has to go to find affordable housing.

Every Step You Take

34 What to do and *not* to do when you are bargaining a new salary schedule.



Don't Let Health Care Swallow Your Raise

36 A raise isn't a raise if health care costs go up, too. Find out how your union can help.

Road Map to Retirement

38 How to plan for retirement whether you're 25 or 65.

Money Changes Everything

40 Good news! Educator salaries are on the rise. Bad news! So is the cost of living.

FEATURES

Five Things to Know About the Higher Educator of the Year

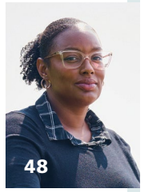
22 Meet Teresa M. Hodge, a professor at a historically Black college in Florida, and find out why she believes in "loud" math.

Opinion: Use Your Power

26 United Faculty of Washington State President Bill Lyne wants NEA Higher Ed members to focus on the public good.

Hands Off Science!

44 Federal funding cuts are squelching important research at universities.



Help! I'm an Educator and I'm Being Bullied

48 If you are being bullied at work, you have rights.

Comics: The Superheroes of Welcoming Classrooms

50 Educators share how they use comics as a learning tool for students of all abilities.

SPECIAL SECTIONS

In the Know *The $alary Issue*

12 Get a snapshot of NEA's annual salary report.

Issues and Action

16 The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act turns 50. Have we made progress?

Our Voices

20 A teacher refuses to take down a poster that says, "Everyone is welcome here."

DEPARTMENTS

7 FROM THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PRESIDENT
8 BECKY'S JOURNAL
10 NEA IN ACTION
25 BULLETIN BOARD
Faculty unions are growing, including NEA Higher Ed!
54 RESOURCES
56 LAST LOOK

EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

The $alary Issue

How Much Does School Support Staff Get Paid?

18 Find out how much ESPs make at public K–12 schools, colleges, and universities across the nation—and see the union difference.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Sign up for *NEA Today* news! For timely news about issues impacting educators, visit nea.org/NEAToday or sign up for *NEA Today's* biweekly e-newsletter at nea.org/signup.

COVER: JAY FRAM; ABOVE, FROM LEFT: SEAN RAYFORD; JAY FRAM; JEN POTTHEISER

MISSION, VISION, AND *values*

NEA NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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

OUR VISION IS A GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR EVERY STUDENT.

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

OUR CORE VALUES
These principles guide our work and define our mission:

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

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

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

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

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

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

NEA TODAY (ISSN 0734-7219) is published four times a year by the National Education Association, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-3290. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *NEA Today*, Attn: NEA Membership Management Services Address Change, Suite 510, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-3290.

Telephone: 202-833-4000.

NEA Today is mailed to all NEA members as a benefit of membership.

To change your address and/or stop receiving print materials from NEA, visit **nea.org/about-nea/contact-us**, or call 202-833-4000.

PRESIDENT'S viewpoint

National Council for Higher Education
President Alec Thomson

We Must Protect Higher Education

Hello! My name is Alec Thomson. I am a community college professor from Livonia, Mich., and president of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). As a council, NCHE advocates within NEA and throughout the country on critical issues facing faculty, staff, and students.

This is your first issue of *NEA Today for NEA Higher Ed* magazine. We are excited to have this tool to connect with each other, especially today.

As an NEA Higher Ed member, I am certain that you, like me, are witnessing a seemingly endless parade of politically motivated attacks that threaten our campuses. Certainly, you harbor no illusions that the efforts to rewrite curriculum, reduce funding, restrict free speech, and eliminate civil rights protections are being adopted so as to expand or improve higher education. These attacks seek to transform America's higher education system from places defined by opportunity and innovation into institutions of limited accessibility where political interference pushes out critical thinking, autonomy, and integrity.

Given this environment, our efforts are more critical than ever. We must defend and protect higher education. And we must advance and improve it. Setting aside today's cruel political attacks, we face a changing educational landscape that requires new ideas and policies.

Thus, I ask you to consider two courses of action: First, take note of the activities hosted by NEA to mark National Higher Education Month. (See Page 24.) These events will not only be informational, but will help us to connect and share our experiences and concerns. Second, please consider becoming a member of NCHE. Your membership gives weight to our advocacy, while providing you with support and access to a community of like-minded professionals. Join at nea.org/NCHE.

NEATODAY

PUBLISHER AND DIRECTOR
Anitrá Speight

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR EDITORIAL CONTENT AND PRODUCTION
Giovanna Bechard

MANAGER PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATIONS
Shawn Stabell

EDITORS
Mary Ellen Flannery
Robin Terry Brown

SR. WRITER/EDITORS
Brenda Álvarez
Amanda Litvinov
Cindy Long

COPY EDITOR
Judy Rowe

PROGRAM AND PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
Tammy Funderburk

NEA.ORG/NEATODAY
Tim Walker

SR. CONTENT STRATEGIST, NEA.ORG
Michelle Chovan

DESIGN AND ART DIRECTION
Groff Creative LLC

ADVERTISING SALES
Scott Kish
skish@neamb.com

CONTRIBUTORS
Mark Ashe
Joan Hoffman
Kristie Iwamoto
Bill Lyne
Sundjata Sekou
Dylan Toth
Kalie Walker

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK:
MAIL: NEA Today, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036
EMAIL: neatoday@nea.org FACEBOOK: facebook.com/neatoday

Important Update to NEA Life and AD&D Insurance Plans

This is a notice for a change made to the NEA Life and Accidental Death & Dismemberment (AD&D) Insurance Plans.

Maintaining active NEA membership is a requirement at the time of application and to continue coverage under the NEA Life and AD&D Insurance Plans. However, with this new change, if you fail to maintain your NEA membership, you will remain covered under your NEA Life and AD&D Insurance Plan through your premium paid date.

It is important to note that during the time this policy has been in force, a claim would have been adjudicated just like any other NEA MIT Life Insurance policy and a claim paid, if affirmed. Therefore, your insurance policy will not be cancelled, nor a refund provided, back to when your NEA membership terminated.

This adjustment provides a grace period, allowing members who inadvertently let their NEA membership lapse to retain their insurance coverage temporarily. To ensure uninterrupted coverage beyond this period, it's essential to renew your NEA membership promptly. Maintaining active membership is crucial, as all insurance plans offered through NEA MIT require NEA membership for continued coverage.

For more information about the change or to fully review the language contained on your rider, visit **neamitplans.com/certificate-rider-notification** or click the QR code.

BECKY'S JOURNAL OF

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

"You are the holders of hope and the keepers of dreams. You provide love and care to our students and to each other. … Our country is depending on us, on this community, to lead the way … from dogmatism back to decency and democracy."

—Becky, addressing nearly 7,000 delegates at NEA's 2025 Representative Assembly, in Portland, Ore.

Face to Face with NEA members

This summer in Chicago, I joined hundreds of labor and community leaders from across the country to collaborate and build power. Our goal? To raise our collective voice for workers, not billionaires! During my time in the Windy City, I talked with state and local affiliate leaders who strategized with us, and partners, about organizing and mobilizing to fight back and fight forward in the face of unprecedented attacks on public education, workers' rights, and our democracy. As I spoke with these dedicated members, I was so moved by their commitment to speaking out and taking action to ensure every public school is a place of dignity, opportunity, and respect.

(Top) I was so inspired by the many NEA members, including those from Kansas NEA, who gathered in Chicago to build our union power. (Bottom) It was my honor to address the city's "Good Trouble Lives On" protest against the Trump administration's attacks on civil rights.

PHOTOS: NEA

JOIN ME
3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

1. **Be that trusted adult for a student.** October is National Bullying Prevention Month. Research shows that having at least one trusted adult at school can minimize the mental health toll of bullying. Find out how you can help a bullied student at **nea.org/BullyFree**.

2. **Resist!** Attacks on public education are coming fast and furious. We must take action to protect our students and schools. Find out how NEA is aligning with local and state affiliates so our members can build power together for educators, students, and public education at **nea.org/Protect**.

3. **Say no to vouchers.** Voucher schemes strip desperately needed funds from public schools and direct it to unaccountable private schools instead. Much of the money goes to families with children who already attend private school, leaving our public schools with even fewer resources. We must continue to fight vouchers at the ballot box and in our communities. Learn more at **nea.org/Vouchers**.

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

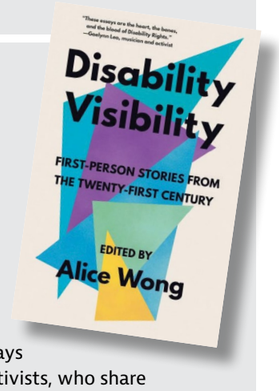
The New York Times

In the News: Protecting Students

"Parents, educators, and community leaders won't be silent as Trump and his allies take a wrecking ball to public schools and the futures of the 50 million students in rural, suburban, and urban communities across America. We will continue to organize, advocate, and mobilize until all students have the opportunity to attend the well-resourced public schools where they can thrive."

—Becky, *New York Times*, July 15, 2025

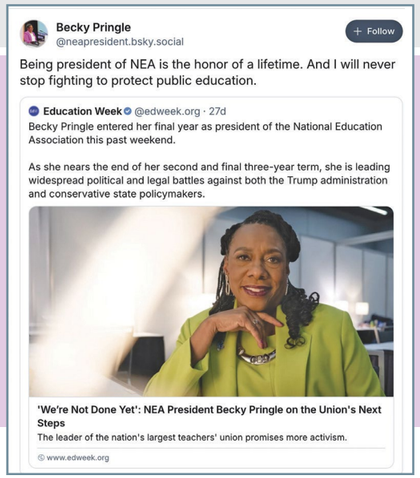
What I'm Reading



This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), on Nov. 29, and the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, on July 26. To honor these milestones, I'm learning about the disability justice movement by reading *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong. This inspirational must-read brings together essays from writers with disabilities, advocates, and activists, who share stories and perspectives from the disability community.

The collection highlights progress that's been made since IDEA went into effect and encourages important conversations about inclusion in education. An informative and a compelling read, it's on NEA's Disability Booklist! As we mark these meaningful anniversaries, we must continue to demand that Congress fully fund IDEA for special education students. Learn more at **nea.org/IDEA**.

Stay connected with me through Bluesky @neapresident.bsky.social.



NEA Grant Secures Florida Win for Collective Bargaining

Florida teacher Lisa Loyd shows off her ballot card—she voted "yes" for a collective bargaining agreement.

An NEA Year-Round Organizing grant helped the Florida Education Association (FEA) protect educators' rights and preserve collective bargaining.

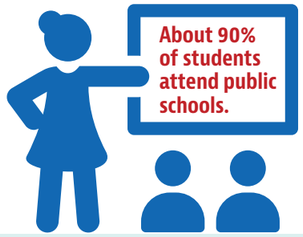
In 2023, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a law that banned payroll deductions for union dues and placed an onerous new requirement on most public employees, including educators, to maintain a 60 percent membership rate within their bargaining unit to avoid mandatory annual recertification elections.

Today, FEA is celebrating its 117th straight recertification win—clear proof that Florida educators stand with their union! To date, FEA has had no recertification losses. Learn about NEA organizing grants at nea.org/YROGrant.

NEA Challenges Wyoming Voucher Scheme

NEA and the Wyoming Education Association filed a lawsuit, in June, challenging the state's $50 million universal voucher program, which allows any student to use public funds to attend private—often religious schools or homeschools—regardless of family income.

The lawsuit argued that the "Steamboat Legacy Scholarship Act," a voucher scheme by another name, siphons money from public education and violates constitutional protections for a uniform, publicly funded education system. In July, the court indefinitely halted the voucher program.



NEA Position Echoed in Supreme Court Decision

NEA protected public education by filing an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court, in April, urging the justices to reject efforts to force states to fund religious charter schools.

In a major win, in May, the Court upheld the principle that public dollars must support public—not religious—schools.

Learn more at nea.org/Vouchers.

NEA Urges Colleges to Adopt Safe Zone Policy

College campuses should be safe places for immigrant students and staff, but today, these communities are at risk. NEA's Office of General Counsel recommends colleges and universities adopt Safe Zone resolutions that outline what educators and staff should do if U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement attempts to carry out raids on their campuses.

Find sample language at nea.org/ProtectHE.

(From left) California NEA Higher Ed members Kashara Moore, Vienna Sa, and Jennifer Escobar.

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: BRIAN PHILLIPS; COURTESY OF KASHARA MOORE

IN THE *know*

The $alary Issue

NEA SALARY REPORT: THE LATEST ON EDUCATOR PAY

The average teacher in the U.S. earned a little more than $72,000 last year—a 3.8 percent increase over the previous year, according to NEA's annual educator pay reports. That's the good news. The bad news? Adjusted for inflation, the average teacher actually makes less today than she did 10 years ago. Too-low pay is a serious problem, hindering efforts to attract and retain educators. What can you do to help change the equation? Use your voice at the bargaining table, and elect lawmakers who respect educators and unions.

Teacher Salaries

National Average Teacher Salary:

(2023 – 2024)
$72,030

(2022 – 2023)
$69,381

National Average Starting Teacher Salary:

(2023 – 2024)
$46,526

(2022 – 2023)
$44,458

But, when adjusted for inflation, average and starting salaries are below 2008 – 2009 levels.

The Collective Bargaining Difference:

24% MORE

Teachers earn 24 percent more on average in states with collective bargaining than in those where it is prohibited.

School Support Staff Earnings

National Average Earnings for Education Support Professionals (ESPs)

Higher Education:
(2023 – 2024)
$45,662

K-12:
(2023 – 2024)
$34,954

The number of ESPs who make less than $25,000:
34.5%

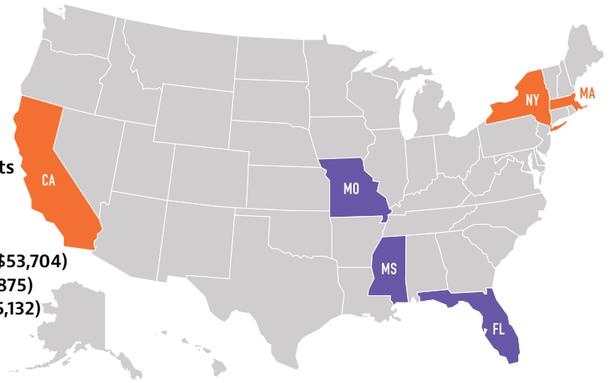
Overall, due to inflation, ESPs make on average 9 percent less than they did 10 years ago.

The Collective Bargaining Difference:

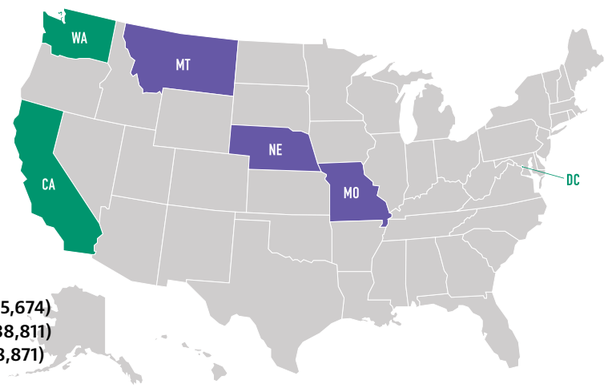
7% MORE

ESPs earn 7 percent more on average in states with collective bargaining than in states where it is prohibited.

U.S. states with the highest and lowest average teacher salaries:



U.S states and territories with the highest and lowest starting teacher salaries:



20.7% – The percentage of school districts with teacher salaries that top $100,000.

96%–The percentage of school districts with teacher salaries over $100K that are in states with collective bargaining laws.

800–The number of districts with starting salaries of at least $60,000–a 66.2% increase from the prior year.

HOW FLEXIBLE SEATING CAN BOOST ENGAGEMENT

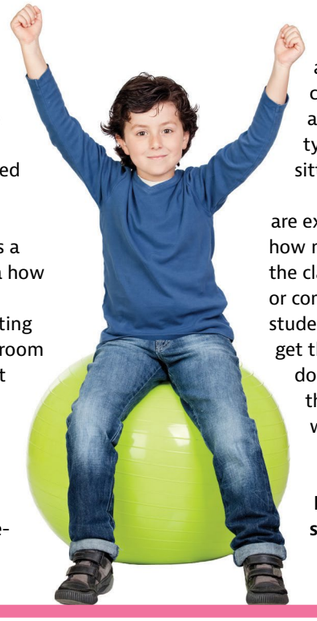
When the physical education teacher at Colleen Metzler's Vermont school said there were exercise balls that could be used as classroom seating, Metzler took full advantage of the opportunity—and replaced all of the seating in her fourth-grade classroom.

"I got rid of all of my chairs and only had exercise balls," she says. "And it was chaos. Because I was in my first year as a classroom teacher, and I had exercise balls that I had no idea how to manage!"

Metzler jumped headfirst into the world of flexible seating and learned a lot from that first experience. Now, her classroom has office chairs, wobble chairs—and the exercise balls that began her journey.

"As the year went on, I slowly started adding regular chairs as another option," she says.

While flexible seating may have become more popular in schools, it may not be for everyone. But some elementary school teachers have noticed that it increases student engagement and reduces behavioral issues.



Metzler said having these options can make her fourth graders feel more mature, and thus they take things more seriously. "I'm trusting that we can have these different seats in our classroom and that we can take care of them, and we can still attend to our learning. They take that very seriously," she says. "It builds confidence."

Flexible seating can include anything from a wide variety of classroom chairs to the way chairs and desks are arranged to the types of desks, such as standing or sitting desks.

Metzler's advice to teachers who are exploring flexible seating? First test how much movement you can tolerate in the classroom before getting distracted or compromising your lessons. "We want students to move, and we want them to get their energy out," she says. "We also don't want to become so distracted that that's the only thing we can see when we're teaching."

—KALIE WALKER

Learn about flexible classroom seating at nea.org/Seating.

Support for "Bell-to-Bell" Cellphone Bans is Growing

Nationwide, more school districts have adopted restrictions on student cellphone use, often mandated by new state laws. The laws often apply only during instructional time, but some districts are extending these policies to the entire school day—so-called "bell-to-bell" bans. A Pew Research Center survey found that public support for both types of bans is on the rise.

74%
Support for class ban in 2025
(68% in 2024)

44%
Support for all-day ban in 2025
(36% in 2024)

CHART SOURCE: SURVEY OF U.S. ADULTS, JUNE 2025. PEW RESEARCH CENTER; PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

How Are Educators Using Artificial Intelligence in the Classroom?

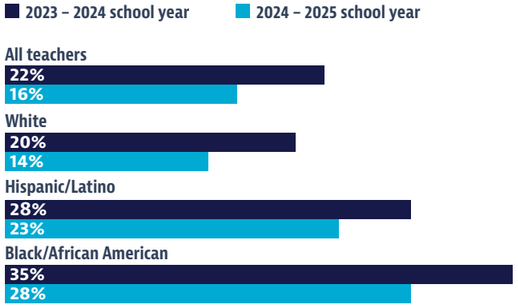
Only 32 percent of teachers report using artificial intelligence (AI) at least weekly, while 28 percent use it infrequently, and 40 percent don't use it at all, according to a recent Gallup survey. For those who use AI monthly, the most common uses include:

- **Preparing lessons (37%)**
- **Creating worksheets (33%)**
- **Modifying materials to meet students' needs (28%)**
- **Doing administrative work (28%)**
- **Making assessments (25%)**

Less common applications include grading (16%), providing one-on-one instruction (14%), and analyzing student data (12%).

SOURCE: GALLUP

Teachers' intention to leave current job



SOURCE: THE RAND CORPORATION

Fewer Teachers Planning on Leaving Their Jobs

Burnout and low pay affect educators across the nation, pushing many of them to leave the profession or at least seriously consider doing so. Teacher retention has always been a challenge, but the factors and conditions that have driven so many out of the classroom were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2025, there may be signs of progress. According to a new survey by the RAND Corporation, teachers overall are less likely to leave their jobs. However, Black and Hispanic educators are more likely to report an intent to leave compared with their white counterparts.

"Managing behavior takes a real toll—physically, mentally, and emotionally. We give so much to our students and their families. If schools are serious about implementing restorative justice, they need to understand that it's not just students being affected—these challenges are hurting the adults, too."

— Candice Pastor, teacher, Montclair, N.J.

Learn how educators are demanding the tools and resources necessary to protect students and school staff from behavior that could turn violent at nea.org/SafeInSchool.

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

ISSUES AND *action*

50 YEARS OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT

By Kalie Walker and Amanda Litvinov

Jean Crockett knows very well how the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) transformed life for students with disabilities. When she was an elementary school teacher in the 1970s, she had a student who was non-verbal and would make loud vocal sounds during reading time.

"Fortunately, it was 1978, and the regulations in IDEA came into effect," Crockett says. She referred her student

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

to the school psychologist, who placed the student in a class where he received the support he needed.

Before IDEA, there was no measure of whether students with disabilities were receiving an appropriate education—if they were in school at all, says Crockett, now a professor emerita of special education at the University of Florida.

But that all changed when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was signed into law in 1975 (it would be renamed IDEA in 1990). The law mandated that students with disabilities would not be turned away from their public school.

While the law was transformative for students with disabilities and their families, and ushered in a new era of inclusion in public schools, the full potential of the law has never been reached.

Will we move forward or backward?

From the start, IDEA stated that the federal government will pay up to 40 percent of the average per pupil cost for special education students. But the federal contribution has never come close to that—it's currently just 12 percent.

Two Trump administration proposals could make the situation even worse.

In the administration's efforts to dismantle the Department of Education, it has cut more than 1,400 employees and proposed that IDEA be managed by the Health and Human Services agency, which has no experience protecting the rights of students with disabilities.

Trump's stated intention is to "move education back to the states" by converting formula grants into block grants—with little to no federal oversight. This would make it much less likely that IDEA funding will reach the students it was intended to help.

"States would not have to answer to anyone about whether they are following the law," says Tom Zembar, NEA's education policy and practice manager.

"As a result, students in some states could receive needed services while students in others receive none," he says.

NEA has taken legal action to block the destruction of the Department of Education and supports a bipartisan push in Congress to fully fund IDEA. Read on to find out how you can help.

IDEA: Important, Imperfect, and Imperiled

STUDENTS SERVED

7.5 MILLION

That's how many students received special education services through public schools in the 2022 – 2023 school year—about 15 percent of all public school students.

FEDERAL FUNDING PROMISE

40 PERCENT

When IDEA passed 50 years ago, the federal government committed to pay 40 percent of the average per student cost for every special education student. It has never met that commitment.

ACTUAL FEDERAL FUNDING

12 PERCENT

The federal share of the average per student cost was under 12 percent in 2025, the smallest share since 2000.

(CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE)

FUNDING SHORTFALL

$ 38.66 BILLION

That's how much states and districts across the country had to cover in the 2024 – 2025 school year, because the federal government fell so short on funding IDEA.

(CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE)

TAKE ACTION

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Tell your members of Congress how IDEA funding helps your students, and ask them to support the IDEA Full Funding Act.

Go to nea.org/IDEAaction.

EDUCATION SUPPORT *professionals*

The $alary Issue

HOW MUCH DOES SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF GET PAID?

FIND OUT WHICH STATES PAY THE MOST, THE LEAST, AND HOW YOUR PAY COMPARES

By Tim Walker

Danielle Jones is a special education instructional assistant in Virginia's Arlington County schools. She has been in her current position for seven years and has worked in education for 21 years. Jones has a bachelor's degree and is halfway to earning her master's. She works a second job as a speech and debate coach and has a roommate, like many support staff in the district.

Danielle Jones

But some colleagues are facing even greater financial pressures. "We have people who are receiving housing assistance, we have people who are on food stamps. The pay is just not enough to make daily ends meet," Jones says. "We are all dedicated professionals, but it is getting difficult to bring 100 percent, especially if you have to work another job. It's exhausting and it leads to burnout."

In 2024, NEA surveyed school support staff, also known as education support professionals (ESP), and found that low pay is a "moderate or serious" concern for 90 percent of those who work in K–12 schools. Thirty-seven percent hold a second job, and one-third have a moderate or serious problem buying food. Many respondents also reported that they skip routine or preventive doctor appointments to avoid compounding financial strain.

Staff shortages are widespread and will only worsen, Jones says, unless improvements are made. "If people can't really survive on the low pay, the staff turnover, the shortages will only get worse. These are dedicated people, but how do [you] continue if you're thinking your food stamps won't last to the end of the month?"

ESP earnings don't keep up with inflation

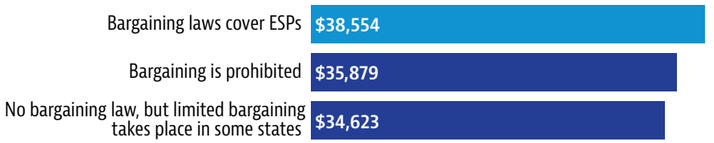
The annual "Education Support Professional Earnings Report" provides a pay breakdown for support staff in K–12 public schools and higher education.

According to new NEA data, almost one-third of all ESPs who worked full-time in 2023 – 2024 earned less than $25,000 per year; and 10 percent earned less than $15,000.

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF DANIELLE JONES

The Benefit of Collective Bargaining

ESPs earn 7 percent more on average in states with collective bargaining than in those where it is prohibited.

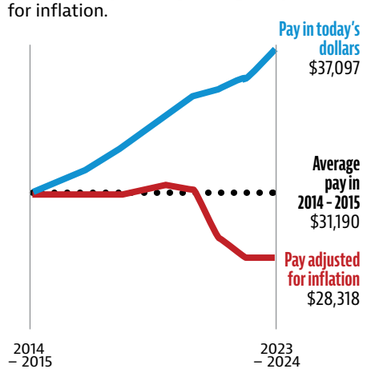


Average salary, 2023 – 2024. Salary averages are weighted by the number of ESPs. Where no bargaining law is in place, the amount of bargaining will vary significantly depending on the state.

SOURCE: NEA ESP EARNINGS REPORT, APRIL 2025

ESP Earnings Lag Inflation

Overall, ESPs make on average 9 percent less than they did 10 years ago, adjusted for inflation.



SOURCE: NEA ESP EARNINGS REPORT, APRIL 2025

Of the approximately 2.2 million support staff working in K–12 public schools, 34.5 percent made less than $25,000 in 2023 – 2024. The previous school year, 38 percent earned less than $25,000. Within higher education, 12.6 percent of support staff earn less than $25,000, and 6.2 percent earn less than $15,000.

The report also found that the average wage for a full-time ESP was $37,097—only a $1,000 increase over the previous year. Higher education earnings came in at $45,662; K–12 at $34,954. For K–12 ESPs, that's an overall increase from $31,190 in the last 10 years. When adjusted for inflation, however, average earnings have declined to $28,318 in real 2015 dollars over the past decade.

According to the report, Rhode Island had the highest average K–12 ESP full-time earnings at $42,940. Full-time earnings were above $40,000 in eight states—Alaska, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island—and the District of Columbia.

Oklahoma had the lowest average K–12 ESP full-time earnings at $27,656. The average K–12 ESP full-time earnings were below $29,000 in four additional states—Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi.

The collective bargaining difference

ESPs in states where collective bargaining is allowed earn, on average, $38,554. Those who work in states where collective bargaining is prohibited earn, on average, $35,879, a 7 percent difference.

In 2024, bargaining power fueled a major victory for paraeducators in Andover, Mass., where Karen Torres has worked as an instructional assistant for 17 years. A hard-fought new contract has lifted starting pay from $24,537 to $39,142 per year. By the end of the 4-year contract, the highest paid employee will earn $50,103.

Torres is the 2024 Massachusetts Teachers Association ESP of the Year and a key member of the Andover Education Association bargaining team. She says her job has changed significantly over the years.

"That is mostly due to increasing student needs—the academic demands and the behavioral and social emotional needs—which are nothing like they were a decade or so ago," Torres says. "But the compensation just has not kept up, and it's unacceptable."

'Show us that respect'

A living wage is a central pillar of NEA's national ESP Bill of Rights campaign. Calling on lawmakers to invest in school support staff, the campaign outlines the top 10 most pressing concerns of ESPs. These include a living wage, adequate health coverage, paid leave, professional training and education, and a safe and healthy work environment. Massachusetts, Virginia, and 12 other states have launched the campaign.

"We're working very hard in getting elected officials to stand behind us," Torres says. "Pay us what we are worth, show us that respect."

TAKE ACTION

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.

MEET THE IDAHO TEACHER WHO REFUSED TO BACK DOWN

"We (help students learn) by making them feel safe. We do that by ... making sure that they know they are all welcome."

—Teacher Sarah Inama, in an interview with *Idaho Education News*.

The classroom poster that led to international headlines and Sarah Inama's resignation says four words: "Everyone is welcome here." Under that message, 10 illustrated hands appear in skin tones that range from dark brown to pale pink.

The message is straightforward: Whether you're Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, white, or some combination of the above, you are welcome in this class. This teacher values you.

For kids who don't need to hear that message, the poster probably blended into the background, says Inama, a world civilizations teacher. But for some students, the message needs to be seen. "If [the hands] help some students know that I'm a teacher who wants everyone to feel welcome, then that's why I have them up," says Inama, who was working at Lewis and Clark Middle School, in Idaho's West Ada School District, at the time.

Without the hands, the poster would not have been a problem, the district's chief academic officer told Inama. But with the hands, it violated a district policy requiring all classroom displays to be "content neutral."

Public schools welcome everyone

In May, Inama resigned from her district because of the poster—or really, because of what the poster revealed about the people she worked for.

The real cliffhanger in Inama's story came months earlier, when she first took the poster down at her principal's request. Right away, she asked herself, why am I doing this? What kind of message does this send to my students? Aren't public school teachers supposed to welcome everyone? Isn't that essential to a public education?

These are questions that many NEA members across the U.S. are asking these days, as anti-diversity, anti-inclusion laws take hold in many states. But based on the thousands upon thousands of emails sent to Inama and to West Ada school board members, most Americans already know the answer: They want educators to embrace and value all students. They want their children to have teachers like Inama.

There was no good reason

Nobody actually complained about Inama's poster. Ever. It only caught her principal's attention in January after parents at another West Ada school complained on social media about a bulletin board with rainbows on it. After the district removed that bulletin board, Chief Academic Officer Marcus Myers told all district principals to "open your eyes to what's hanging on the wall," according to Myers' interview on *The Ranch Podcast*.

In late January, Inama's principal came to her classroom during lunch and told her to take the poster down. Inama recalls feeling "very, very sad." But she did as she was told, and set the poster aside on a table at the back of the classroom.

Her principal told her: "We're just trying to protect you if something were to happen."

But Inama wasn't so sure. "It seemed like they were trying to preemptively appease somebody with exclusionary beliefs," she says.

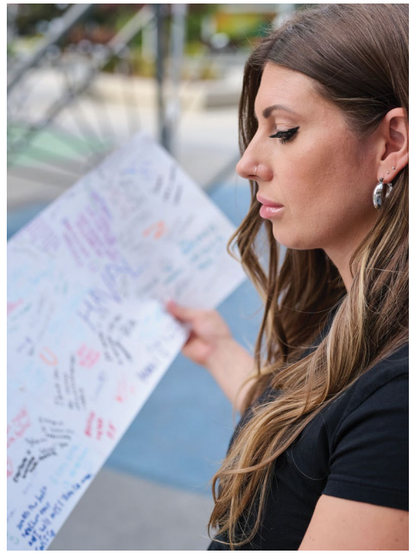
When her students spied the poster on the table, they asked Inama why she took it down.

"I was just like, 'I don't even know,'" she recalls. Inama realized she didn't have a reason. Any reason she gave would sound racist and hurtful to the non-white kids in her classroom.

"I literally felt like I had let them down," she reflects. "I was thinking, 'I don't agree with this.' To me it's blatantly discriminatory and it's blatantly allowing people with exclusionary views to affect my classroom and my students. And I felt sick about [my students] even knowing that."

Inama knows her students trust her. She works hard to build relationships with them. When she looked at their faces and heard their questions, she thought, "I'm doing them such an injustice by being complacent. Whatever reason the district has, I don't agree with it."

So, one weekend in early February, Inama returned to school with her husband and her 1-year-old baby, and she put the poster back up.



Sarah Inama's students signed the back of the poster that she was forced to take down. (Opposite) Inama's "controversial" poster.

'These are people's kids'

Then she emailed her principal, saying that his request to remove the poster "goes against everything that we work towards and the type of community that we dream to have at our school. Is not everybody welcome here?"

In an interview with *Idaho Education News,* Inama said, "We (help students learn) by making them feel safe. We do that by making sure they have food. We do that by building relationships with them. And, most importantly, we do that by making sure that they know that they are all welcome. ... With that being said, I have put my sign back up."

Today, when Inama thinks about sending that email to her principal, her frustration returns. "These are people's kids who we promised to care about and teach," she says.

Her principal told her once again to remove the poster, or else she would be considered insubordinate, and he would get district-level officials involved. She didn't—and they did.

In late February, the chief academic officer and the district's legal counsel told her that the poster violated the district policy as well as the state's 2021 ban on critical race theory.

— MARY ELLEN FLANNERY

LEARN MORE

For guidance about your rights and protections, visit nea.org/Teach-Truth-Know-Your-Rights-FAQ.

What happened next?

In the end, Inama resigned. After going back and forth with the principal, the superintendent, and the people at the district office, she came to a realization: "It's hard to work for people who you feel are fundamentally immoral," she says.

Inama was sorry to leave her students in the West Ada School District, but she found a new job. Last spring, educators in nearby Boise had turned out to support Inama, wearing T-shirts that said, "Everyone is welcome here." This fall, she joined them as a junior high world studies teacher.

HIGHER EDUCATION

member spotlight

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE HIGHER EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR

By Mary Ellen Flannery

The 2025 NEA Higher Educator of the Year, Teresa M. Hodge, sat down with *NEA Today for NEA Higher Ed* to talk about her earliest memories of labor activism; her journey from the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) to a historically Black university in Virginia; her love of math, music, unions, and unsteady aeronautics; and even her dedication to animal rescue. Here are a few things to know about Hodge, the seventh person to ever receive this award.

1 Unionism runs in her blood.

Her earliest memory of what it means to care about working people—and to know the power of solidarity—is at least 50 years old. Hodge grew up on St. Thomas, where her father practiced law. She recalls sitting in a corner of his office, probably with a crayon in hand, while her father and uncle talked about how to improve taxi drivers' working conditions. At that time, St. Thomas had no unions, Hodge says, but "tourism was hot and heavy, and workers were being exploited." Eventually, their efforts laid the groundwork for unionization across the islands—from taxi drivers to hotel and resort workers. Their cause also made an impression on young Teresa, seeding a passion for workers' rights.

2 She still thinks like a student.

Hodge, whose original goals included a *Hidden Figures*-like career in unsteady aeronautics, changed direction and earned a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Florida State University. She has taught math at Florida's Broward College since 2002.

"My style is unique, it's fun, it's approachable, and it is loud!" she says.

It's also innovative. Long before pedagogists popularized the flipped classroom, Hodge was naturally teaching this way.

"Because of my ADHD, passive note-taking was never going to work for me," she says. "You'll never come into my classroom and see students sitting in rows quietly. Math is meant to be loud! Students will be running around, putting their names on the steps of problems that I have up around the room."

Hodge also ensures her course materials reflect the diversity and life experiences of her students.

3 Her passion is organizing—that's growing and strengthening unions and union members.

In 2010, while participating in NEA's former Emerging Leaders Academy, Hodge made the connection between her father's historic work with USVI's taxi drivers and her work as a campus union leader.

"It was like an epiphany for me," she recalls. "I knew in that moment that this union work is for me."

Across three decades, Hodge has served in almost every union role—from building steward to grievance officer to bargaining team member. She was also a chapter president for 10 years and president of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) for 2 years. "I love all aspects of union work," she says. "But my heartbeat is organizing."

4 She knows times are tough for faculty, staff, and students.

The assault on academic freedom; the coerced closure of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs; the war on scientific research and the humanities—all of this and other attacks on higher ed are happening across the U.S. now. But Florida faculty have been dealing with politicians telling them what to teach for years. As a result, UFF's membership is actually growing. Faculty are turning to the union, seeking solidarity and the protections of collective bargaining agreements.

In west Florida, UFF members partnered with community members to push back Gov. Ron DeSantis' three extreme nominees to the university's board of trustees. At Florida International University, union members are leading efforts to stop immigration raids on campuses. Across the state, faculty are recertifying their unions—as required by a new state law—by large margins. At the University of Florida, 95 percent voted yes to unionization!

"You can fight back and take action, as a collective," Hodge says. "Yes, there is a big war going on, but we are winning every battle."

5 She has advice for you.

Hodge says she has learned from experience and through her faith to be open to receive what's coming. In other words, seize opportunities and know you have a right to them, she advises. Also, understand that disappointment is part of the process, in life and in union work.

"The rewards we get—the outcomes that improve people's lives—will always outweigh the obstacles," she says. "Union work is hard work, but like my girl Kamala [Harris] says, 'it is good work!'"

Bonus item! She has a soft spot for four-legged friends.

Hodge's side gig is fostering cats with medical needs. Got a kitten that needs subcutaneous meds? Hodge can hang an IV bag like a pro. The final three words to every speech she gives are these: "Adopt, don't shop!"

"You'll never come into my classroom and see students sitting in rows quietly. Math is meant to be loud!"

—Teresa M. Hodge (left)

PHOTO: SUSAN STOCKER

The Julius B. Thomas Scholarship

Julius B. Thomas, a former counseling professor at Río Hondo College, in California, and the 2021 NEA Higher Educator of the Year, died suddenly in 2023. Renowned for his efforts to help students and colleagues, and for his advocacy on social justice issues, Thomas is honored with a scholarship in his memory. To donate, visit bit.ly/JuliusBThomas.

NEA Higher Ed Is Growing!

Faculty and staff are fueling a union boom in higher education as they seek a more powerful voice. Among them are new NEA Higher Ed chapters in these three states.

New Mexico: Unionization carries a special resonance in Silver City, N.M., a community with a storied labor history that includes the epic Empire Zinc mine strike in the early 1950s. Today, faculty at Western New Mexico University (WNMU) are organizing to counter a top-heavy, opaque administration and ensure their voices are listened to. Their hope? "That we can indeed improve the structure of our university and serve our students more effectively," says WNMU Professor Andy Hernández.

Western New Mexico University union member Roberta Brown, in front of Silver City's historic Mine Mill Local 890 Union Hall.

Maryland: At Harford Community College—the first community college in the state to unionize—contract bargaining began early this year. "This is not just bargaining—it's the fight for the future of higher education, for dignity, and for the power of unity. We're making history!" says union secretary Elizabeth Holmes.

Meanwhile, at Anne Arundel Community College (AACC), a majority of faculty and staff have signed on to their new union, Riverhawks Educators United. "We want to make sure our voices get heard, so students can have the full advantage of our knowledge and experience," Professor Suzanne Spoor told AACC's newspaper, *Campus Current*.

Andy Hernández

Devon Ash

New York: This spring, professional staff at Nazareth University, in Rochester, voted to unionize through NYSUT (New York State United Teachers). "I have seen far too many talented colleagues leave in favor of better pay and benefits, thus taking institutional knowledge with them. Having a union will mean that staff finally has a voice at this institution that we love," says Devon Ash, an assistant director in the admissions office at Nazareth and a member of Nazareth United Professionals' organizing committee.

NEA Research: The Funding Gap for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)

Over the past three decades, the University of Tennessee has received about $2.1 billion more in state funds than Tennessee State University, the state's only publicly funded, historically Black university. In North Carolina, the gap is similar. How does it look in your state? Check out NEA's latest research into HBCU funding at **nea.org/HBCU-reports**.

DO YOU GET THE NEA HIGHER ED E-NEWSLETTER?

If not, you're missing out on the latest NEA resources—like our latest salary research—and on opportunities to advocate for federal legislation, attend webinars, and more. Subscribe to NEA Higher Ed at **nea.org/HE**.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

HIGHER EDUCATION *Opinion*

Use Your Power

In this essay, English professor Bill Lyne asks NEA Higher Ed members to focus on the idea of college as a public good. It was once—and can be again.

It is tempting to look for facile historical congruences and imagine that this is what it must have been like in 1930s Germany.

The autocratic seizure of power from feckless bureaucrats; the scapegoating of racialized "others"; the creation of an unaccountable secret police force; the use of borders to stoke fears; the flagrant genocide; and friends and neighbors turning on each other in fear of and obeisance to pallid power.

Depending on our position, our perception, and our pluck, we respond in a variety of ways. Some of the most materially fortunate tell themselves that this the natural order; the world is better off leaving decisions to the unaccountable few. The least fortunate feel the daily erosion of their nervous systems as they wait in fear of the next no-knock warrant, the next roundup at Home Depot, the next climate disaster that steals the lives of their children. Those of us in between toggle between planning our next vacation and feeling like we're politically active because we listen to a Substack podcast or stand in front of a government building with a sign about ovaries or kings. We make sure that one of our cars is electric, donate to a Democratic Socialist candidate, and check our 401(k)s, and then tell our students to follow their conscience.

As what's left of the professoriate struggles with the question, "What is to be done?" we should move beyond reified one-liners about Nazism and toward a gimlet-eyed understanding of how we got here.

Donald Trump is neither new nor unique. While Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush–*père et fils*–are obvious precursors, so are Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. The massive economic inequality that created the conditions for Trump has driven the poll numbers for the Democratic Party even lower than the president's.

While ruling class cruelty and vulgarity are more visible now, Trump still has a ways to go before he catches either Bush Jr. or Obama on the deportation scoreboard, and the policies that have blossomed into the genocide we're witnessing in Gaza have long had the support of both Democratic and Republican elites.

While the Republican Party has capitulated to fascist populism (a term that in a saner world would be oxymoronic), the Telluride/Davos/New York/London Democratic leadership pushed a legitimate socialist alternative into the shredder in favor of the same old, same old.

As we begin to see the limits of pageants of protest, we should return to the kind of organizing around redistribution–and the real material interests of most people–that first led to the circling of the oligarchical wagons.

"We should try to focus what power we have left on the idea of college as a public good, available to anyone who walks through our doors."

—Bill Lyne (above), president of the United Faculty of Washington State

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BILL LYNE

We must face up to the fact that U.S. universities have become mostly producers of what Thomas Picketty calls the "Brahmin Left," a technocratic elite focused on identity over inequality, providing little more than faux opposition to the "Merchant Right." But we should also remember that college can be a fertile site for the kind of organizing we need.

In the years following World War II, the combination of massive Cold War federal and state investment, the GI Bill, and various civil rights and women's movements provided access to college for large numbers of people who had previously been excluded. While the Ivy League remained a finishing school for people whose places in industry, government, or the CIA were reserved, public colleges and universities became state-supported spaces where the tenured members of the bourgeois intelligentsia who talked about the consequences of capitalism could commingle, talk with, and listen to people who had actually lived those consequences.

This led to a lot of things, including the creation of radical collective energy that reverberated beyond the campus. The guys who created the Black Panthers met in college. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement was nourished by the student newspaper at Wayne State University. The free speech and anti-war movements wouldn't have existed without the crucible of college.

We can debate the efficacy of these interventions endlessly, but one thing we know for sure is that they got the attention of the ruling class. Lewis Powell, in his infamous "Powell Memo" to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, spent a third of his manifesto lamenting the radicalization of otherwise perfectly reasonable young white men in college.

Reagan lubricated his transition from B-movie star to California governor by vowing to "clean up the mess at Berkeley." Powell and Reagan were the medicine-show hucksters, the noise to rile up an incoherent base (the equivalent of what Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and George Clooney represent to what counts as "the left" today), but the real damage to higher education was done by 50 years of patient (and bipartisan) organizing in think tanks, state legislatures, and Congress.

Between 1950 and the early 1970s, college was as available to working classes as it has ever been. Since 1980, it has been increasingly restricted by a retreat from public funding and made available only to those with the time and stamina to pass through the intimidating keyholes of admissions and financial aid bureaucracy. What was once a public good– and a genuine threat to pull back the curtain on inequality and oligarchy–has become relentlessly focused on training for individual access to more and more precarious jobs.

So, as we try to fend off the onslaught of attacks on the most vulnerable, which enrich the few at the expense of the many, we should use what power we have as unionized academics to restore access to the knowledge and community that could lead to a different arrangement.

Standing between our students and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; trying to shield our colleagues from payback for daring to say genocide; protecting academic freedom; understanding the implications of AI; and improving our wages, benefits and working conditions are all vitally important, but those are rearguard actions that would all be easier if college were genuinely free. We should focus what power we have left on the idea of college as a public good, available to anyone who walks through our doors. Free college was once a genuine threat. We should try to make it that again.

Bill Lyne is a professor of English at Western Washington University and president of the United Faculty of Washington State.

(Top to bottom) In the 1960s, students rallied for free speech and academic freedom; last year, they protested tuition hikes at Sacramento State, in California.

PHOTO FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY; THOMAS R. CORDOVA/LONG BEACH POST

HIGHER EDUCATION *feature*

The $alary Issue

I Can't Afford to *Live Where I Work*

Three NEA members from across the U.S. share what it's like to live on an educator's salary in their hometowns

Barely Getting by in Illinois

DYLAN TOTH
Middle school family and consumer sciences teacher, in Bloomington

I'm a 24-year-old, third-year teacher with two bachelor's degrees and a master's, making $49,000 a year in Bloomington—a middle-class city where I struggle to afford to live.

When I accepted my job in 2021, housing in this historic college town was relatively affordable. I envisioned that after a few years earning "adult money," I could buy a modest home, purchase my first new car, and even enjoy a social life. But since then, average housing prices in the area have jumped 44 percent, and rent has risen 40 percent. Those dreams feel further away than ever.

My $1,500 biweekly paycheck disappears fast. Between rent, groceries, a car lease, student loans, and graduate school tuition (to help me move over on the salary schedule), there's little left.

I'm cost-conscious—I budget, meal prep, and take on extra work. But even when I had a roommate, I found myself relying on balance transfer offers and small amounts of credit card debt, hoping future raises would catch me up. Now I'm in my fourth year of teaching, and a broken lawn mower or auto insurance hike is still enough to put me on the brink of crisis.

I'm not looking to live lavishly. I just want a dignified life, some stability, and the chance to plan for my future. But with rising costs of housing, food, and transportation, I wonder: Why isn't a salary just shy of $50,000 enough for a master's-credentialed professional in middle America?

I love teaching and feel lucky to work in my district. But the financial stress is constant—and I'm not alone. Early career educators are leaving the profession faster than any other group, not because they don't care, but because they can't afford to stay. We're losing talented, passionate young educators to jobs that pay more and ask less.

We deserve better. Our communities and our students deserve better. If we want strong public schools, we need to make it possible for educators to live in the communities they serve. I don't expect educators to be able to afford exclusive areas like Orange County, California, or the Chicago Loop, but we deserve wages that reflect the real cost of living and the real value of our work.

"Now I'm in my fourth year of teaching, and a broken lawn mower or auto insurance hike is still enough to put me on the brink of crisis."

—Dylan Toth (above)

California Dreamin'

KRISTIE IWAMOTO
Tenured English instructor, at Napa Valley College, in San Pablo

I am a proud second-generation educator and NEA member. When my father got a job as a public middle school teacher in the California Bay Area, in 1979, his starting salary was $14,000 per year. The very next thing he did was buy a three-bedroom house. That house—also in the Bay Area—cost $69,000.

Putting this into an inflation calculator, $69,000 in 1978 would be about $350,000 today. However, the average price of a house in the Bay Area today is nearly three times that amount.

In Napa County, where I'm a community college instructor, the average home price exceeded $1 million last year. It ranks in the top third of the most expensive places to live in California, but the faculty salaries at Napa Valley College are ranked in the bottom third of the state.

Even rent for a one-bedroom apartment, on average about $2,100 per month, can be a struggle for our younger and newer faculty.

As a result, many of my colleagues live in the slightly more reasonably priced cities of Vallejo, Fairfield, Vacaville—or in some cases even farther, putting their commutes at over an hour each way. Personally, my drive is about 40 minutes each way.

These distances affect our sense of community, both with our students and with each other. Faculty salaries should reflect the cost of living in that area.

Sadly, in California, and in many places across the nation, this is becoming more and more of an impossibility.

No Progress in North Carolina

JOAN HOFFMAN
Career and technical education teacher, in Asheville

I am lucky to live in such a beautiful place—but building a stable life here on an educator's salary has been anything but easy. When I was hired, I turned down higher-paying offers in Virginia. Even after more than two decades in the classroom, I still make less than I would have made starting out there.

If I left today, I could earn nearly $20,000 more elsewhere—along with better classroom support. But I chose Asheville to be near family, and I've stayed for love, for community, and for my students.

Over the past 20 years, I've watched support for public education get slowly stripped away. I began this career believing that my experience and dedication would one day be reflected in my pay. But the raises never came. Steps froze, longevity pay vanished, and the benefits that once made this calling sustainable disappeared.

To make ends meet, I've worked nights at the Biltmore Estate—a nearby historic home and tourist attraction—and only managed to buy a home because my mother co-signed the mortgage. Many of my fellow educators aren't so lucky. We're single parents, caregivers, and sole providers—and still, we show up for our students.

When Hurricane Helene hit in September 2024, my family was already stretched thin. Floodwaters from Hutch

Mountain surged into our home. For days, we lived in fear—unsure if our loved ones were safe. The storm devastated our community and made Asheville's housing and food insecurity crisis worse. It also exposed the long-standing disinvestment in our public schools, now facing even more cuts without state or federal relief.

My partner and I often ask when we'll have to leave—aging parents need care, and our salaries don't stretch far. This is why I organize: Because staying shouldn't mean struggling, and because our students, our schools, and this community are worth fighting for.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

HIGHER EDUCATION *feature*

The $alary Issue

Everything You Need to Know About *Faculty Pay*

New NEA research shows who's getting paid the most, the least, and how unions make a difference!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Who is the best paid professor in the U.S.? Likely it's a white man, teaching medicine or engineering at a research university in California or New Jersey, according to trends identified in NEA's 2025 "Higher Education Faculty Salary Analysis." You know who it's not? A woman at a historically Black college or university (HBCU), preparing future teachers in Mississippi, Arkansas, or Louisiana.

The latest NEA research into faculty pay, prepared in partnership with ASA Research, dives into the gender pay gap, the HBCU pay penalty, and, most strikingly, the impact of unions on pay. It also includes average salaries at every public college and university in the nation. Wondering where full professors get paid the most? In 2024, the average salary for full professors reached $269,400 at UCLA, or twice as much as their peers at the University of Mississippi.

Here are six charts that show some of the report's key findings:

Chart #1: There's a reason faculty feel poorer today.

While U.S. faculty's purchasing power increased 1 percent last year, it wasn't enough to keep up with rising costs. Between 2020 and 2024, as inflation soared, faculty's purchasing power declined by 7.7 percent.

Chart #2: Heck yeah, unions make a difference!

"We have a very strong union," notes Sara Williams, a math instructor and bargaining team member at Oregon's Mt. Hood Community College. The proof of their strength? A new 4-year contract, ratified in 2024, provides 18 to 21 percent raises for the college's roughly 150 faculty members.

It took two years to bargain the contract, Williams notes. The process relied on an experienced bargaining team and a deep bench of union members who showed up for public bargaining sessions and volunteered on support teams.

"We told faculty from the start that we were asking for a lot, and it might take a while to get it," but union members knew the results would be worth the wait, she says.

Before this contract, new faculty members couldn't afford to rent their own apartments. "They needed to get roommates. Is that what we want? Employees who can't even afford to live in their own places?" Williams asks. "I don't think so."

Now, when new faculty get the salary scale during orientation, they're stunned, says John Hasegawa, who was president of Mt Hood's union during bargaining. "I tell them, 'Think about it!' You're getting 4.5 percent step raises each year, plus [cost-of-living adjustments]. That's 7 or 8 percent per year for the next four years.'"

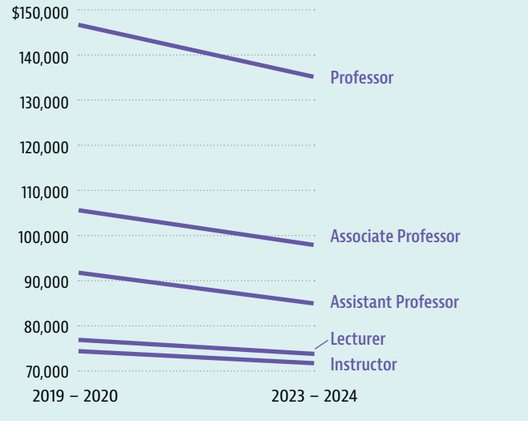
This is the power of collective bargaining, notes Alec Thomson, president of NEA's National Council for Higher Education. For example, community college faculty who bargain collectively made $93,000, on average, in 2024. That's an average of $20,000 more a year than non-unionized faculty in those same states, and $26,000 more than non-unionized faculty in states without collective bargaining.

"We do have power on these issues—and it's through

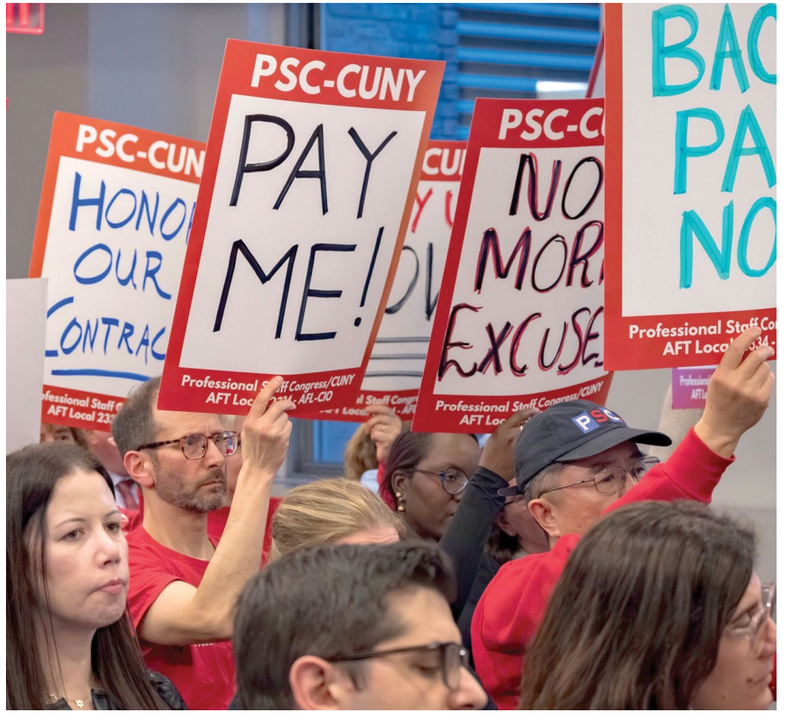
John Hasegawa

1. A Decline in Faculty Purchasing Power

Small pay increases haven't kept pace with the rising cost of necessities like food and housing. As a result, U.S. faculty's purchasing power has declined—even for full professors, who lost more than $12,000 between 2020 and 2024.



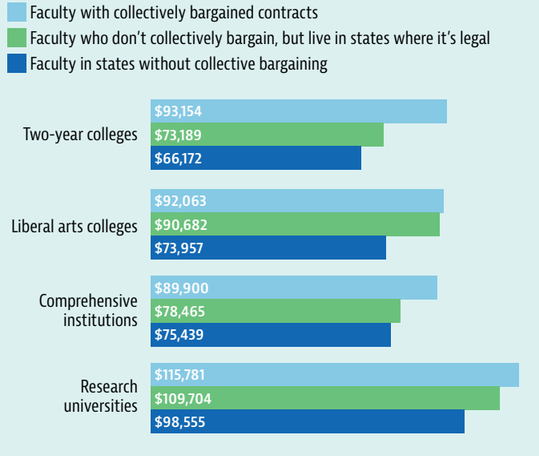
SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.



(Left) Professional Staff Congress members, who teach at the City University of New York, won hard-fought pay raises in 2024. (Below) Members of the faculty union at Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC), in Oregon, packed the MHCC Board of Education's Valentine's Day meeting in 2024. A week later, they had an agreement.

2. The Union Difference

On average, unionized faculty who collectively bargain for better pay earn much more (nearly $20,000 more at community colleges!) than non-union faculty in the same states. Meanwhile faculty in non-union states are paid the least.



SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS; COURTESY OF MT. HOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE ASSOCIATION; JAY FRAM

HIGHER EDUCATION *feature*

"People stay at FAMU [Florida A&M University] because we're aligned to the mission and doing it for the culture. We want to see Black students succeed and we want to help."

—Samique March-Dallas (above), professor and union president at FAMU, a historically Black university

collective bargaining. The power is at the table," Thomson says.

Two contracts ago, part-time faculty at the City University of New York (CUNY) were paid a minimum of about $3,200 per 3-credit course. In the next contract, the floor was $5,500. Today, thanks to the latest union contract, ratified in December, it's $7,100.

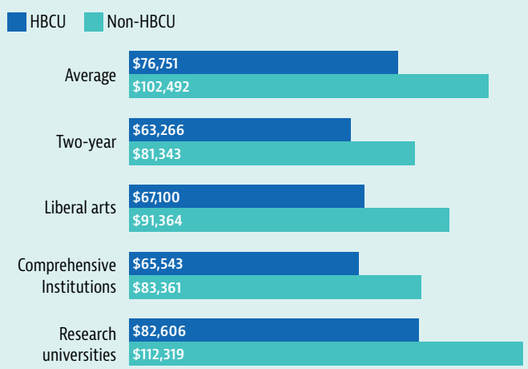
"That's a lot of movement over two contracts. We're getting to the point where the university's incentive to abuse the adjunct system is reduced almost to where I think we're going to see more full-time hires," says James Davis, president of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union representing faculty and staff across CUNY's 26 campuses.

The PSC bargaining team worked for two years for this contract, which provided across-the-board raises of 13.4 percent, plus equity raises that reached up to 40 percent for the most underpaid union members.

"We have a strong understanding, across the union, that when you lift the floor, everybody benefits," Davis notes.

3. The Pay Penalty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

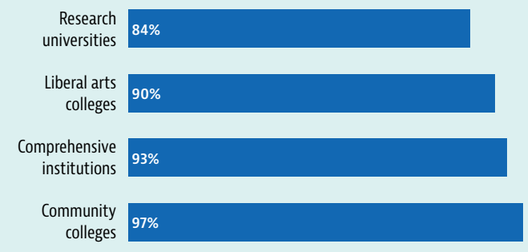
In 2024, HBCU faculty were paid 75 cents on the dollar, on average, compared with non-HBCU faculty—or about $26,000 less in annual pay. This pay gap has grown since 2023.



SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.

4. The Gender Gap in Faculty Pay

Across the U.S., women faculty earn less, on average, than men do. The disparity is most dramatic at research universities, where women are paid 84 percent of men's wages, on average.



SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.

Chart #3: The pay penalty for historically Black colleges and universities still exists.

On average, faculty at HBCUs earned 75 cents on the dollar compared with other faculty in 2024, with the biggest disparity at research universities, according the NEA report.

"It's like being in an emotionally abusive relationship," says Samique March-Dallas, a finance professor and faculty union president at Florida A&M University (FAMU). "People stay at FAMU because we're aligned to the mission and doing it for the culture. We want to see Black students succeed and we want to help. Or you're an alum and you want to see the school—your school—grow."

Because HBCU faculty care so deeply for their students, they stay and demand better. FAMU's union has been at the bargaining table for more than three years, attempting to renegotiate a contract that expired in June 2022. "Yes, more than three years," March-Dallas sighs.

FAMU is an R2 research institution. The only other R2 institution in the state is Florida Atlantic University (FAU). And while FAU faculty also are paid far less than the U.S. average, at every rank, they still earn more than FAMU professors. Associate professors at FAU earn $99,000, on average. At FAMU? $83,600.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MEMBER

Chart #4: Women faculty still earn less than men.

Maggie Bernish

On average, women teaching in public colleges and universities were paid 86 cents on the dollar compared with their male counterparts. Contributing factors likely include: Women represent just a third of the faculty at research universities; women are more likely to teach in undervalued fields, such as education; and they're more likely to drop out of academe before getting to the highest-paid rank of full professor.

Chart #5: Grad students have it really, really tough.

The average stipend for grad assistants in 2024 was about $22,000, according to NEA research. How do they get by? Not easily.

At the University of Rhode Island (URI), for example, the average stipend last year was about $23,000. Meanwhile, it would take more than $52,000 a year for a single adult, living in the area around URI, to pay for food, medical bills, and a roof over their head, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.

"A lot of people get part-time jobs pouring beers, making coffees. Obviously it's a lot of time taken away from their research. Others have to rely on their parents for rent assistance and help paying bills," says Maggie Bernish, a doctoral student in biological oceanography who also serves as president of URI Graduate Assistants United (URI GAU).

To make ends meet, Bernish has worked at a second job for 20 hours a week, and even received SNAP benefits—often called food stamps—for a while. Many of her union colleagues do the same.

Since 2012, the number of grad assistants who belong to unions has increased by 133 percent. And that's no coincidence, Thomson notes.

"Grad assistants, HBCU faculty, these are areas that are experiencing growth in collective bargaining—or calls for growth," says Thomson. "I think that's the obvious solution, not just in terms of pay, but in terms of power."

5. Grad Assistant Pay: Could You Live on This?

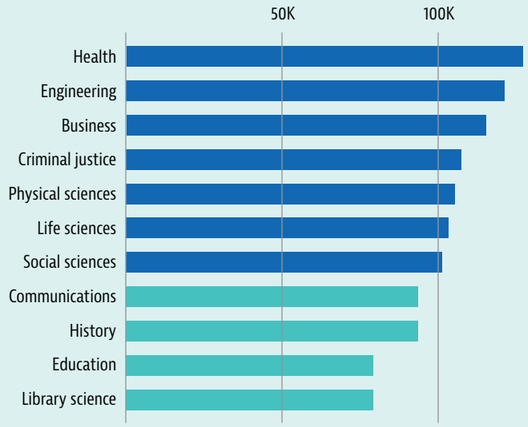
Even as grad assistants teach classes, grade exams, run labs, and develop new science, they get paid poverty-level wages.

SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MEMBER

6. Highest Paid Fields at Public Universities

The highest paid fields for faculty, such as engineering and physical sciences, are dominated by men. The lowest paid fields—education and library science—are mostly taught by women.



SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF DATA, 2023 – 2024.

Chart #6: What you teach matters.

Pay is highest for faculty who teach engineering and physical sciences and lowest for those who teach future educators and librarians.

Where you teach also matters. In 2024, California led the nation with the highest average faculty pay among state colleges and universities, as well as community colleges. New Jersey followed closely behind. Both states are union powerhouses. Bringing up the bottom were Mississippi and Arkansas.

Your Union Can Help!

Want a higher salary? Check out NEA's complete 2025 faculty pay report online at **nea.org/HE** and use NEA's exclusive database of higher ed contracts at **hecas.NEACollectiveBargaining.org**.

SALARY SCHEDULE:

Every Step You Take

By Amanda Litvinov

A WELL-STRUCTURED SALARY SCHEDULE IS ALWAYS WORTH FIGHTING FOR!

Stacie Baur knows from experience what a weak salary schedule can do to a career.

Baur was hired, in 2012, by the Clairton City School District, in Pennsylvania, along with 14 other teachers. Only four of them remain in the district today.

"Most left within a few years, and mostly due to the low pay," says Baur, a fifth-grade math teacher. "They couldn't wait around to make a salary they could live off of or start a family."

The salary schedule is considered a sacred principle of unionism: It establishes a rate of pay for each position, called the "career rate," earned by those who have mastered their craft. It also defines apprenticeship wages, with "steps" that raise a worker's salary at regular intervals.

Salary schedules are bias-free and prevent discrimination by race, gender, grade level taught, or academic field. But a weak schedule that takes forever to get to the top—like the one Clairton had—can cost educators hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of their careers.

As recently as 2019, teachers coming into the Clairton district with a bachelor's degree were starting at just $38,000. Each step on the salary schedule brought teachers only $500-$750 closer to the career rate. Then in years 16 and 17, their pay would suddenly increase by $20,000 each year (these are called "jump steps" for obvious reasons).

When Baur took on the role of president of the Clairton Education Association, in 2017, she knew the local needed to strengthen their very problematic salary schedule.

They had their chance to make improvements when bargaining commenced in 2020.

Stacie Baur

"We knew we needed better starting salaries, fewer steps, and more valuable steps," explains Baur, who brushed up on salary issues at trainings offered by the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

District negotiators acknowledged that low salaries and the long wait for an enormous raise were pushing teachers out the door. In the end, they agreed to the union's demands, resulting in tremendous improvements over the five-year contract. Once they reduced the enormous jump steps at the top, they were able to increase the value of all the steps on the salary schedule; raise the starting salary by $10,000; and reduce the total number of steps to just 11. At press time, the local was back at the bargaining table, working on even more improvements.

Baur's best advice for negotiating a better salary schedule: "First, educate yourself, whether you're a local leader or a member. This is our salary schedule, our money, and we can't educate the district until we understand it all ourselves," Baur says. "Lean on your Uniserv director [a member of your state affiliate staff] for help—we couldn't have accomplished this without ours!"

What does a good salary schedule look like?

Strong and short—that's the best description of an ideal salary schedule. In fact, NEA recommends no more than 10 steps to reach the maximum salary.

Why is that important? A "strong, short" salary schedule moves employees efficiently from entry level to the maximum rate of compensation over a reasonable number of steps.

Look at it this way: Districts want to incentivize educators to stay and grow and eventually become a master of their craft. But do they really think that takes 15, 20, or 25 years? Research shows, it takes around 7–10 years in the teaching field. A good salary schedule reflects that.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF STACIE BAUR

WHEN IT COMES TO SALARY SCHEDULES ... DO THIS, NOT THAT!

For ease of comparison, these salary schedule examples do not include cost of living increases—but by all means, your union should fight for those!

YES
Step values should be as uniform as possible, whether a dollar amount or a percentage.

YES
Consider additional columns or "lanes" on the schedule that encourage advanced degrees and professional development.

SCHEDULE A

STEP	SALARY	TOTAL CAREER EARNINGS	TOTAL CAREER EARNINGS OVER SCHEDULE B	OTHER
1	$50,000	$50,000	$0	
2	$54,694	$104,694	$4,194	
3	$59,388	$164,082	$12,582	
4	$64,082	$228,164	$25,164	
5	$68,776	$296,940	$41,690	
6	$73,470	$370,410	$62,160	
7	$78,164	$448,574	$86,574	
8	$82,858	$531,432	$114,932	
9	$87,552	$618,984	$147,234	
10	$92,250*	$711,234	$183,234	
	$92,250	$803,484	$218,234	
	$92,250	$895,734	$252,234	
	$92,250	$987,984	$285,234	
	$92,250	$1,080,234	$317,234	
	$92,250	$1,172,484	$348,234	
	$92,250	$1,264,734	$378,234	
	$92,250	$1,356,984	$407,234	
	$92,250	$1,449,234	$435,234	
	$92,250	$1,541,484	$449,234	
	$92,250	$1,633,734	$449,234	

YES
Keep it short! The fewer steps, the more each step is worth and the sooner your members will reach their "career rate."

NO
Avoid step values that vary throughout the salary schedule. Chaotic schedules hurt educator retention efforts.

SCHEDULE B

STEP	SALARY	TOTAL CAREER EARNINGS
1	$50,000	$50,000
2	$50,500	$100,500
3	$51,000	$151,500
4	$51,500	$203,000
5	$52,250	$255,250
6	$53,000	$308,250
7	$53,750	$362,000
8	$54,500	$416,500
9	$55,250	$471,750
10	$56,250	$528,000
11	$57,250	$585,250
12	$58,250	$643,500
13	$59,250	$702,750
14	$60,250	$763,000
15	$61,250	$824,250
16	$62,250	$886,500
17	$63,250	$949,750
18	$64,250	$1,014,000
19	$78,250	$1,092,250
20	$92,250	$1,184,500

NO
Long schedules force educators into extended apprenticeships that districts think will save them money.

NO
Avoid "jump steps"! Enormous increases at the end of the schedule undermine efforts to attract and retain educators. Uniform steps are better.

LEARN MORE

Learn more about educator pay in your state at nea.org/FairPay.

BONUS TIPS:

TIP 1: Beware of one-time bonus proposals that don't raise your base pay or boost your pension, especially in lieu of salary steps.

TIP 2: Demand competitive entry-level salaries. Drastically low starting pay guarantees higher turnover, which is costly to the district.

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Post this in your break room and encourage others to learn about salary schedules.

Don't Let Health Care Swallow Your Raise

By Cindy Long

This year, the Fairfax Education Association made history by ratifying its first collective bargaining agreement in nearly 50 years! The groundbreaking contract includes not only a 6 percent pay increase but also improved health-care benefits.

"This agreement transforms our education landscape," said Fairfax Education Association President Leslie Houston, when the agreement was ratified. "It demonstrates what we can achieve through collaboration and sets a new standard for educational excellence in our community."

The union negotiated the big bump in salary to help offset sharply rising health-care costs. What's more, they bargained for a decrease in health-care premiums and out-of-pocket costs, as well as to speed up the district's search for a lower-cost health-care provider. Another major win was the establishment of a joint health-care committee, co-run by the union and the district.

"The idea behind creating this kind of health-care committee is that it will set our members up for many years, giving them the opportunity to choose their own health-care plan and obtain information from the district to create transparency and long-term stability of the reserve," says Cynthia Blankenship, with NEA's Center for Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy.

Since 2018, the overall cost of living in the United States has increased by 17 percent, but the cost of health insurance in general has increased by 45 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Some of those skyrocketing costs are being passed to educators. The latest BLS data shows that the average cost of a public school employee's health benefit contributions (the portion of the premium paid by employees) increased by 14 percent between 2018 and 2022.

Leslie Houston

According to the latest national salary data, public school teachers' salaries increased only 10 percent in the same time frame. In other words, health-insurance premiums and the general cost of living are increasing faster than educators' pay raises.

With education budget cuts and a persistent shortage of health-care providers, costs will likely continue to rise. But armed with information, union members can make a difference.

Ask your local affiliate if your union has a health-care committee—and if it has a seat at the table for decisions about health-care programs for school employees. Bargaining for lower health-care costs benefits the entire school community, including the district.

How unions and districts can work together on health care

Everyone in a school district has a shared interest in improving the quality and affordability of health-care benefits. Forming a joint labor-management benefits advisory committee (BAC), allows union and district staff to work together to examine health-care plans, share ideas, and find the best options for everyone. It's a win-win for all parties!

Check with your union and district human resources office to see if a BAC already exists. If not, reach out to your union representative and share these reasons why your union and district should form a BAC, and how to get started.

- A BAC allows members to discuss the health-benefit needs and related financial constraints of employees throughout the year.
- It provides the opportunity for all stakeholders—employer, employee, the health plan, and other vendors—to openly discuss what is and is not working.
- Members of the BAC should have an equal number of employers and employees, but not less than two of each.
- The BAC should survey members, analyze data, discuss details, and proposals, and report out to keep everyone in the school informed.

SHARE THIS

Check out NEA's report, "Health Insurance Cost and the Impact on Salaries," to learn strategies for protecting your health care and how to form a BAC. Go to nea.org/HealthCareCost, and share this resource with your union leaders and colleagues.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LESLIE HOUSTON

Road Map to *Retirement*

"While behavioral economists suggest that human beings tend to put too much emphasis on 'present me,' each of us has our own time bias that we need to be aware of."

—Mark Ashe

HOW TO PLAN FOR A SECURE RETIREMENT AT EVERY AGE AND STAGE

By Mark Ashe, AP economics teacher, Maine Education Association

Planning for retirement is inherently difficult. We don't know how long we will work. We don't know exactly how much our pension and/or Social Security will be. We don't know how much we will spend in retirement. And we don't know how long we will live.

So we face the difficult dilemma of balancing how much we take care of "present me" with how much to sacrifice today to take care of "future me." While behavioral economists suggest that human beings tend to put too much emphasis on present me, each of us has our own time bias that we need to be aware of.

The principles below can help you make a more informed decision when it comes to striking this balance.

General principles:

1. Save something.

Before you start socking money away for retirement, be sure you have an appropriate emergency fund. Many experts recommend three to six months of expenses. Keep these funds in a high-yield savings account—which earns an above-average interest rate—to protect against inflation. Also, prioritize paying off high-interest debts. If you have a credit card balance with a 30 percent interest rate, it probably doesn't make sense to prioritize money for retirement that may, at best, earn 10 percent per year on average.

2. Save in a cost-effective way.

In my experience, many school employees don't realize how terrible their schools' 403(b) plans are, which are rife with low-performing, high-cost investments.

For example, I showed an elementary school teacher that even though she had chosen a good mutual fund from her 403(b) provider, the provider charged an outrageous fee of 1.25 percent every single year. This may not sound like a lot, but over 30 years of putting away $200 biweekly at a 7 percent annual rate of return, this fee would mean a loss of well over $100,000!

If your school district doesn't offer a high-quality 403(b) plan, consider putting in just enough to get your employer's match (if they offer one) and consider putting the rest of your retirement investments in a Roth IRA (check IRS contribution and income limits) and/or in a regular (i.e. taxable) investment account. Either way, consider sticking with low-cost index funds for your investments.

3. See a fiduciary.

Whether you're just getting started or think you are ready for retirement, consider seeing a fiduciary for a financial checkup. A fiduciary can help evaluate your specific situation and what you can do to achieve your goals.

4. Automate.

We all struggle to keep up routines. Make life easier and have your investments automatically deducted from your paycheck or bank account each month.

20–30 years old

1. Consider investing in stocks.

While stocks aren't for everyone, younger people should know that the worst 30-year return in the U.S. stock market since 1926 was an average annual rate of 7.8 percent—and that time span included the Great Depression, when the stock market fell more than 50 percent.

We don't know the future, but investing $200 biweekly at 7.8 percent for 30 years would yield a portfolio of more than $600K.

2. Keep it simple. Depending on your risk tolerance, consider investing in a total stock market index fund that includes international stocks, or a target-date fund that automatically gets more conservative as you get closer to retirement.

3. Embrace market downturns.

Historically, the market has always recovered from a crash, and many of us have made the mistake of stopping our contributions or selling investments during a market crash. However, these have been incredible opportunities for investors.

ICONS (ABOVE AND OPPOSITE): SHUTTERSTOCK

40s

1. Assess how much you have saved. Look at how much you have now and how much you may need to save by the time you retire. The average retiree spends 75 percent of the annual income they had while working.

2. Plan for the spending gap.

You will need enough retirement savings to make up any gap between your expenses and anticipated pension and/or Social Security. A simple rule of thumb is to divide your annual spending gap by 4 percent. This can provide a rough estimate of how much savings you may need for a 30-year retirement. So, if you anticipate a $30,000 annual gap between your retirement income and retirement spending, dividing this number by 4 percent would mean that $750K in retirement savings may be necessary. Then use this rough estimate to see if you are on track to reach this goal by retirement.

4. Consider appropriate life insurance. How much you need depends on your goals and circumstances (i.e. paying off the mortgage or sending kids to college), but choosing low-cost term life insurance instead of an expensive whole life policy can help you save more for retirement.

50–60 years old

1. Determine whether you still need life insurance. By now, your retirement nest egg may be big enough to protect your family should you pass away unexpectedly. If you no longer need the insurance, put any unneeded insurance premiums toward your retirement savings.

2. Reevaluate when you are five to seven years out from retirement. Ensure that your portfolio is well diversified with a few different stock and bond funds. This makes managing your portfolio more complicated, but it gives you more options when drawing income from your portfolio in retirement because sometimes international stocks go up when U.S. stocks go down, and sometimes bond funds go up when stock funds go down. This may help protect your retirement plan from being sidetracked by a declining market.

3. Pay off high-interest debt.

It's best to pay off credit cards and other high-interest debt. But carefully assess whether or not you should pay off a mortgage with a low interest rate (below 5 percent), as keeping your mortgage can help avoid cash-flow problems in retirement (especially if your investments can earn at least 5 percent). It is hard to pull money out of a home to buy groceries compared with selling a stock or bond fund.

Planning for retirement can feel like trying to hit a moving target. But regardless of what career stage you are in, taking just one meaningful step can help you feel more confident about taking care of "future you."

Mark Ashe has taught economics and personal finance in public schools for more than 25 years. He is a licensed investment advisor and fiduciary. The commentary in this article is not professional investment advice or an endorsement of any kind. This article is for informational purposes only and should not be relied on to make any investment decisions.

ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK; PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARK ASHE

Money Changes EVERYTHING

By Tim Walker

SALARY INCREASES ARE HELPING TEACHERS STAY IN THE PROFESSION, BUT MORE PROGRESS IS NEEDED

Ten years ago, South Carolina was hemorrhaging teachers.

"We couldn't find anyone. Teachers were leaving mid-year, and hiring subs was difficult," recalls Sherry East, who served as president of The South Carolina Education Association (The SCEA) from 2018 – 2025.

The state reported more than 1,600 teacher vacancies in the 2023 – 2024 school year—a huge increase from pre-pandemic numbers. But South Carolina may—*may*—have turned a corner. As the 2024 – 2025 school year began, vacancies dropped 35 percent.

"Teacher salaries have increased and most certainly helped drive down vacancies," East says. "In many districts, pay rose quite substantially."

According to the "2025 NEA Teacher Salary Benchmark" report, South Carolina ranks 30th nationally in starting teacher salary and 36th in average teacher salary. The state has slowly but steadily climbed the rankings every year since 2020, when it stood at No. 42.

Across the country, teacher salaries are heading in the right direction. During the 2023 – 2024 school year, teachers received the most significant year-over-year pay increase in more than a decade. But even with record-level increases in some states, average teacher pay has failed to keep up with inflation. Adjusted for inflation, teachers are making an average of 5 percent less than they did 10 years ago.

Still, Eric Burress, a fine arts teacher in Sumter County, says the impact on educators in South Carolina is real.

"When I started teaching in 2015, I had a mortgage, car payments, and everything else that comes with life," he says. "Ten years later, is it easier? Yes. Have we been able to retain more teachers? Yes. Could it be better? Yes. But now I can say, I have my head above water. I can finally breathe. And that's something."

'Treat me like a professional'

Burress entered the teaching profession in 2015, knowing he would take a pay cut from his earlier job and that teaching in a Title I school, like Sumter High School (his alma mater), would bring its share of challenges. But Burress has deep roots in the community and a profound appreciation for the impact his teachers had on him. "[This was] where I needed to be," he says.

That may sound like a "calling," but this well-intentioned term can be problematic. Too often it provides an excuse to avoid paying educators what they need and deserve. Burress loves his school, his colleagues, and his students, but even with the recent pay increase, the district will continue to face recruitment challenges, he says.

"We've made progress in retaining teachers, but how can we attract new teachers on the pay we're offering—especially when adjacent districts can offer up to $10,000 more per year?" he asks. "We have to continue to do better."

In South Carolina and across the nation, educators holding down two jobs is far more common than it should be. According to a 2024 NEA survey, 40 percent of pre-K–12 teachers had more than one job. Burress supplements his income with additional work within the school system, including teaching performing arts in the district's program for academically gifted students.

"People will always tell you, 'Oh, I couldn't do your job, and you should make more,'" says East, who sold auto parts on the side for two decades. "We tell them, 'Well, I'll do my job, but pay me more and treat me like a professional.'"

The impact of teacher voices

Educators in states without collective bargaining can still win higher pay. Like in South Carolina, many of these states have notched up major salary wins through local or state-level advocacy.

Still, there's no denying the union advantage. The fact is that educators who work in states with collective bargaining laws make more money.

Starting salaries and top pay for teachers are higher in states where

"We have made progress, ... but how can we attract new teachers on the pay we're offering?" asks Eric Burress, who teaches in Sumter County, South Carolina.

During the 2023 – 2024 school year, teachers received the most significant year-over-year pay increase in more than a decade. But average teacher pay has failed to keep up with inflation.

ARTWORK: SHUTTERSTOCK

PHOTO: SEAN RAYFORD

Money Changes EVERYTHING

collective bargaining is legal. And teachers in 9 out of the 10 states with the highest average starting salaries were all covered by comprehensive collective bargaining laws.

Working in a state where collective bargaining is prohibited cuts off a critical mechanism for winning higher pay. So, educator advocacy in South Carolina centers around school boards and the state legislature.

And when The SCEA members tell their stories to state lawmakers and other elected officials, real change can happen, says Dena R. Crews, current president of The SCEA.

"Many lawmakers don't really understand until they hear about our lived experiences," she says. "We are their constituents; they represent us. So, we need to tell them about our low pay and the struggles we endure just to make ends meet. It has an impact."

"We've gone from $36,000 starting salary to $48,000 in three years," East says. "And some districts have been able to push that to more than $50,000. These are potentially life-changing jumps in pay."

Charleston leads the way

Nowhere in South Carolina, and perhaps in the entire country, have these increases been more dramatic than in Charleston County. In mid-2024, the starting salary for teachers in the school district—the second largest in the state—catapulted past the state average to $56,200 and will increase this upcoming school year to $64,000. Before the raises, the district had more than 100 teacher vacancies each year. In early 2025, after the raises went into effect, the district reported a mere handful scattered across the district.

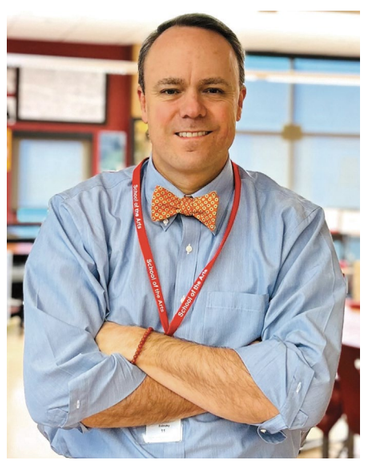
These changes did not come quickly. It all started three years ago, when Chief Human Resources Officer William Briggman announced the formation of a Teacher Compensation Task Force. His motivation? Concern about teacher recruitment and retention in the face of a meteoric rise in Charleston's cost-of-living.

"Teachers couldn't live here or near the communities they serve," says Patrick Martin, a teacher at Charleston County School of the Arts and a longtime advocate for higher pay. Martin offered to serve on the task force, although he had to manage his expectations first.

"Sometimes these kinds of groups are really just about people, politicians usually, just looking for a soundbite," Martin recalls.

That skepticism quickly evaporated. Briggman put the work in, assembling a coalition of teachers, principals, businesspeople, and community members to work together on the issue. But it was those educator voices that Briggman wanted most to highlight.

"Teachers would come in and tell their stories to the school board. The district produced videos with these testimonials," Martin recalls. "This was really key to building the relationship with the school board."



Patrick Martin

PHOTO: COURTESY OF PATRICK MARTIN

Budget discussions centered on housing costs, instead of arbitrary dollar figures or a one-time bonus. So, the question was: What do teachers—particularly those newer to the profession—need to earn so they can live closer to where they work?

Starting in 2024, the school board began approving a series of measures boosting teacher salaries across the board. In addition to the dramatic increase in starting pay, the board also added 12 steps to the district's pay schedule, pushing top salaries well past $100,000 from a previous limit of $81,000.

In addition to the resulting drop in staff vacancies, says Martin, the increases have led to a much-needed morale boost in Charleston County. "You can see it in classrooms, hallways, and out in the community."

From No. 39 to No. 7

"Teachers feel respected and valued when they are paid well," says Julie Wojtko, president of NEA-Las Cruces, in New Mexico. "The salary increases we've received have made a huge impact."

By the 2023 – 2024 school year, New Mexico had moved up to 7th from 39th in the country on starting salaries, and from 49th to 21st on average salaries, according to NEA data.

Meanwhile, in Texas, where Wojtko's sister teaches, salaries have stagnated at $10,000 below the national average. Veteran educators are especially hard hit. "[My sister and I] both have our master's degrees, and my sister works so hard. But I make more than her, and that's not right," Wojtko says. "Texas does not have a strong, pro-public education governor. … And there is no collective bargaining. We have that in New Mexico, and it makes a difference."

Mia Dimbo, a math teacher in Bridgeport, Conn., says low pay is deepening the educator shortage in her district.

PHOTO: GALE ZUCKER

In states where pay has increased significantly, the cost of living in many of these areas can negate much of the positive benefit. Even in states that rank in the top 10 for average teacher salaries, educators and their unions continue to fight for professional pay.

According to NEA data, the average teacher salary in Connecticut is $86,511 (sixth nationwide), with an average starting salary just below $50,000. The cost of living in the state, however, is 21 percent higher than the national average.

"I know educators who make more than $70,000 and still need a second job or have two or three roommates," says Mia Dimbo, a math teacher in Bridgeport, the largest district in the state. Dimbo says the teacher shortage in her cash-strapped district is severe. "We're an urban school district and are surrounded by wealthy suburbs. At my school, we can't get certified teachers. We rely too heavily on long-term subs. We haven't had a science teacher in five years."

As a veteran teacher, Dimbo says she does OK, but continually worries whether new teachers will ever want to work in Bridgeport, if salaries remain inadequate. And incoming cuts to federal funding—a sizeable chunk of Bridgeport's budget—are an added worry. "We get so much from the federal government. We already have a huge recruitment and retention problem. It's hard to even think about," she says.

The next level

In South Carolina, the next step for The SCEA is to get starting salaries up to $50,000 statewide by 2026, a goal supported by many in the state legislature. "That's where we need to go soon, because we still have a lot of work to do to attract and keep teachers in the profession," Crews says.

The Teacher Compensation Task Force that led the successful effort to boost salaries in Charleston has been rebranded as the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task Force. "We're looking at other issues, like improving working conditions and child care," explains Martin. "And we're sharing our story and best practices, because we need to help pull up the rest of the state as well, so that we're not just one pocket where this is happening."

In Sumter County, Burress is cautiously optimistic that recent increases will continue to help retain the educators the district has been able to bring in, but salaries are still not high enough to attract new people to the profession. "We've made progress, no question. But it's still difficult to recruit. So, with salaries, we have to get to that next level. There's a model we can follow in Charleston, so maybe we can catch up to them!"

LEARN MORE

To find out how your state stacks up, check out NEA's latest salary reports at nea.org/EducatorPay.

Hands Off SCIENCE!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

FROM CLIMATE CHANGE TO CYBERSECURITY, FEDERAL RESEARCH CUTS ARE KILLING INNOVATION

If you are a parent of a child with muscular dystrophy, you will want to know what's happening in Clarissa Henry's University of Maine lab.

If you have an antibiotic-resistant infection, Terri Ellis is looking for solutions in her University of North Florida (UNF) lab.

Climate change. Sudden cardiac arrest. HIV prevention. Teacher recruitment in math and science. These issues are among current STEM challenges—and NEA Higher Ed members won competitive federal grants to study them because they have unique expertise.

Caroline Hardin

Today, however, Henry may have to shutter her lab. With the National Institutes of Health (NIH) facing a proposed 40 percent budget cut, her grant hasn't been renewed. And Ellis? While her own research continues, her NIH grant to provide low-income UNF undergraduates with paid research jobs—the kind that would get them into medical school or Ph.D. programs—was terminated in the spring.

"This [was] a grant about building for the future," says Ellis. Now, not just at UNF, the future of American science is uncertain.

'Throwing away results'

This spring, NIH terminated more than 1,300 research grants, while the National Science Foundation (NSF) terminated more than 1,600. And while big-name universities have taken notable hits, the axe has also fallen hard at state universities and community colleges.

Claire Wladis

Unlike larger, private universities, these institutions simply don't have the money to fill the gaps and enable faculty to finish their work. Midway through their grants, NEA Higher Ed members have mountains of new information, but not the funding to analyze and publish it.

Western Washington University professor Caroline Hardin was two-thirds of the way through a three-year grant when her NSF funding was suddenly terminated. Her team's task? Figuring out how to increase the number of computer-science teachers in the U.S., especially educators of color and women.

NSF also terminated Claire Wladis' $2.2 million grant that supported research intended to help college students with chronic mental and physical health issues. "This is an area where there is no research," says Wladis, a City University of New York professor. Her study was the first—and it had the potential to help tens of thousands. "And now we're like, it's never going to see the light of day?" she says.

One or two years into their work, these research teams have answers—but their grant terminations mean they can't share them. "You can't tell me that this is about efficiency. This is so profoundly inefficient!" Hardin says. "It's throwing away results that taxpayers paid for!"

> "There is no way that private industry or philanthropy or states can make up for the miracle of U.S. federal science funding, which ... produces so many ripple effects in new technologies, new science, new medicine."
>
> —Krista Harper, University of Massachusetts anthropologist

Ripple effects

For generations, U.S. science has been "a marvel," says anthropologist Krista Harper, who works with the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Energy Transition Institute. In the spring, she and her colleagues lost a $6 million NSF grant aimed at helping communities move toward sustainable energy systems.

"It feels like a ship going down," she says. "There is no way that private industry or philanthropy or states can make up for the miracle of U.S. federal science funding, which ... produces so many ripple effects in new technologies, new science, new medicine."

Federal grants also produce new scientists. At UNF, where about 1 in 3 students qualify for Pell Grants, Ellis' NIH grant was helping low-income undergrads stay on the path to medical school or advanced science degrees. The grant paid the students $1,000 a month to work in research labs, including at the Mayo Clinic in Florida. It also provided structured mentoring and tuition assistance.

University of North Florida professor Terri Ellis led a federal grant providing low-income students with lab experience—the kind that would lead to careers in medicine or pharmaceuticals. It was terminated.

"The reality is, to get your start in biomedicine, you have to have undergraduate research experience," notes Ellis. And while more affluent UNF students have time to do unpaid work, she adds, "You can't do it if you're working as a checker at [the supermarket] to pay your tuition bill."

Recently, some research grants have been reinstated, thanks to a lawsuit filed by attorneys general in Democratic-led states. Florida was not among them.

Faisal Aljamal

Isn't education a priority?

More than half of the terminated NSF grants were STEM education grants, aimed at questions like: What will it take to get more STEM teachers of color? Or how do we get more girls to study cybersecurity?

Professor Faisal Aljamal runs a renowned cybersecurity program at New Jersey's Hudson County Community

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

PHOTOS FROM TOP: BOB SELF; COURTESY OF FAISAL ALJAMAL

Hands Off SCIENCE!

College. In 2024, he won a three-year, $599,611 NSF grant to expand his program, especially among women. The first year was completed in May. "The grant evaluator was amazed at what we were able to accomplish. And then, boom!" Aljamal says. The grant was terminated.

"Everybody is talking about the international threats and the need for our graduates at federal agencies," he says. "We're contributing to our country's defense!"

With these terminations, scientific agencies are likely trying to comply with President Trump's efforts to end federal investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The form letters received by faculty simply say their work "no longer effectuat(es) program goals or priorities." Aljamal asks: Isn't cybersecurity a priority? Isn't computer science a priority?

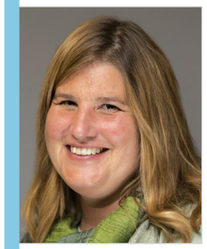
"People in a lot of areas are being left out, and it's hugely detrimental to American competitiveness," Hardin says. "How do we get more rural students? More women? More People of Color? … If you want to expand opportunities, you have to go to the people who don't have the opportunities."

(Left) City University of New York union members protest cuts; (top, left to right) NEA Secretary-Treasurer Noel Candelaria rallies with union leaders Alec Thomson, Brett Smith, and Marcia Mackey, in Michigan.

Studying Zebra Fish in Maine: A federal investment in your health

Forty or so years ago, scientists at the University of Utah found an alternative to the laboratory mouse. Meet the zebra fish.

"Fish are a fantastic model!" says University of Maine professor Clarissa Henry. Cheaper and easier to grow than mice, zebra fish also are externally fertilized, which means scientists can actually "watch disease happen," Henry explains.



Clarissa Henry

For the past 20 years, Henry and her team of students—as many as 4 doctoral and 12 undergraduate students at a time—have used zebra fish to study skeletal muscular development.

Fun fact: Your grip strength is a better predictor of how long you'll live, and whether you'll die of a heart attack, than any blood test. Muscle strength really matters to human beings.

In Henry's lab, which received more than $13 million from NIH over the years, her goal is to rigorously investigate what kinds of activities promote muscle health.

The implications for humans, especially those with muscular dystrophy (MD) are huge. For years, doctors have told people with MD to avoid exercise. The cells that replenish muscles don't work well for them. But Henry's team has found a mode that improves muscle structure and lifespan, she says. Unfortunately, her NIH money ran out this summer—and no money means no lab. Today, Henry is searching for new funds.

TAKE ACTION

Protect Academic Freedom!

The Trump administration's research cuts go hand-in-hand with their attacks on academic freedom. Use NEA's model letter to ask your campus administration to publicly commit to the principles of free speech and academic freedom. Visit nea.org/HE-OpenLetter.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: COURTESY OF MARCIA MACKEY; COURTESY OF CLARISSA HENRY; COURTESY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS.

Meet the *NEA Today* Shoe Council!

These 10 educators—chosen from among 4,000 applicants—are the heart and ***sole*** of *NEA Today's* new shoe council, representing the epi-***toe***-me of professionalism. Look for their well-trodden, expert shoe recommendations in the January issue of *NEA Today!*

Daniel Derflinger

Band and chorus teacher, Pennsylvania

"Parade season …"

Madison Sharp

Fifth-grade teacher, Kentucky

"As a fifth-grade teacher, I'm basically a professional at giving and receiving brutally honest opinions!"

Amy Dingfield

Library assistant and more, Washington

"I work five different jobs in my building and walk no less than five miles a day."

Amber Jirsa

English teacher, Illinois

"I am all about fashionable footwear … and comfort!"

Charmaine Emmanuel

Classroom aide, Florida

"I know that shoes tell a story not just of style, but of strength, movement, and service."

Michelle Merciadez

Occupational therapist, New Jersey

"As an occupational therapist, I'm on my feet doing yoga, obstacle courses, hopscotch …"

Molly Peddycoart

Special ed teacher/elementary, Minnesota

"Sometimes I think my feet should be in training as an Olympic runner."

Meera Ramchandran

Science teacher, California

"As a science teacher, I actually do a project on biomimetic* shoes!"

*BIOMIMETICS IS THE PRACTICE OF FINDING DESIGN SOLUTIONS IN NATURE.

Bryan Stork

School counselor, Ohio

"Oftentimes, I'll see a student and say, 'Hey, care if I walk with you?'"

Alicia Diozzi

Middle school teacher, Massachusetts

"My shoes need to be comfortable, but also *not* look as if I shoved my feet into a burnt baked potato."

Help! I'm an Educator and *I'm Being Bullied*

ADULT BULLYING EXISTS IN K-12 EDUCATION, AND IT'S HARMING THE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND THE PROFESSION

By Sundjata Sekou, elementary school teacher, New Jersey Education Association

We know what to say to students. Don't remain silent. In a calm, firm voice, tell the bully to stop. Avoid the places where the bullying occurs.

But what if the victim is an educator—and the bully is a co-worker, administrator, or district employee?

That's what happened to Jaclyn Headlam, a 30-year-old New Jersey school counselor who was contracted to work for a school in Monmouth County. The principal told her again and again that she was too young to be in a supervisory role and too young to work on the principal's team.

Headlam recalls that when she planned school trips, the principal would cancel them or allow them to happen only if one of the principal's allies went along. And before Headlam could meet with students, she had to send a list of names to the principal. Then the principal would talk with the students and decide whether the meetings would take place.

"This type of behavior is not how counseling is supposed to be," Headlam says.

She remembers how the principal used microaggressions and intimidation tactics against her and other school staff. They knew to be careful to avoid incurring the principal's wrath, Headlam adds. Fed up with the principal's behavior, Headlam found a new position as a school counselor in another New Jersey district.

How do you know if you're being bullied?

Richard T. Geisel, a professor of education leadership at Michigan's Grand Valley State University, notes that in the education field, "We are in the people business, so it's not surprising that it's a workplace environment that occasionally lends itself to conflict, disagreement, hurt feelings, and sometimes adverse employment actions." But bullying, he says, "is something entirely different that erodes the dignity and humanity of the individual being bullied."

"An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders," published in the *School Leadership Review*, Geisel and co-author Cynthia J. Kleinheksel define adult bullying as the "repeated, persistent, non-physical mistreatment of a person that threatens the psychological integrity, safety, and health of the target."

The researchers cite examples such as "spreading false information about a worker, spreading malicious gossip, discrediting a person's work performance, making personal character attacks, isolating a worker physically or by not including them in communication loops required to do their jobs, or belittling them."

Adult bullying, the authors write, can cause victims to withdraw, experience distress, or believe they are to blame for the harassment.

"The first thing to do is to simply acknowledge that adult bullying exists in K–12 education and to recognize the long-term, adverse effects of adult bullying on school climate and the profession … if it isn't addressed proactively and constructively," Geisel says.

A pattern of mistreatment

Fear and intimidation are all-too familiar to Abby Taylor, an elementary school teacher and president of the Hamilton Southeastern Education Association, in Fishers, Ind.

It all started when the district began moving teachers from general education to special education, focusing on those who had dual general education and special education licenses. As the union president, Taylor started asking questions about how these decisions were being made.

"The district's representative really felt like we were pushing back on him," she says.

Over time, the district staffer started harassing her, raising his voice on the phone, complaining to the state union about her, sending her text messages, and leaving belittling voicemails that said she couldn't do her job.

When Taylor recalled these traumatic experiences, she needed a moment to compose herself. The bullying only stopped when the representative left the district.

What happens when the principal is the bully? School counselor Jaclyn Headlam can tell you.

You have rights and protections

Follow the same advice you would give a student: Tell an adult. "If the bullying offender is district personnel, members should inform the principal," Taylor says. "If it is a principal doing the bullying, members should tell their association representative immediately."

Abby Taylor

Research your district's policies on harassment, intimidation, and bullying, and create a paper trail by sending a follow-up email after every face-to-face or telephone conversation, Taylor advises.

Investigate your state laws. In some (but not all) states, it's legal to record conversations with or without the other party's consent. And, if you live in Maine, a law that passed in 2021 now protects school employees from bullying by administrators, school employees, parents, students, or any other individual associated with the public school.

It's important to know your rights. Every educator has protections, whether the bullying is based on age, experience level, a recent return from maternity leave, or another reason. Headlam urges all school workers to understand the employee handbook and the district's human resources policies.

Ask your union for help. In states with collective bargaining rights, educators should understand their contract, know when it's violated, and be familiar with the grievance process, Headlam advises. Even if your state doesn't have collective bargaining, contact your union representative or state affiliate. They can help you understand how you are protected and what actions you can take to stop bullying and mistreatment.

Sundjata Sekou (pronounced Sund-Jata Say-Coo) is a hip-hop loving, "dope," elementary school teacher in Irvington, N.J. You can follow him on Instagram @blackmaleteacher and email him at sundjata.sekou@gmail.com.

LEARN MORE

Want to know more?

Watch this prerecorded webinar on adult bullying in the workplace at bit.ly/NEABullyWebinar.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: JENNIFER POTTHEISER; COURTESY OF MEMBERS (HEADSHOTS)

Comics

The Superheroes of Welcoming Classrooms

IT'S A BIRD …
IT'S A PLANE …
IT'S A CHAMPION OF INCLUSIVITY!

By Cindy Long

In today's public schools, would a Superman comic be considered too controversial for a social studies curriculum? The idea makes for an interesting classroom discussion, especially in an environment that questions anything that touches on equity and inclusion.

Consider this: In 1949, DC Comics (formerly National Comics) produced a schoolbook cover featuring Superman talking to school children, drawn by artist Wayne Boring. "And remember boys and girls, your school—like our country—is made up of Americans of many different races, religions, and national origins," Superman says. "So … if you hear anybody talk against a schoolmate or anyone else because of his religion, race, or national origin—don't wait: Tell him that kind of talk is UN-AMERICAN."

How would the Man of Steel's words go over in today's political climate? Discuss!

Tim Smyth

In Tim Smyth's high school social studies classes, he often uses comics to supplement traditional texts for history and current events discussions. "Comic books serve as a time capsule that reflect the news of the day as history is happening," says Smyth, who teaches in Ambler, Pa. "History isn't just kings and queens, battles and dates, it's made up of stories from a time and place. And comics, which come out weekly, can be used as historical artifacts from different eras."

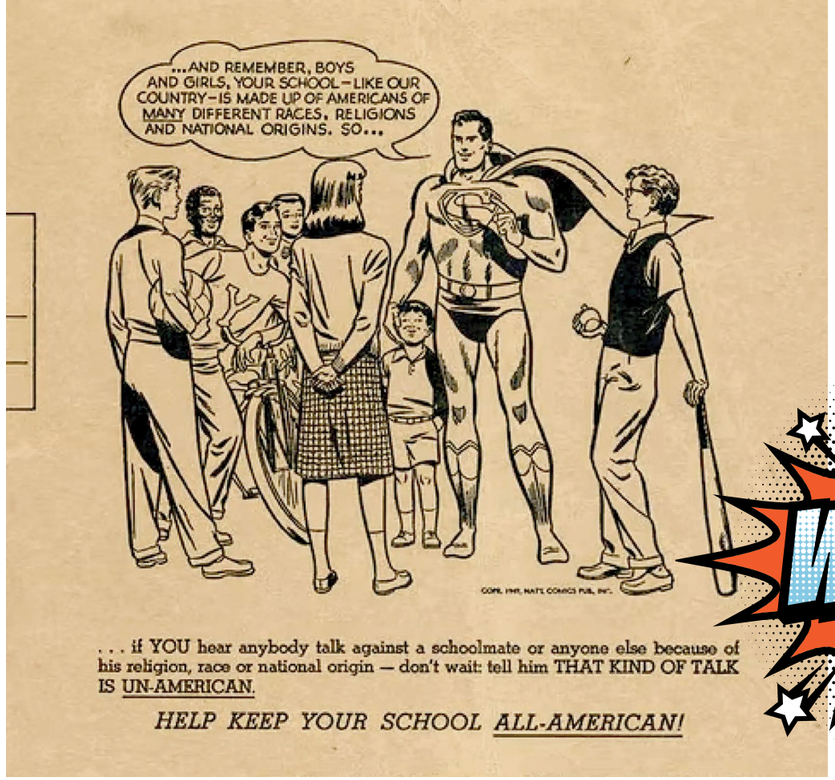
Like Smyth, many teachers across the country use comics and graphic novels to supplement classroom lessons, as students' interest in these formats explodes. Comic and graphic novel readership among young people grew by 56 percent in the 2022 — 2023 school year, according to *School Library Journal*.

"Comics and graphic novels allow students to connect with curriculum more deeply, especially if they see themselves in the story," Smyth explains.

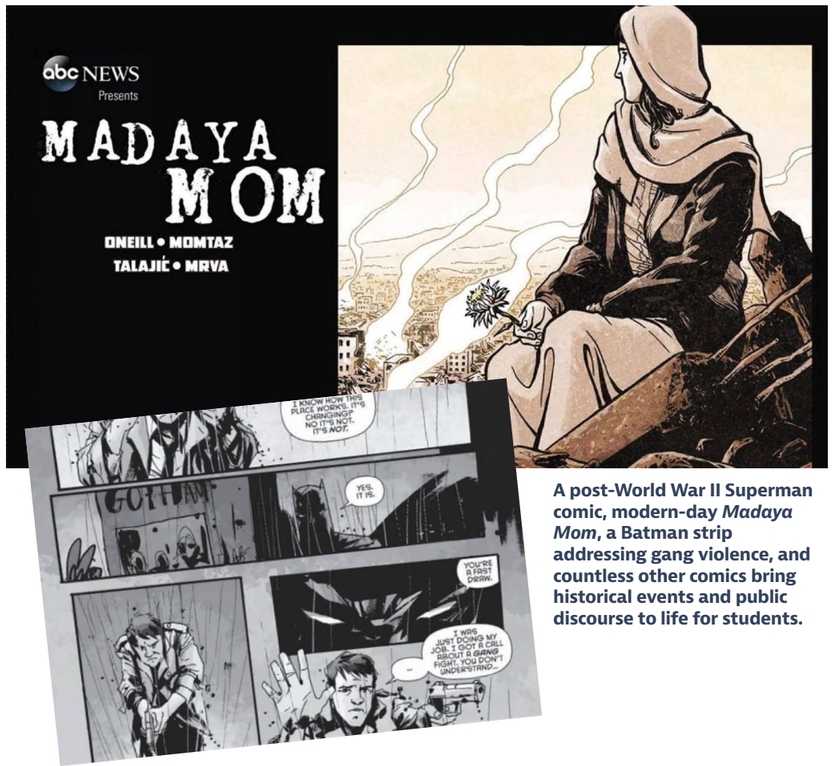
'Truth, justice, and the American way'

(Superman)

It's not surprising, he says, that Superman would make a statement about acceptance in the wake of World War II, as waves of refugees and immigrants arrived in America—just as there are refugees and immigrants today.



WOW!



A post-World War II Superman comic, modern-day *Madaya Mom*, a Batman strip addressing gang violence, and countless other comics bring historical events and public discourse to life for students.

"Superman, too, was once an outsider, a newcomer to America," Smyth notes. "A superhero reminding us that we are all Americans sends a powerful message to students."

For his lessons on war and their aftermath, Smyth uses a Superman comic from 1985, where the superhero is the sole survivor of a nuclear war. The comic reflects society's fears of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear bombs more viscerally than a traditional text.

He also introduces contemporary comics, such as Marvel's *Madaya Mom*, a comic that tells the true story of a mother and her five children who were trapped inside the Syrian town of Madaya for more than a year.

The comic is based on texts sent to *ABC News*. The news outlet then partnered with Marvel and Croatian artist Dalibor Talajić, who lived through

ARTWORK: SHUTTERSTOCK

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DC COMICS (TOP AND BOTTOM); COURTESY OF ABC NEWS (MIDDLE)

COMICS

The Superheroes of Welcoming Classrooms

war during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

The comic shows how the mom fights off starvation, unsanitary living conditions, and threats of violence as the family is caught between warring factions in the country's civil war.

"Students connect with this comic very emotionally," Smyth says. "It's very hard to comprehend 13 million people displaced from their country, but when you boil it down to one person, one family, and show war's impact through a medium like a comic, it creates a very deep connection."

The class discusses the historical and social implications of the comic and applies them to the human experience of war and persecution throughout history.

'Anyone can wear the mask.'

(Miles Morales)

Reading *Madaya Mom*, students see that not all superheroes are men in tights with capes.

"Superheroes are not defined by their powers or their physique. Superhero is in the heart," Dalibor Talajić told *ABC News*. "*Madaya Mom* fits within this category because she finds the strength to be human and unhardened."

Comics can humanize lessons on history and current events, especially when students can see themselves in the characters, Smyth says.

"As Miles Morales says in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*: 'Anyone can wear the mask,'" Smyth adds. "That's the power of comics."

Speech and language pathologist Jana Tropper also uses comics in her practice. Students not only see themselves in comics and graphic novels, she says, but the format helps reinforce vocabulary from lessons.

"The science shows that brains simultaneously interpret the visual and textual information, and the connection is stronger when they're together," says Tropper, who teaches at an elementary school outside of Chicago.

She adds, "Teaching with comics embraces brain differences and engagement in visual learning."

'In brightest day, in blackest night'

(Green Lantern)

The students in Tropper's classroom have disabilities, including students who are autistic. Tropper has found that comics help them connect with

Jana Tropper at Comicon

the world around them and build their communication skills, particularly in lessons where they create their own comics. To do that, Tropper and her students use Pixton, a popular program for creating comics.

One of her students who has autism created a comic to cope with his fear of storms.

"He was reluctant to go outside when there was even a hint of a cloud," she says. "He's very uncomfortable with weather, and tornado drills make him extraordinarily anxious."

Enter Captain Cloud. There's a storm forming on the horizon? That's a job for Captain Cloud!

Tropper helped the student create a comic where he's a superhero, a version of himself where he could cope with weather changes. They created a visual of him in costume on the playground.

"It gives him a preview of what he could be like outside on a cloudy day," Tropper explains. Now he feels brave enough to weather overcast skies.

'Holy [literacy], Batman!'

(Robin)

Comic books can be a powerful format for storytelling, because the art conveys information, Tropper explains, much like evacuation instructions on airplanes or IKEA furniture assembly guides.

Comics and graphic novels can be an option for all students to augment, broaden, and deepen curriculum. They can engage reluctant readers and increase comprehension for students working on decoding or working memory.

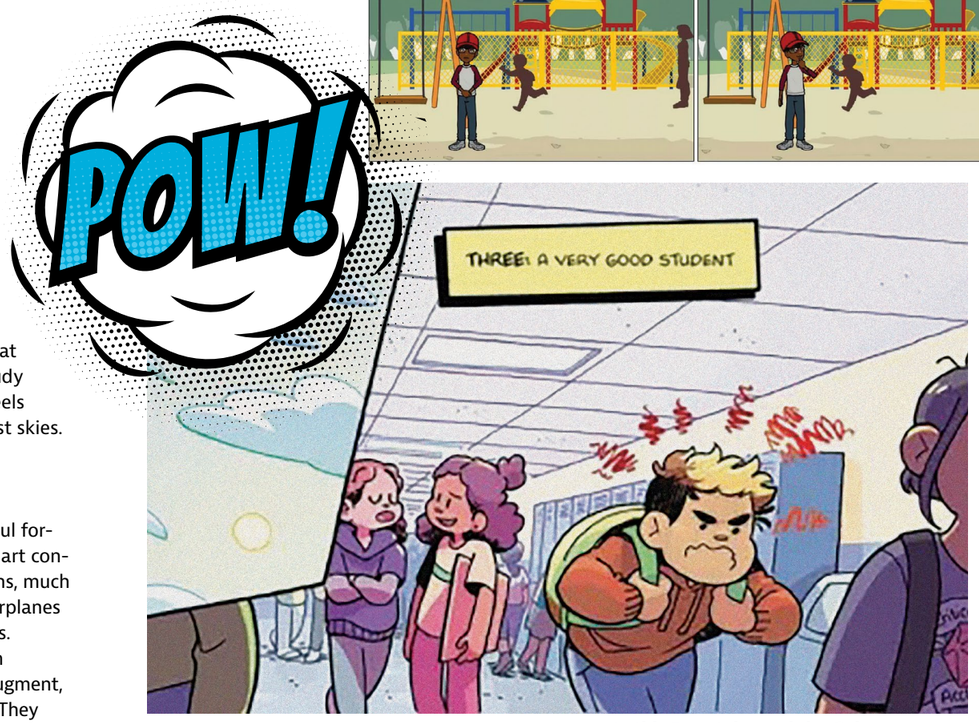
"They might not be for every student, but they're a great option for visual learners," Tropper says. "One student could read *Little Women*, while another could read *Jo* [a graphic novel adaption of *Little Women*], and they could talk about the same concepts without decoding being a gatekeeper. Visual literacy needs to be brought to all content areas."

'You've got the costume. You've got the power.'

(Spider-Man)

Tropper offers creative tips for how to use comics in all kinds of lessons.

Make a copy of a comic page, and block out one panel, then ask students to fill it in.



In this Freestyle comic by Gale Galligan, red lines emanating from the boy's head show anger—an example of visuals called "emanata" that show emotion.

"By drawing attention to the details in the images in the panels before and after the blocked panel, you're teaching students about inferring," she explains.

"*Calvin and Hobbes* or *Garfield* are good ones—they usually have a setup, a disaster, and then an explanation. If you remove the disaster panel, the wild ideas the kids can come up with about what happened never cease to amaze me!"

Try removing the dialogue from a word balloon so students have to examine what happens before and after, looking at how others react and what facial expressions convey, to infer what the word balloon might say.

"The students make their case about what was said by offering evidence, which is higher-level reasoning."

Next, introduce students to emanata (eh-mah-NAH-tah), the visual elements that emanate from a character that symbolize the character's internal state—like lightbulbs for ideas, rain clouds for anger, or question marks for confusion.

"Ask students to interpret the emanata in a comic or come up with a set of their own to build critical-thinking skills," Tropper says.

For an autistic student who was afraid of storms, creating this comic helped him feel safe outside on cloudy days.

'I could do this all day.'

(Captain America)

"Meeting kids where they are is the only way we can connect with them in this era of increasing needs and decreasing resources to serve them," Tropper says.

There is an ever-increasing number of students who want to read comics and graphic novels, and they have fun reading and learning from them, she says.

"Educators can get them to learn what we want them to learn with the materials they choose," she adds. "By letting them choose the medium, they'll be more engaged."

Tropper acknowledges that some find comics and graphic novels less serious than traditional prose, but she disagrees strongly, and has seen time and again how effective they are with her students.

"There are incredibly moving tales in 'just comics.' We take fine arts seriously, and we take literature seriously, but put them together and some people lose their minds. They decide it doesn't count," she says. "My question is, why can't school and learning be fun?"

LEARN MORE

Graphic Novels for Your Classroom

There are hundreds of graphic novels, and more are coming out constantly. Tim Smyth and Jana Tropper recommend some titles at nea.org/GraphicNovels.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JANA TROPPER

PHOTOS FROM TOP: COURTESY OF JANA TROPPER; COURTESY OF GALE GALLIGAN

Three Steps to Financial Wellness

Falling short of your retirement savings goals or having trouble paying the bills? You are not alone. Many people are financially out of balance. Financial wellness means finding a balance between living for today and preparing and planning for tomorrow.

1. Protect what you have with insurance.

"Life, disability, and long-term care are vital components of a comprehensive financial strategy," says financial planner Nick Ventura, president and CEO at Ewing, N.J.-based Ventura Wealth Management. "Having these elements in place will offset the risks of catastrophic events."

2. Plan for life after you're gone.

Most people don't want to contemplate their own mortality, but putting off estate planning is ill-advised. In addition to arranging for an authenticated will and a trust, you should designate beneficiaries for your retirement accounts.

3. Get an early start on saving for retirement.

Putting off long-term retirement saving could cost you. To get started, designate contributions as a percentage of your income, not as a flat dollar figure. Also consider increasing your contributions each year to match any salary increases.

NEA Member Benefits can help. Get started with benefits for insurance, retirement, and more at neamb.com/Overview.

nea Member Benefits
neamb.com

THE NEA FOUNDATION
EQUITY. EXCELLENCE. OPPORTUNITY.

Applications are reviewed three times a year (**winter, spring,** and **fall**).

Need a grant?

Apply for the NEA Foundation's $2,000 and $5,000 grants for individuals and teams of education professionals to support instructional practice or professional development across all subject areas and grade levels.

Want to bring the world to your classroom?

These resources and opportunities can help connect you, your classroom, and your students with ideas and people around the world.

Download classroom resources from the NEA Foundation's Global Learning Resource page to help your students become 21st century global citizens.

Join a learning community of educators committed to global education advocacy.

Find more resources and programs offered by the NEA Foundation—a public charity founded by educators for educators—at neafoundation.org. Follow us on Facebook and YouTube for updates.

Find Tools for Your Practice

- **Looking for professional learning opportunities and resources to bolster your lessons?**
- **Legal guidance on educator rights?**
- **Or just good advice from fellow educators?**

Check out NEA's online resource library, where you can search by keyword, issue, resource type, and more to find the latest and best professional resources from NEA. Visit nea.org/Resource-Library.

ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

59TH ANNUAL NEA HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS AWARDS

CALL FOR 2026 NOMINATIONS

Know 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 on 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!

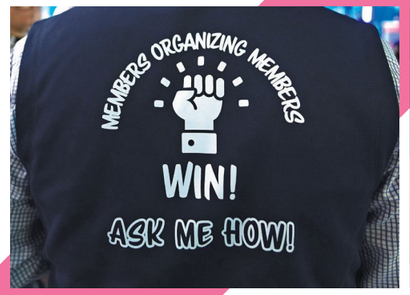
Identify your nominees now! It is never too early to begin profiling nominees and potential HCR Award winners! Find information on past winners and submit nominations for the 2026 HCR Awards at **nea.org/HCRAwards**.

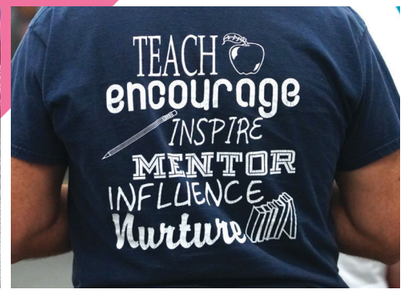
Nomination forms and instructions for the 2024 HCR Awards will be available online until Dec. 6, 2025, at **nea.org/HCRAwards**.

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

Say It LOUD, Say It PROUD!

Wearing hearts on our sleeves and union pride on our tees, NEA members will not be silenced. Together, we are standing strong in our union power and our belief that all students have a right to an honest and equitable education!





PHOTOS: NEA

Sign up for *NEA Today's* biweekly e-newsletter at **nea.org/signup**.

For the latest education news, visit nea.org/NEAToday

Join the conversation

NEAToday

@neatoday.bsky.social

@NEAToday