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January 2026

neaToday

for **NEA-RETIRED**

An edition of *NEA Today*

Time to Declutter?

THIS STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE WILL HELP YOU PUT ON YOUR EDUCATOR HAT AND GET IT DONE

PAGE 26

Retired Utah music teacher Debbie Green keeps the items that bring her joy.

inside

Drastic Funding Cuts Are Harming Students PAGE 16

How to Plan the Best Family Reunion PAGE 24

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nea NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

NEA Today's digital experience is here!

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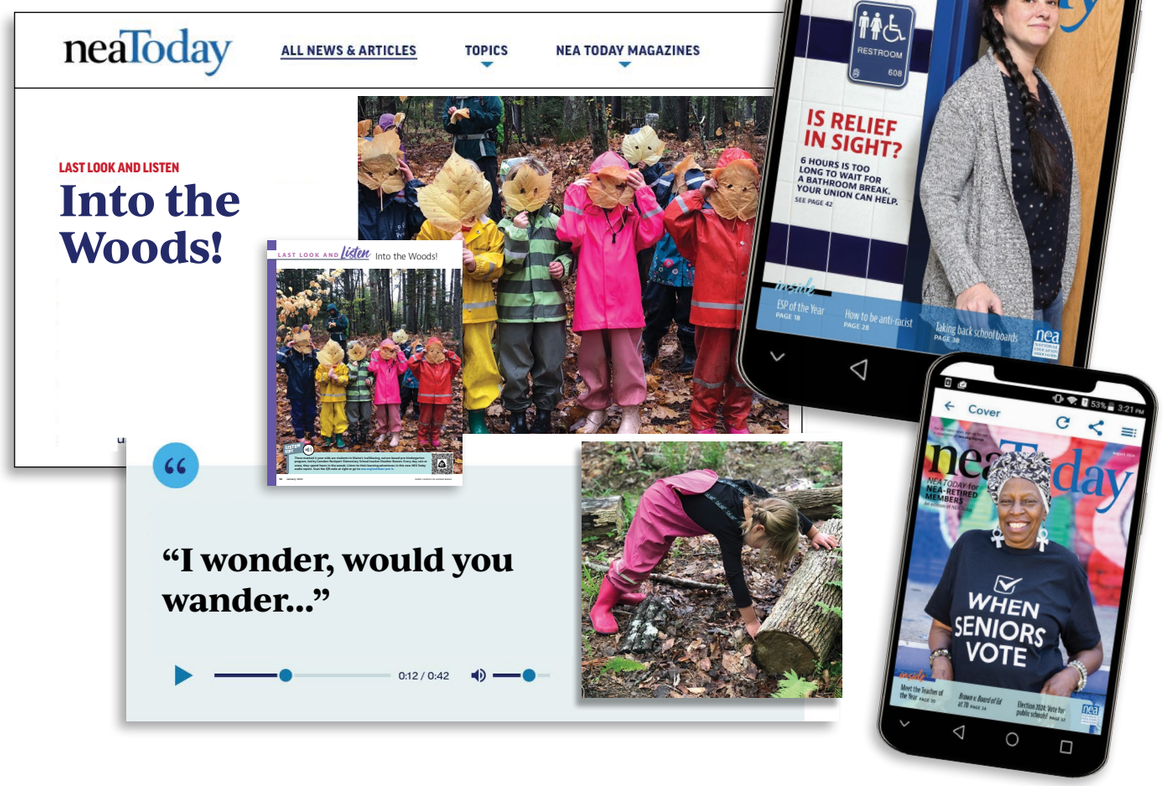

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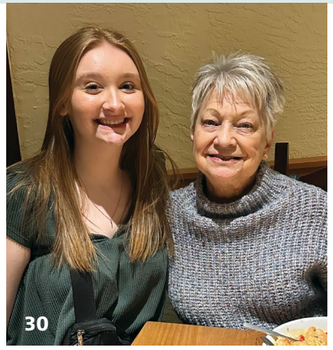

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Sign up for *NEA Today* news! For timely news about issues impacting educators, visit **nea.org/NEAToday** or sign up for *NEA Today's* biweekly e-newsletter at **nea.org/signup**.

COVER: JAKE CAMPOS; ABOVE FROM LEFT: MARK MCCALL; SHEA KASTRINER; COURTESY OF JORDAN HOY AND SARA KAUFMAN

MISSION, VISION, AND *values*

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.

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PRESIDENT'S viewpoint

NEA-Retired President Anita Gibson
anitagretired@gmail.com 256-717-7993

New Beginnings: Embrace the Power of a Fresh Start

As the calendar turns, and we step into a brand-new year, there's a certain magic in the air—a sense of possibility, hope, and renewal. It's a time to reflect on the lessons of the past while daring to dream about the future. The beginning of the year is not just a change in date; it's an invitation to reinvent ourselves, set new goals, and embrace the endless opportunities that lie ahead.

Every new year offers a blank page, waiting for your story. Perhaps last year brought challenges and setbacks, but remember that growth often comes from overcoming adversity. Take pride in your resilience and let those experiences fuel your journey forward. Now is the perfect moment to let go of what no longer serves you—old fears, doubts, and regrets—and to welcome fresh ambitions with open arms.

Set your intentions with courage and clarity. Whether you're pursuing a personal goal, nurturing relationships, or seeking new adventures, trust that small, consistent steps can lead to profound transformation. Surround yourself with positivity, cultivate gratitude for what you have, and strive always to become the best version of yourself.

Most importantly, remember that the journey matters just as much as the destination. Celebrate your progress, learn from your mistakes, and support those around you. As you move through this new year, let hope guide you, let kindness inspire you, and let your dreams lead the way.

Here's to new beginnings and the courage to make this year your most remarkable yet!

NEATODAY

PUBLISHER AND SENIOR DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
May Malik

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER AND DIRECTOR
Anitrá Speight

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR EDITORIAL CONTENT AND PUBLICATIONS
Giovanna Bechard

EDITOR
Robin Terry Brown

SR. WRITER/EDITORS
Brenda Álvarez
Mary Ellen Flannery
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
Shawn Stabell
sstabell@neamb.com

CONTRIBUTORS
Colin Davan
James Paterson
Janet Rivera Mednik

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

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
NEA President

"We refuse to allow our students, our researchers, our higher education faculty to live in fear of their own government. We will not allow their brilliance to be self-censored before it has a chance to shine. We will not allow the Trump administration to erase academic freedom or steal our future."

—Becky, speaking at a meeting with NEA Higher Ed state leaders

Face to Face with NEA members

Some of my proudest moments with NEA members happened this fall. I met Iowa educators who are making sure children don't go hungry in the face of historic cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). And at the No Kings rally in Atlanta, I joined educators in protesting the injustices carried out by the Trump administration.

We are taking our place as leaders in this movement by educating and organizing and mobilizing … and electing! That leadership culminated in MAJOR wins in the November election. American voters were very clear. We care about our kids. We care about our communities. We care about our country!

(Top) In Des Moines, Iowa, I joined members of the Iowa State Education Association, who were delivering food for hungry families. (Bottom) U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (on my right) and I united with educators and families at Atlanta's No Kings rally this fall.

PHOTOS: NEA

JOIN ME
3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

1. **Honor Martin Luther King Jr. Day!** On January 19, join me in reflecting on the contributions of Martin Luther King Jr. and how his legacy impacts our schools and communities today. Visit **nea.org/MLKDay**.

2. **Save federal programs for students.** Every state will feel the impact of cuts to federal funding for public education. See how the cuts will affect students in your state at **nea.org/FederalFunding** and learn how you can speak out against the cuts at **nea.org/ProtectOurSchools**.

3. **Get ready for NEA's Read Across America!** Students all over the country will come together for a love of books and reading during Read Across America Day, on March 2. Then keep it going all year long with our calendar of 12 months of recommended titles, authors, and teaching resources that promote diversity and inclusion at **nea.org/ReadAcrossAmerica**.

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

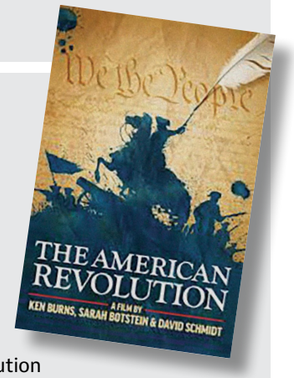
maine public
RADIO · TELEVISION · ONLINE

In the News: Federal Cuts to Special Education

"The alarm we are sounding is that it isn't just bureaucratic neglect, it's a deliberate rollback to a darker time when Americans with disabilities were denied access, opportunity, and dignity before IDEA [Individuals With Disabilities Education Act]."

—Becky, *Maine Public Radio,* October 17, 2025

What I'm Watching:



The American Revolution
by Ken Burns

In his editing room, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns has a neon sign that says, "It's complicated." The sign is there to remind him to embrace complex truths—and that's exactly what his documentary on the American Revolution asks of viewers. We know the Revolution was devastating. The film shows us just how destructive and grisly it was, and how the Revolution was steeped in failures, contradictions, and hypocrisy. But I was also reminded that it was ultimately about possibility and progress toward a "more perfect union." The series includes firsthand accounts of people too often left out of the usual histories of the war: Native Americans, women, and Black people, both free and enslaved. While watching, I felt a lot of different things—anger and frustration, but also pride and hope. The nation was even more divided than it is now, and the series reminds me that our nation is a work in progress. We are still becoming a more perfect union. And that requires active participation and civil discourse, now more than ever.

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

NEA Supports California Dream Centers

Three NEA-funded Dream Centers across the Alhambra Unified School District, in California, are changing lives. These safe, welcoming spaces meet the needs of students, many of whom are recent immigrants living under the threat of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

An inclusive and welcoming sign hangs in the Dream Center at Alhambra High School, in California.

The Dream Centers offer safe spaces for a community under ICE surveillance, as well as tangible support that helps students thrive, including:

- Tutoring and academic support.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring.
- Food and pantry items.
- A clothing closet.
- A safe space to share concerns and build community.

Learn more about NEA's community grants at nea.org/CAPE.

NEA Backs Colorado Educators

NEA stood with the Colorado Springs Education Association during their one-day strike, calling for the restoration of their collective bargaining rights.

Educators organized for change when the school board allowed a decades-long master agreement to expire, replacing it with a non-binding employee handbook. Over 1,000 teachers, parents, and community members rallied across the city. Educators emphasized that stable schools and fair contracts benefit students by providing consistency, smaller class sizes, and stronger support.

NEA Helps Arizona Local Push Back Against Too Much Testing

With NEA's support, Arizona's Tucson Education Association (TEA) led a successful grassroots campaign to eliminate non-mandatory standardized tests required by the school district—putting students' learning first.

TEA collected more than 1,200 petition signatures, held multiple public forums, spoke at board meetings, and gathered educator stories that illustrated the toll of excessive testing on students.

The results:

- **More instructional time for educators and students.**
- **Less focus on test preparation and less stress.**
- **A stronger, community-centered approach to teaching and learning.**

NEA Provides Food to Iowa Families

NEA donated $25,000 to the Food Bank of Iowa. The donation will help sustain the network of school-based food pantries across Des Moines Public Schools.

NEA President Becky Pringle also joined leaders of the Iowa State Education Association and the Des Moines Education Association in delivering boxes of food to Callanan Middle School, to support the school's families.

NEA President Pringle presents a $25,000 check for Iowa school pantries.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION; BRIAN WASHINGTON/NEA; SHUTTERSTOCK; DES MOINES PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NEWS YOU *can use*

BOYS AND 'DIGITAL MASCULINITY'

A new report by Common Sense Media analyzed how boys' self-esteem is often impacted by their exposure to specific types of content featuring "digital masculinity." This content may reinforce specific gender roles or cover anything from getting fit and building muscle to making money to fighting or using weapons.

According to the report, nearly three-quarters of boys regularly encounter such content, and nearly one in four experience high levels of exposure.

The report found that boys with high exposure to digital masculinity are more likely to report they feel "useless at times," think they're "no good," and are more likely to report being lonely.

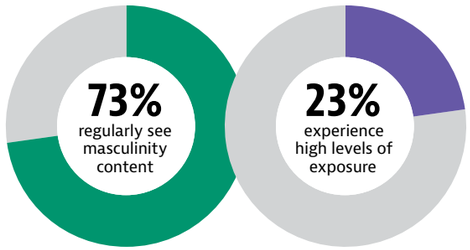
In addition, over two-thirds of adolescent boys regularly see masculinity content that promotes stereotypical gender roles. And exposure increases with age—older boys (14–17) are much more likely to view this content than younger boys (11–13).

How do boys find this content? They're not searching for it. According to the report, more than two-thirds say

it just started showing up in their social media feeds, while 1 in 4 say friends shared it with them, usually through TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram.

Want to know more? Turn to Page 38 to read our story, "What's the Recipe for Reaching Boys?"

Percent of boys who see masculinity-related content:



Percent of boys who see masculinity-related content that promotes problematic gender stereotypes:

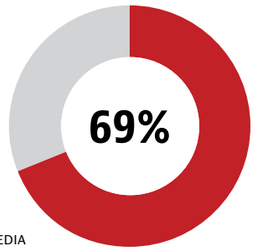


CHART SOURCE: COMMON SENSE MEDIA

More Legislation Targets Sex Education

How sex education should be addressed in classrooms has always been a political minefield, but efforts to limit what is taught have accelerated over the past couple of years. As of fall 2025, more than 650 bills on the topic had been introduced in state legislatures, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S., a nonprofit organization advocating for comprehensive sex education. Of those bills, nearly one-quarter sought to pare back or remove access to sex education—a 35 percent increase in these restrictive bills from the year before.

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

Tariffs: Rising Cost of School Supplies Increases Burden on Educators

As the Trump administration's tariffs kick in, the price of school supplies could increase by as much as 15 percent before the end of this school year, according to a report from the Groundwork Collaborative and the Century Foundation.

Roughly 90 percent of teachers pay for classroom expenses out of their own pockets. Recent surveys indicate that teachers, on average, are forking out anywhere from $500 to as much as $900 in the first two months of the school year.

And it's not just teachers. Support staff also spend their money on classroom materials, field trips, and projects.

The 2025 – 2026 school year could be educators' most expensive yet. According to the report, at the beginning of the current academic year, school supplies cost an average of 7.3 percent more than the previous year—nearly triple the overall inflation rate. Index cards are up more than 42 percent; notebooks are up 17 percent; binders and folders are up around 12 percent.

The tariffs on China have had a significant impact. China is the largest exporter of office and school supplies made from plastic.

Cost of school supplies, 2025 versus 2024

ITEM	2025 PRICE	2024 PRICE	PERCENT INCREASE
Adhesive notepads	$3.93	$3.69	6.5%
Binders	$13.74	$12.18	12.8%
Composition notebook	$6.34	$5.86	8.2%
Glue sticks	$6.04	$5.76	4.9%
Hand sanitizer	$4.54	$4.20	8.1%
Headphones	$22.96	$21.38	7.4%
Highlighters	$3.98	$3.56	11.8%
Index cards	$2.31	$1.62	42.6%
Lunch box	$15.13	$13.97	8.3%
No. 2 pencils	$12.24	$11.56	5.9%

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

NEWS YOU *can use*

NEW RESEARCH:

SEL Leads to Greater Academic Performance

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has long been recognized as a powerful tool for student growth, teaching essential life skills, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relationship-building. According to a new large-scale analysis of existing research, SEL is also beneficial to students' academic achievement.

The American Education Research Association (AERA) reviewed 40 studies involving more than 33,700 students in grades 1–12. The researchers concluded that students who participated in universal SEL programs (provided to all students in a school) performed better on academic outcomes—including grades and standardized tests—than students who did not. Gains were reported in both literacy and math. The duration of the programs is a key factor. Those lasting more than one semester produce higher gains than shorter programs.

"Our analysis underscores the importance of explicit SEL instruction in schools," says Christina Cipriano, associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine and leader of the AERA research team. "These programs should not be viewed as add-ons, but as essential components of all students' school experiences."

"Never before in the life of any living American have so many books been systematically removed from school libraries across the country. ... Never before has access to so many stories been stolen from so many children."

—"The Normalization of Book Banning," a new report by PEN America, which recorded 6,870 instances of book bans during the 2024 – 2025 school year. Since 2021, when the current wave of book bans began, there have been 22,810 cases of banned books across 45 states and 451 school districts.

PHOTOS FROM TOP: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK

DO STUDENTS READ FOR FUN?

Most people have to read—but too often it's an activity limited only to school or work. Reading for pleasure, on the other hand, has long been recognized as a critical factor in supporting mental health and creativity, not to mention lifelong learning. But, according to a new study from the University of Florida (UF) and University College London, reading for pleasure has declined by more than 40 percent over the last 20 years.

"Reading has historically been a low-barrier, high-impact way to engage creatively and improve quality of life," says UF's Jill Sonke, a co-author of the study. "When we lose one of the simplest tools in our public health tool kit, it's a serious loss."

There are a number of factors behind this decline, Sonke explains. "Our digital culture is certainly part of the story.

But there are also structural issues—limited access to reading materials, economic insecurity, and a national decline in leisure time. If you're working multiple jobs or dealing with transportation barriers in a rural area, a trip to the library may just not be feasible."

Is Homework Necessary for Student Learning?

HERE'S WHAT EDUCATORS HAD TO SAY IN A RECENT *EDUCATION WEEK* POLL ON LINKEDIN:

PHOTOS FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

ISSUES AND *action*

HOW RECENT FUNDING CUTS WILL HURT STUDENTS

By Amanda Litvinov and Cindy Long

Nancy Baker Curtis's son, Charlie, loves monster trucks, playing with his friends, and bike-riding with his mom. "It's amazing because, at the age of two, he couldn't crawl or even sit up," says Baker Curtis, who teaches Spanish at Johnston Middle School, in Iowa.

Six days after Charlie was born, he was diagnosed with a serious infection that would leave him with lifelong disabilities.

When Charlie wasn't hitting developmental milestones, Baker Curtis called in early intervention services.

"The reason Charlie can run and swallow and use his talker is because Medicaid has covered life-changing therapies for our son," she says.

But now Congress has cut Medicaid by a whopping $1 trillion, making it likely that students with disabilities—kids like Charlie—will lose therapies and services they count on to thrive and even survive.

Nancy Baker Curtis, with her son, Charlie, speaks out against Medicaid cuts at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NANCY BAKER CURTIS

'WHAT WILL WE DO?'

Charlie's school-based Medicaid services include specialized transportation and a one-on-one aid, as well as speech, occupational, and physical therapy.

Baker Curtis and her husband—who also have a 12-year-old daughter to care for—both have employer-provided health insurance. But their policy doesn't cover anywhere near the amount of services Charlie needs.

"Under our PPO, we qualify for a total of 30 appointments for occupational and physical therapy," Baker Curtis says. "We would blow through those in about three and a half months. What will we do for the rest of the year?"

Nationwide, Medicaid supports over $7.5 billion of school-based health services annually.

A BARRAGE OF CUTS

Incredibly, Congress voted to sacrifice the well-being of millions of students like Charlie to help finance tax breaks for the ultrawealthy.

When federal support for health care is cut, states are forced to try to make up the difference—and that could result in cuts to education spending. For students, that could mean larger class sizes, losing school counselors, or many other negative outcomes.

Read on to see how students will be directly affected by three reckless moves by the Trump administration.

What's at risk? School meals, Title I funding, and health care

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM HAS ALREADY HAD DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION. HERE ARE THREE WAYS STUDENTS WILL CONTINUE TO PAY THE PRICE:

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Share this with your colleagues and ask them to speak out for their students. Find out how at the link below.

Fewer school meals for hungry kids

WHAT WAS CUT: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) faces $186 billion in cuts over the next decade—the largest reduction ever made to an anti-hunger program.

WHY IT MATTERS: Students whose families qualify for SNAP are automatically eligible for free school meals. With fewer kids receiving SNAP benefits, some districts will lose community eligibility, a provision that allows schools to provide universal meals to the entire student body.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: These cuts will result in as many as 18 million children losing access to free school meals. That means more students will face food insecurity and come into the classroom hungry. Studies show—and educators know—that hungry kids have a hard time focusing and have more behavior issues.

Title I funds uncertain

WHAT WAS CUT: The Trump administration gutted the U.S. Department of Education (ED), including its National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—the agency responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting U.S. education data. NCES staff was reduced from 100 employees to 3.

WHY IT MATTERS: ED's number crunchers provide the data that determines how much funding schools receive for programs such as Title I, which helps K–12 schools serve low-income families.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: Today, nearly 90 percent of U.S. school districts receive some Title I funding, which has long had bipartisan support among lawmakers. By firing the statisticians and data experts who determine which schools qualify for that money, the Trump administration has made it virtually impossible to deliver on those programs going forward.

Medicaid cuts mean students lose critical health services

WHAT WAS CUT: Congress slashed Medicaid by $1 trillion; most cuts will be phased in between 2026 – 2028.

WHY IT MATTERS: Nearly 80 million Americans—including 38 million children and 1 in 10 education support professionals—receive health care coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: The Congressional Budget Office estimates that 16.9 million people will lose their health coverage by 2034. Medicaid is also the fourth-largest source of funding for the public school system, supporting over $7.5 billion in school-based health services annually.

TAKE ACTION

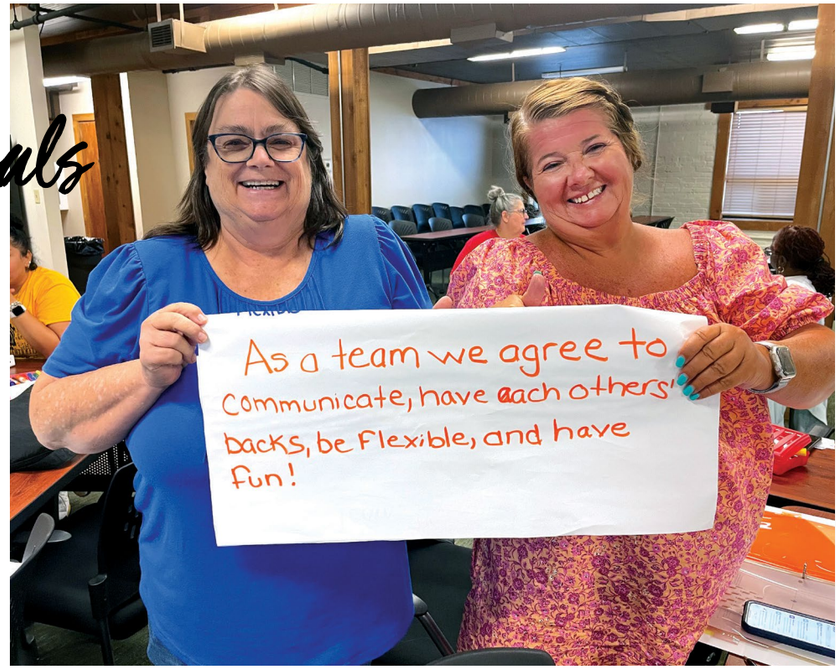
Join the movement to stand up to reckless education cuts at nea.org/ProtectOurSchools.

ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

EDUCATION SUPPORT *professionals*

HOW TO BUILD BETTER TEACHER-PARAEDUCATOR TEAMS

By Cindy Long



Teacher Nancy Tate (left) and paraeducator Lynne Formanski (right) drafted a team statement during a "Building Winning Teams" training in Hillsborough County, Florida.

When Connecticut paraeducator Jean Fay was starting out in her career, she walked into her new kindergarten classroom in a skirt and heels, carrying a big bucket of My Little Pony figurines. The classroom teacher who greeted her wore flannel, Converse high-tops, and an uneasy expression that seemed to say, "This is never going to work."

But Fay maintained her confidence and told the teacher, "We're going to be great partners." In fact, they meshed after day one, Fay recalls, and became such good friends that they even vacationed together. They became known as the "dream team."

In a school in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, the superintendent and chancellor of the city's public schools stopped by a classroom where paraeducator Margaret Dalton-Diakite and her partner teacher were working with students. The visitors couldn't tell who was the paraeducator and who was the teacher.

Dalton-Diakite says, "We looked at each other like, 'Yes!' We moved simultaneously. We flowed. We were a team!"

The secret to successful partnerships

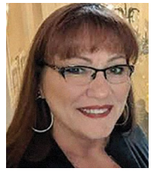
Fay and Dalton-Diakite's classroom partnerships were so productive that they decided to share their success stories at last year's NEA Education Support Professional National Conference.

Becoming a dream team isn't always easy, acknowledges Sabrina Gates, an NEA member and union activist who leads the Hillsborough Consortium for Technology and Education (CTechEd)—a Tampa, Fla., nonprofit that provides professional development for educators.

She recognizes that paraeducator-teacher relationships can be difficult, so she jumped at the chance to lead an NEA training called "Building Winning Teams: Effective Paraeducator-Teacher Teams." The series of eight trainings is designed to engage teams and includes topics such as communication, establishing a shared vision, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.


Jean Fay


Margaret Dalton-Diakite


Sabrina Gates

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

NEA Today spoke with paraeducators Dalton-Diakite and Fay, as well as CTechEd trainer Gates, who offered this advice about creating winning teams:

1. Respect yourself and each other.

Fay: We teach respect to students, but we need to model that respect, too. Often we, as paraeducators, don't think about the talents we have and how we enhance the learning environment for students and colleagues.

Respecting yourself means valuing what you do and what you represent. Don't minimize the importance of your accomplishments and contributions. Paraeducators bring a lot to the table and are critical to student success.

Dalton-Diakite: If a paraeducator has served for years in a school, the para might have more knowledge than the teacher about that community. The para knows the families, the students, and the culture. That can be tremendously helpful, especially for newer teachers. When there's mutual respect, teachers can tap into that knowledge.

Gates: Respect also means understanding the roles and dynamic of a partnership. You can't have a winning team if a teacher feels they are "the boss." It doesn't work if the paraeducator feels they're being assigned tasks that aren't their role or if they are relied on solely to clean up the classroom and organize bookshelves.

Set the tone of a true partnership based on mutual respect: The teacher is the leader of the team, but not a supervisor. Ask each other, "What are we going to do together to make this a great partnership?"

2. Nurture your relationship.

Gates: When you focus on building rapport, you can have honest conversations. In one training activity, I ask each team member, "What is it that you want?" and "What do you offer?"

I've noticed that paraeducators can be reticent about their wishes and skills. This exercise helps them speak up and say, hey, I have an idea, and here's what I think we can do to accomplish it.

It's also important to have the confidence to admit when you don't know something and to say, "I don't know how to do this, but you can help me to better our students."

Your position entitles you to gain more knowledge. Grow that ownership by saying, "This is my job, and I want to do it better, please help me get there."

3. Refine lessons together.

Dalton-Diakite: A teacher can break down the lesson plan for the paraeducator, who is then better able to teach it to students in the most effective ways.

The paraeducator might have questions about the lessons, and the teacher might have questions about what works best when reinforcing the lessons to students who need more explanation.

The teacher should be giving outlines of lessons to the paraeducator, and then the pair should sit down together to go over it. The teacher could say something like, "Remember the science lesson I taught on Monday? I don't think Sue, Johnny, and Mary got it. Can you sit down with them and go back through the lesson and try to see what they are missing?"

It's wonderful when you work together as a team to make sure all students have a good understanding of the curriculum.

Try These Tips for Creating Effective Partnerships

- **Establish routines so everyone knows how the class or the day will unfold. No surprises!**
- **Meet regularly to talk about lessons and the strengths or weaknesses of your team dynamic.**
- **Include teachers and paraeducators in team meetings, so everyone is on the same page.**
- **Overcommunicate. Avoid lack of clarity and missing information. Be open to new ways of doing things.**
- **Find time in the day for planning. Negotiate for it with your district, and ask your union for help.**
- **Advocate for professional development for paraeducators! Learn more at nea.org/ESPLearning.**

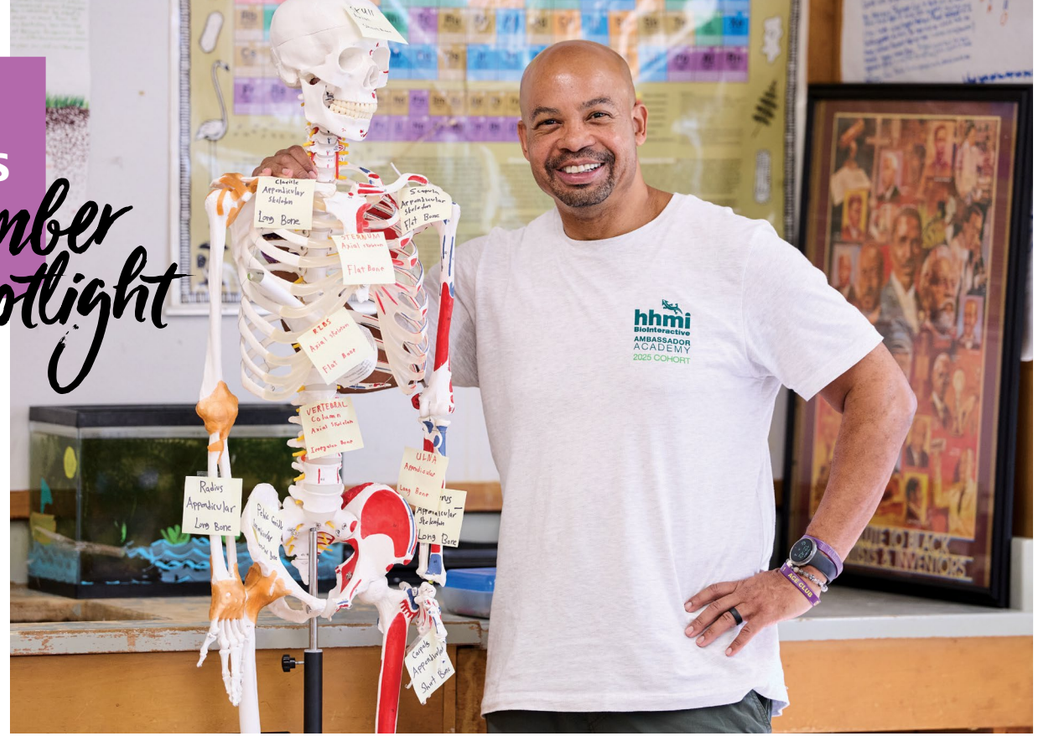
TAKE ACTION

Want to Strengthen Your Paraeducator-Teacher Team?

NEA offers a series of eight trainings, called "Building Winning Teams: Effective Paraeducator-Teacher Teams." Learn more at nea.org/WinningTeams.

OUR VOICES

member spotlight



A SCIENCE TEACHER SPARKS CURIOSITY AND CONNECTION

"At first, kids love science—bugs, their bodies, the outdoors. But if you don't tap into that natural curiosity, they lose it."

—Samuel Washington Jr., high school science teacher, in New York

Fewer than half of the cells in our bodies are human cells.

That's the kind of fun fact that science teacher Samuel Washington Jr. loves to drop on his students at the start of the school year. He'll also have his biology students design "weird but true" bumper stickers. Things like, the human stomach can dissolve razor blades, a cloud can weigh more than a million pounds, and hot water can freeze faster than cold water. And if you're still wondering, the rest of the human body is made up of trillions of non-human microbial cells, including bacteria, fungi, and viruses!

Washington has taught for more than three decades and knows science can lose its spark if it's reduced to textbooks and note-taking.

"You want to catch their attention first," says Washington, who teaches at Woodlands High School, in Hartsdale, N.Y. "At first, kids love science—bugs, their bodies, the outdoors—but if you don't tap into that natural curiosity, they lose it. To me, that's the ticket to bringing education forward."

He also uses science to meet students where they are and draw them into learning through wonder and relevance.

A CLOUD CAN WEIGH MORE THAN A MILLION POUNDS.

The need to 'be better'

Men of color make up just 2 percent of educators nationwide, so Washington sees representation as central to his work.

"Growing up I didn't see a lot of me in my own teachers," he says. "That really inspired me to go just a little harder in terms of what I bring to the table ... to be better."

Today, that commitment translates to setting high expectations for himself and his students.

"I don't have time to slack off because I want [my students] to be the best they can be," Washington says. "I'll say, 'I know sometimes you don't want to be here, sometimes I don't want to be here—we're human. But if you can give me your best, I'll give you my best.' And that's all I can ask for."

Holding students to high standards goes hand in hand with creating a classroom where they feel seen and valued.

Washington makes sure his students feel like they belong in school. For example, during Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and Women's History Month, he asks students to research scientists whose names don't appear in the usual textbooks.

And when one of his students was allowed to profile her mother, a hospital worker, her grades started improving.

"She was like, wow, he really does care about what I have to offer and where I come from," Washington recalls.

He adds: "Not only am I beneficial to students of color, especially young Black males, but I feel I'm a benefit to all students."

A bond beyond the classroom

Some of Washington's most powerful connections stretch across years. He recalls one ninth grader who entered his honors biology class nervous and unsure—both about her own abilities and about Washington's, since he was a newer teacher at the time.

By the end of her senior year, she had taken every course he offered and later went on to Harvard. Her younger brother followed the same path.

Recognition, he admits, is gratifying. But what means the most to Washington is how his lessons in science continue to resonate years later.

"Sometimes, as a teacher, the impact of our work can go under the radar until years after a student has graduated," he says. "I've had former students come back after 20 years to thank me for how much I did to prepare them for life after high school. To be honored in real-time makes it come alive."

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ

(Left) New York teacher Samuel Washington Jr. taps into kids' natural interest in science topics, including the human body; (right) Washington fosters a love of learning in his students, including Kenly McDonald (in red hood) and Tiffany Williams.

WATCH THIS

How does Samuel Washington Jr. work his magic in the classroom? Scan this code to check out his video.

Who is Samuel Washington Jr.?

"[My friends and I] always joke that we were bowling alley kids," says Washington, whose father was an avid bowler. His last memory with his dad, who died when Washington was 16, was winning a tournament together.

That moment inspired him to coach, mentor, and guide young people through a school bowling program. Over the years, his youth league and high school teams have earned championship titles and collected thousands in scholarship money—extra support that helped many students pursue college.

"I've found that students who bowl, or who are in clubs, perform a little bit better in school," Washington says. "They know someone cares about them, and that makes all the difference."

PHOTO: SHEA KASTRINER

PHOTO: SHEA KASTRINER

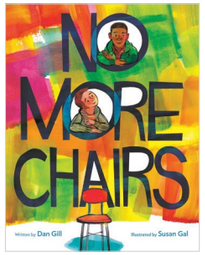
NEA-RETIRED *bulletin board*

The latest news on NEA-Retired members around the country

Retiree's Book Selected for NEA's Read Across America

For former educator Dan Gill, kindness and inclusion were the most important messages in his classroom. Those same themes inspired the retiree to write the book *No More Chairs,* which was selected for NEA's Read Across America January 2026 collection!

Read Across America promotes literacy in schools across the country and celebrates diverse and inclusive books for every month of the year. Gill's book will be highlighted as part of January's "End Exclusion" theme.



New Jersey retiree Dan Gill (above) authored the book *No More Chairs* based on an experience from his childhood.

No More Chairs is based on an incident that Gill witnessed as a child. He and his friend Archie attended a birthday party, but were told upon arrival that Archie could not come in because there were "no more chairs." The excuse was simply a cover. Archie is Black; Gill is white.

The author, who taught middle school in Montclair, N.J., kept an empty chair in his classroom for 40 years. He shared this story in all of his classes: "My kids always said, 'Come in! We have an extra chair,' because the chair says to them, being kind is important here."

Gill has also told the story at many community events and rallies. So when Pitchapalooza came to his hometown, he decided to give the story a shot. At the event, 20 people have the opportunity to give a 60-second pitch, vying to impress a panel of judges from the publishing industry. At the end of the night, Gill emerged as the winner. His prize? An introduction to an agent, who then connected him with an editor and illustrator.

Check out Gill's book and get the complete 2025 – 2026 Read Across America calendar at **nea.org/ReadAcross**.

—COLIN DAVAN AND MARY ELLEN FLANNERY

Announcing the 2026 NEA-Retired Communications Award!

Every year, the NEA-Retired Executive Council Communications Committee recognizes NEA-Retired affiliates for outstanding communications work. The following awards are presented to affiliates in two categories: Membership of more than 2,500, and membership of less than 2,500.

- **Established State Retired Newsletter** (Published more than three years)
- **State Retired Newsletter** (Published fewer than three years)
- **Established Local Retired Newsletter**
- **E-newsletter**
- **State Retired Website**
- **NEA-Retired Spotlight Award** (State active newsletter/ magazine covering NEA-Retired issues)

The **Newsletter Hall of Fame** award goes to newsletters that have earned an award three times in the same category.

To apply, visit nea.org/CommAwards. Applications must be postmarked by April 15, 2026.

Top Award for Hawaii Retirees!

The Hawaii State Teachers Association–Retired, Oahu District, is the 2025 winner of the Tom Wellman Spirit of Membership Award, which honors an affiliate that builds membership in innovative ways. In the winning program, students make presentations to retirees on topics like bystander CPR and smartphone use, which "were not taught back in the day," says former program leader Candace Chun. The retirees then help the students practice public-speaking and prepare for competitions. Chun notes, "We can still support our public school teachers and students even after we retire."

(Our October 2025 issue incorrectly listed the award winner. The runner-up for the award is the Indiana State Teachers Association-Retired.) *—COLIN DAVAN*

PHOTOS FROM TOP: COURTESY OF DAN GILL

NEA-RETIRED *try this*

PLAN A FAMILY REUNION LIKE A PRO

By Colin Davan

Attending a family reunion sounds like fun, but planning one, *no thanks*! If that's how you feel, you are not alone. But Arkansas retiree Laura Montgomery may be able to change your mind.

Continuing a long-standing family tradition, she has been planning reunions since the 1990s. Every two years, she plans an event for more than a hundred family members. She shared these tips with *NEA Today for NEA-Retired Members* to help make the planning process more manageable—and inspire you to begin!

Start early: About a year before you're aiming to host the event, start reaching out to family members to gauge interest and how many people to invite.

"I always start with who is the oldest or the elderly, … because that's where you find out who's in your family," Montgomery says.

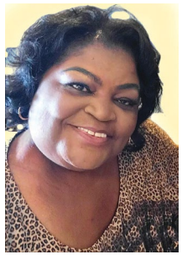
She also assembles a small organizing team to pull the event together.

Save the date: Find a day or weekend that will suit as many people as possible, such as summers when kids are off from school or long weekends.

Decide what kind of event you want to have: "Nothing's wrong with getting together in granny's backyard," Montgomery says. Smaller family reunions can take place in just an afternoon. Kids can have sack races and softball matches, while the adults prepare the food, she suggests.

For larger families, a campground, nearby park, recreation center, restaurant, or resort might fit the bill. If you are hosting the event at a venue, be sure to book it far in advance.

Some families may want the reunion to be a multiday event that requires a full itinerary of activities, such as outings to a zoo, county fair, amusement park, or other local attractions. This year, Montgomery's family is taking a cruise!



Laura Montgomery

Organize activities: Depending on the size of the event, the reunion can be rigidly structured or loosely planned.

"We start out with a family meet and greet," suggests Montgomery, noting that it can be a simple gathering at someone's house with drinks and munchies. This allows relatives to get to know newer family members or people who are attending for the first time, she says.

Keep it inclusive: Make the reunion engaging and feasible for people of all ages. Take note of accessibility needs and other accommodations for family members attending.

Figure out the finances: It's important not to take on a financial burden when organizing a reunion, Montgomery cautions. The invitation can include a cover fee that pays for food, drinks, location rental, personalized items like T-shirts, and other expenses. Some families have even organized fundraisers to support the event.

Be sure guests are aware of travel and housing costs, especially around holidays when airfares may be higher than normal.

Stay connected: Montgomery says her family keeps booklets with everyone's contact information, a family reunion website, and family trees. They update the information each time they plan a reunion, so people can stay in touch when the party's over.

LEARN MORE

Ready to start planning?
To help you get organized, visit myevent.com or reunacy.com.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAURA MONTGOMERY; ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

2026 NEA-RETIRED ANNUAL MEETING

DENVER, CO | JUNE 30-JULY 1, 2026

For hotel and meeting information, visit **nea.org/Retired.**

2026 NOMINATIONS FOR NEA-RETIRED OFFICE

The deadline for receipt of **NEA-Retired governance nominations is April 15, 2026,** and the deadline for NEA-Retired seats on the **NEA Resolutions Committee is May 1, 2026.** Both submissions are due at 5 p.m. EDT. The preferred filing method is to use the electronic forms, which are available at **nea.org/Retired_Elections**. If you use the form below, please follow the instructions at the bottom of the page.

2026 NEA-RETIRED ELECTIONS NOMINATION FORM

NEA NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION | NEA-Retired

☐ Retired President (3-year term)
☐ Retired Secretary (1 year, 2 months)
☐ Retired Executive Council (2 seats / 3-year term)
☐ Retired Director on the NEA Board of Directors (2 seats / 3-year term)
☐ Retired Alternate Director on the NEA Board of Directors (2 seats / 3-year term)
☐ Retired Member on the NEA Resolutions Committee (6 seats / 1-year term), must be a delegate to the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly.

*A candidate may run for only one office or elected position of NEA-Retired.

☐ I affirm that I am a current NEA-Retired member. NEA Member ID Number: _____

During the NEA-Retired Annual Meeting, I will need a table for campaign materials.
Yes ☐ No ☐

I will need a standing easel.
Yes ☐ No ☐

Name _____ Personal Email _____
(PRINT your name as it is to appear on the ballot)

Signature _____

Mobile Phone Number _____ Home Phone Number _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

***Race and Ethnicity (Optional)—Check all that apply:**

☐ Asian and Pacific Islander
☐ Native American/Alaska Native
☐ Latin(o/a/x), Hispanic, and Chican(o/a/x)
☐ Black or African American
☐ Multiracial
☐ Middle Eastern and North African
☐ White
☐ Other, Prefer not to say

*Race and ethnicity information is optional and failure to provide it will in no way affect your membership status, rights, benefits in NEA, your state association, or any of their affiliates.

Landrum-Griffin Act (Response required)

NEA is covered by the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure (i.e. Landrum-Griffin) Act, Section 504 of which provides in pertinent part that no person "who has been convicted of, or served any part of a prison term resulting from his conviction of" certain enumerated crimes within the past 13 years may serve as an "officer" of a covered labor union organization. If you check "yes" below, a representative of the NEA Executive Office will contact you regarding the matter.

During the past 13 years, have you been convicted of or served any part of a prison term resulting from the conviction of a crime, excluding minor traffic offenses?

☐ Yes ☐ No

The preferred method for returning a completed paper form is to scan and send via email to **retiredannualmeeting@nea.org** *and* **seg4652@aol.com**.
If the form is mailed, send to NEA-Retired Nomination Form, Center for Governance, 1201 16th St, NW, Suite 414, Washington, DC 20036.

33686.1025.JR

NEA-RETIRED *feature*

What to Keep and What to Throw Away

So it's time to declutter or downsize. Instead of dreading the process, consider it an investment in your future self.

By James Paterson

"We found a plot of land with eight acres right behind our son's house, and we made the decision to build a new home with everything we wanted on one floor," says Maine retiree Jane Conroy.

But before she and her husband could make their big move, they'd have to dig through years of belongings—including many sentimental objects Conroy accumulated after her parents died. She would have to make some hard decisions about what to part with and what to take to their new home.

To help her tackle a seemingly overwhelming task, Conroy followed some simple rules. "For one thing, I realized that my kids would not care about a lot of the things I'd saved, so why should I burden them with having to go through it all or get rid of it," says the former cooperative extension educator. "So, I worked on it a little at a time and had three piles—things I would keep, things I would pass along, and things I would toss. It felt so good when I got through it."

Conroy, who lives in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine, says she kept items she enjoyed and had meaning to her, and passed down objects she thought would have meaning to others.

"I tried to think about things my kids and grandkids would want. I came across a letter my daughter had earned for cheerleading and cross-country running. Since my granddaughter is an athlete, I thought she might like it. She loved it and hung it on her bedroom wall."

Getting rid of stuff, especially as possessions and memories have accumulated over time, is hard work emotionally and often physically, says Jenny Albertini, author of the book *Decluttered: Mindful Organizing for Health, Home, and Beyond.*

Want to jump-start your decluttering or downsizing projects—and still keep your sanity? Follow these tips from experts and fellow retired educators.

Prepare emotionally

"So much of the work ... happens before the first box is packed up," Albertini says. "It's the emotional readiness that deserves the most attention and that will usually take the most effort."

Albertini, whose mother was a teacher, notes that the work may be particularly difficult for educators.

They often have an extra layer of "stuff" collected from their professional lives, like old textbooks and prized notes, gifts, and drawings from students, Albertini says.

"[They also] have demonstrated such tremendous leadership in their professional roles, that when it comes to homes and clutter, the idea of giving up control ... can be very stressful."

On the other hand, some take on the process with the same efficiency they used to run a classroom, she adds.

> "I have accepted the sentimentality I have toward some things. I want to keep the things that give me joy or fill me with emotion. I think that is important."
>
> —Utah Retired educator Debbie Green (right)

(Clockwise from left) Maine retiree Jane Conroy rotates former students' drawings on her seasonal "Wall of Fame"; Conroy has a storage system for memorabilia, like this homemade holiday book; former Utah music teacher Debbie Green keeps only the items that mean the most to her.

Retired social studies teacher Tammy Johnson, from Wales, Wis., says, "When I did it, I relied on a mantra I had regarding my classroom—I embraced throwing things away. We should pretend it's the end of the school year, our grades are due, and we have to clean up our classroom, all in a few days."

Identify your purpose

Antonia Colins is founder of the blog and website "Balance Through Simplicity," where she offers advice and resources to help others navigate this process.

"The things we own often carry memories, reminders of people, places, experiences, and moments in time," she says. "So it makes sense that clearing it out takes a bit of reflection, patience, and soul-searching to work through the emotional side of letting go."

It helps to focus on the value of decluttering, Colins suggests. For some, letting go of possessions will help them get ready to downsize. For others, it releases them from the burden of holding on to unwanted things. Still others may get inspired by the idea of having a more organized home, where they can actually find the holiday decorations without scrounging through the entire attic.

"Understanding the purpose gives clarity and motivation, especially when the process feels emotional," she says.

Albertini tells clients to think of decluttering "as a chance to make life easier and more joyful for your future self." Don't take it personally if others don't share your attachment to items.

PHOTOS: MARK MCCALL (CONROY, BOTH); JAKE CAMPOS (GREEN)

Conroy takes that theory to heart. "It may be hard to recognize that our children are from a different generation, and many times could care less about things we value," she notes. "Give them an opportunity to have things you think they might want, but don't be offended if they don't care about them."

She adds, "Think about what memory something holds. Who or what does it remind you of, and is it important? Could you keep one representative piece instead of a whole collection? Could you take photos of items to preserve the memories? Could something be repurposed or displayed in a new way so it continues to bring joy in everyday life?"

Find a project pal

Cleaning out your closets with a buddy or family member can help keep your energy level up and help you make decisions, suggests Colins. But choose your decluttering partner wisely, she cautions.

Retired music teacher Debbie Green, from North Ogden, Utah, knows exactly what she means. "I have a deep attachment to things. My sister has none," Green says. "We can't understand each other when it comes to this and would have a hard time working on it together."

Green lost five family members over eight years—her parents, in-laws, and her husband—and their possessions piled up in her home alongside the items she had collected from years of indulging her love of thrift shops.

But her daughters have helped her gradually thin out the possessions.

"If you are sentimental about things, it helps to have someone else say, 'Yes, your granddaughter made these paper flowers, but do you really need to keep them? Do they mean that much? Will they mean anything to others?'" she explains. "You have to determine where you are on the attachment spectrum—if you can do it yourself, or if you need someone to help with decisions and keeping focused."

Tackle a little at a time

Colins and Albertini suggest starting with less emotional items such as clothing, tools, or kitchenware.

"Decide what approach works best for your time, space, and energy," Colins adds. "Take action, but start small, stay consistent, and keep your 'why' in mind."

Albertini agrees: "Allocate time to work on it on a regular basis. It doesn't have to be every day, but try to get into a rhythm, so that even for an hour per week you are connecting with this activity."

Also be sure to keep an eye out for important records that might be mixed in with memorabilia, and keep those in a safe place, they advise.

6 Steps to Help You Get Started

Sometimes the hardest part of downsizing or decluttering is figuring out where to begin. Here are six expert-recommended steps to help you move from overwhelmed to organized—and ready to take the first step.

1) Identify priorities. Develop a list of your target areas, organized by priority. Consider ranking each area by the estimated time involved or level of difficulty (which can be based on emotion or the magnitude of the task). Focus on one area at a time.

2) Establish a pace and schedule. Start small. Recognize that this may take time and will be more successful if you break it up into manageable chunks of work. Consider setting a timer for your work sessions, so they don't become onerous.

3) Create four boxes—or five? Make boxes or piles for items you want to keep, pass on, sell, or throw away. Some experts recommend a fifth category—the "I can't make a decision about this now" pile.

4) Find helpers. Ask family or friends for help, or hire professionals, if your budget allows. This can be particularly useful for spaces or possessions that pose physical or emotional challenges.

5) Allow for emotions. Sorting through the past often stirs up emotions, sometimes in unexpected ways. Give yourself permission to pause if the process gets difficult.

6) Reward progress. Do something enjoyable after you've wrapped up your project for the day. This can help relieve stress and keep you motivated to continue the project another day.

ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

When Green decluttered her home, she couldn't part with these precious trinkets: (at left) a pendant gifted to her by a student and (lower left) a Hummel choir boy from her late husband.

PHOTOS: JAKE CAMPOS

Have a storage system

A first step, Colins suggests, could be to plan for where to stash things, such as your attic, garage, or closets. Limiting space for certain items can motivate you to control what you keep, she notes.

Green, for instance, has a hutch devoted to memories of her late husband. At one point, she feared that in clearing things out, she was losing him. "I wanted to keep things ... that reminded me of him, but I did it thoughtfully and have much of it in one place," she says.

Establish guidelines

Embrace the one-year rule. If you haven't used it in a year, toss it or give it away, experts advise.

For those shoe boxes full of photos? Digitize them, Colins says. They are easier to preserve and organize this way, and you can share them more readily with friends and family. Tech-savvy family members may be willing to help with this project, too.

Don't hold the keepsakes of others. Instead, give children the option to take them, with an understanding that you are going to dispose of the items they don't take, Albertini says.

Don't feel guilty about "mistake purchases" that were expensive or haven't been used. Give them to someone who can use them.

"Embrace change and the future," Albertini advises. When it comes to personal items and memorabilia, be decisive and consider how you want your life to be in the future.

And if you can't squeeze all of your "get rid of" items into storage boxes and bags, Johnson recommends renting a large disposal bag or dumpster from a company that will leave it in front of your house and haul it away when it's full.

Johnson knows how difficult these decisions can be. "When discarding items, reminiscing over them is probably the hardest part," she acknowledges. "You know at a glance whether you want something or not, so just make a decision."

Go boldly forward

Organizing your home also provides an opportunity to think about changing your habits.

Green says she has stopped visiting thrift shops as recreation and is more thoughtful about what she acquires and keeps. Some objects, she says, are worth keeping because they provide a valuable connection to the past.

"I have accepted the sentimentality I have toward some things. I want to keep things that give me joy or fill me with emotion," Green says. "I think that is important."

She has a glass pendant that a student gave her around the time she retired. She hangs it on the rearview mirror of her car, because it reminds her of all the students she has taught.

She says, "While many things probably aren't worth keeping, that certainly was."

NEA-RETIRED *feature*

Mentoring the Next Generation

When NEA-Retired members team up with NEA Aspiring Educators, the learning goes both ways

By Janet Rivera Mednik

Freshman year hit Aspiring Educator Jordan Hoy like a wave. A student at Illinois State University (ISU), she faced syllabi piled high, with relentless deadlines, gnawing homesickness, and shifting friendships. Then, a lifeline: An email flickered on her laptop screen, offering a mentor from the Illinois Education Association-Retired (IEA-Retired). Hoy seized the chance.

Relief came in the form of Sara Kaufman, a septuagenarian with the energy of a 20-something. Since 2009, she's been a passionate champion, insightful coach, trusted union advisor, and, most importantly, a cherished, wise friend to some three dozen mentees.

The perfect match

There was an immediate spark when Hoy and Kaufman met for the first time, last year. Chatting like old friends over pasta and salad, they talked about what was in store for Hoy, who is now a sophomore studying to be an elementary school teacher.

Before dessert was served, it was clear that Kaufman, who taught kindergarten for more than 30 years, had a wealth of information about everything from practical bulletin board ideas, to curriculum, to planning for parent-teacher conferences.

Turns out, the topics explored at their monthly meetings vary as much as the menu items.

Sometimes, it's just a time to laugh and learn about how being a teacher has changed. Kaufman shares many "history lessons" from her early teaching days, but one detail truly astonished her mentee: the requirement to wear a dress or skirt, complete with stockings!

"I couldn't imagine trying to sit on the floor with 5-year-olds wearing a fancy skirt and pumps," Hoy quips.

A long history of matchmaking

Stories like these are exactly what Tim Brinker, coordinator of the IEA-Retired mentoring program, likes to hear. Each fall, he teams up with Alayna Nance, a leader in the Illinois Aspiring Educators program, to match mentors with mentees. They pair participants based on geography, grade level, and course subject.

The program has been going strong since 1994; today, it supports about 30 mentorships across the state each year.

"We supply resources to our mentors—on topics covering everything from improving classroom management to combating bullying—but we understand that every relationship is unique and there has to be some flexibility," Brinker says.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JANET KILGUS

"She is serious about being the best possible teacher and wants to get the most out of our time together."

—Retired teacher Janet Kilgus, speaking glowingly of her mentee and friend, Anna Mohyliuk

Aspiring Educator Jordan Hoy (left) and her NEA-Retired mentor, Sara Kaufman (right), met in person for the first time over dinner, in February. Since then, Hoy says, "Sara's passion for political activism has definitely rubbed off on me."

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JORDAN HOY AND SARA KAUFMAN

Nance emphasizes the vital role of the retired mentors: "They offer invaluable support, whether through encouraging emails, answering questions, or offering a sympathetic ear."

Brinker's advice to retirees who want to start a program? To work best, the program needs to be co-led by a retiree and an Aspiring Educator from your state.

A shoulder to lean on

For Kaufman and Hoy, it wasn't long before their conversation turned to more than just coursework. Hoy confided to Kaufman that she dreaded the imminent departure of two of her closest friends from school. She was losing sleep over it and getting distracted in class, yet she didn't want to worry her parents about it.

She finally got the nerve to broach the subject with her mentor. Kaufman listened intently and then encouraged Hoy to deepen her friendships with others and, more specifically, suggested that she create an inviting space to have friends stay over.

The advice worked.

"My mentees know they can call me during the day or at night, and they can laugh or cry with me," Kaufman shares. "I once even went with one student to meet with a professor over an unfair grade—a grade we ultimately raised."

Models of activism

Whether fighting for fair treatment for a specific student or for educators across her state, Kaufman sees activism as a way of life. As a former president of the Eureka Education Association and current president of her IEA-Retired chapter, Kaufman encourages her mentees to be politically involved.

Just this August, Kaufman and other public education activists prevailed in having the edTPA in Illinois temporarily suspended.

She and her fellow activists convinced lawmakers that the state's assessment is plagued with problems, not the least of which is that it does not accurately predict a teacher's readiness to enter the profession.

Hoy, who recently advocated for paid student teaching at the Illinois State House, says: "Because of what I have learned from Sara, I fully understand that what happens in my classroom and over my career as a teacher depends on my contract and the action taken by lawmakers. As someone who would like to teach at a Title I school, I think activism is even more important. I'm grateful to be getting an early education."

Happy long-distance relationships

Unlike Hoy and Kaufman, who live close enough to meet in person regularly, Janet Kilgus and her mentee, Anna Mohyliuk, have more of a long-distance relationship.

Kilgus lives in Bloomington-Normal, Ill., about an hour from Mohyliuk, who is a sophomore, majoring in secondary education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. But the pair has forged a strong bond over monthly video conference meetings.

Despite their age difference and varied backgrounds—Kilgus from Pontiac, Ill., and Mohyliuk, originally from Ukraine—

"People who have spent their lives in the classroom ... can speak to the joy of making a difference in the lives of students."

—Fatima Suhail, NEA Aspiring Educator at Illinois State University, speaking about her state's mentoring program

their shared passion for education, particularly math, unites them. That mutual desire to do their best for students is the basis for what Mohyliuk calls an "awesome friendship."

Kilgus, who taught junior high math for more than 30 years, praises Mohyliuk's professional approach to their monthly sessions. "She is serious about being the best possible teacher and wants to get the most out of our time together," Kilgus says. "She always comes prepared with good questions."

The respect is mutual.

"We talk about everything," Mohyliuk says. "Janet gives suggestions about how I can present math lessons and explains ways I can deal with potential behavioral problems."

The lesson of union involvement

Mohyliuk and Kilgus often discuss why union activism is an essential part of teaching. Kilgus has held leadership positions as president of her local and of the IEA-Retired State Council.

"Janet's stories about ... her union involvement have really had an impact on me," Mohyliuk shares. "For instance, she explained to me that her class size was really getting out of hand, so she asked an IEA representative to take a look and, sure enough, her class size was reduced. It was powerful to see my mentor in this light! Because of Janet's experience, I absolutely will be active in my union."

There is just one problem: "We never stop talking, and then, before we know it, time has run out," Mohyliuk jokes.

Growing Successful Mentorship Programs

When Grace Callen and Peyton Richards were part of the Missouri National Education Association Aspiring Educators program, they recognized a valuable, untapped resource for future teachers: retired members. They hit the road to speaking directly with retirees, gathering feedback to help launch a mentorship program in their state. Callen and Richards, who are now first-year teachers, share what they learned along the way:

NEA Today for NEA-Retired Members: **What inspired you to start a mentorship program?**

Callen: When we began connecting with Missouri NEA-Retired members, everything shifted. One retired educator asked me, "Who has the greatest power to move education forward?" I immediately thought it was current teachers, but over time, I realized the real answer: It's NEA-Retired members and NEA Aspiring Educators (AE). Retired educators have the time, experience, and relationships to advocate at the state level, and new educators bring fresh energy and perspective.

I saw that partnership in action for the first time at the state Capitol. Retired members used their existing relationships to help us elevate the voices of new educators.

What should NEA-Retired or AE members do if they want to start a mentorship program in their state?

Callen: The first step is to develop genuine interest and awareness. You have to tell people about it and get them excited.

Richards: It also starts with clear communication about the needs and benefits of collaboration. Both groups share common goals, which are supporting students and strengthening the teaching profession.

Now that you are active teachers, how have your interactions with NEA-Retired members helped you in your first year of teaching?

Callen: They've reminded me that classroom challenges are temporary and that it's okay to ask for help. Those conversations help me stay grounded and remember why I teach. Their encouragement makes you feel like you're part of something much bigger than your own classroom.

FOR MORE

To learn how to start a mentorship program in your state, contact Tim Brinker, Illinois Education Association-Retired, at tbrinker@aol.com.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF FATIMA SUHAIL

How to Help Students Value DEMOCRACY

By Amanda Litvinov

GREAT SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSES ARE ESSENTIAL, BUT THEY'RE NOT THE ONLY PLACE STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Many young Americans have lost faith in democracy. That's the troubling finding of several surveys conducted over the past five years.

About half of the Gen Z participants (ages 18–25) said democracy "makes no difference," according to a 2022 Penn State University survey, and nearly 30 percent said living under a dictatorship "could be good."

Let that sink in.

A 2025 survey by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), at Tufts University, similarly found that a third of Americans ages 18–29 "do not buy into the value of democracy and show higher support for authoritarian governments." Although the remaining two-thirds said they generally support democracy, they do little to engage in it.

The study found no major differences between the group that still values democracy and the group that does not in terms of age, gender, city-rural division, or even party affiliation.

So what does influence whether or not young people value our system of government?

"At the top of that list is education, access, and community support," says Alberto Medina, a co-author of the CIRCLE report. "Of course, teachers are critically important to helping students understand and value democracy, but so are their peers," he says.

When groups of students work together to understand how our government functions and even take on problems they care about, he says, it "can help show the deeply skeptical that there is something here worth saving."

While great social studies courses are critical for students of all ages, a student's civic education is not limited to those classrooms. In fact, public schools—as institutions that welcome all students regardless of race, first language, family income, or abilities—can serve as living laboratories of democracy.

It's never too early to teach civic engagement

Here's one way to think about it, says Stephanie Serriere, a professor of social studies education at Indiana University Columbus: "Public schools are one of the first civic spaces our children enter, and it is up to you to purposefully teach the principles of democracy," Serriere tells her classes of future educators.

That teaching, she says, should begin in kindergarten.

Serriere developed her theory of "carpet-time democracy" in her years as an elementary school teacher, when she observed her young students' natural interest in fairness and equity. There are many creative ways to harness those instincts, she says.

For example, when elementary-age students get to discuss and decide classroom rules, they become tiny framers of a founding document that applies equally to all and guides their experience in the classroom.

When older students identify things they wish they could change—as tweens and teens tend to do—educators can walk them through the process of inquiry. This may include polling their peers, gathering research, and using their findings to advocate for change.

Research shows that asking students to gather the perspectives of their peers—which is at the heart of many of these projects—can be the springboard to a lifetime of empathy, according to Serriere. That's a necessary component in a democracy, she adds.

What can you do to foster civic learning in the classroom and beyond? *NEA Today* asked several educators around the country for their advice.

Laura Ellis teaches students "the power of the pen" in an after-school club that advocates for institutions that serve the public good, like libraries and museums.

"If there's one thing I hope everyone leaves my class knowing, it's that we have a participatory form of government, and if we don't engage, we're letting other people frame the debate and make the decisions."

—Lem Wheeles, government teacher, in Alaska

PHOTO: JATI LINDSEY

Teach students how to build their case

Laura Ellis, library media specialist, Wheaton High School, Silver Spring, Maryland

Many students want to speak out. We can teach them how to make their voices heard by the right people.

Last year, when I heard the Trump administration was cutting funding for libraries and museums, I started writing to my elected leaders, asking them to fight those cuts. I quickly realized that this could be a service-learning opportunity for students.

As a lunchtime activity, I teach interested students how to write a

How to Help Students Value DEMOCRACY

strong, fact-based letter, based on a visit to a local library, where they ask an employee questions about the resources and programming they offer to the community. The students learn not only what kinds of questions to ask, but also the etiquette of conducting an informational interview. We practice at school before the real interview so they feel confident.

After they gather information about the amazing programs the library has for kids, teens, adults, and seniors alike, the students write to our state's U.S. senators. I have a template for guidance, but encourage them to include a personal story that will make their letters unique.

This project teaches students to value community resources and learn how to advocate for them.

Emphasize respectful dialogue

Lauren Hallgring, eighth-grade civics teacher, Neptune Middle School, Neptune, New Jersey

Our state passed a law a few years ago mandating at least one semester of civics instruction before students leave eighth grade. It's an incredible opportunity to introduce some finer points of the U.S. Constitution and to teach students to engage in productive dialogue.

Things can heat up in a middle school classroom very quickly, so I am very intentional at the beginning of the course in talking to students about respectful discourse. Yes, they need to learn to form an argument, but it's just as essential for them to actively listen.

Allowing students to bring up issues and talk about what they are seeing and hearing in their world is critical. They will begin to respond to each other—it's a beautiful thing to see—and the teacher's role is largely to monitor and moderate.

I never get on a soapbox or make my own political views known. Instead, I ask a lot of guiding questions and give students practice in finding evidence from primary sources.

Last year, for example, my students had a lot of concerns about immigration. So we went back and read the 14th Amendment to the Constitution before we started the conversation. This strategy helps students learn to support their arguments with evidence rather than emotion.

Preya Krishna-Kennedy

Channel students' passions into community building

Preya Krishna-Kennedy, history and geography teacher, Bethlehem High School, Delmar, New York

In my classes and in the after-school groups I co-advise, I always emphasize that in our democracy, we have the power to make change, even beyond the essential acts of voting and holding elected leaders accountable.

Students for Peace and Survival is a social justice group initially formed by students during the Vietnam War. I took on the role of co-advisor in my first year of teaching, and honestly, I credit this group with keeping me in the profession. This club attracts students who are so motivated to solve problems and help their community, it gave me a boost when I was an overwhelmed new teacher. Now I'm in my 29th year.

This group organizes events like a Pronouns Day celebration to start conversations and support students who have changed their pronouns. They do a coat drive for a refugee group in Albany, N.Y. They hold fundraisers to address food insecurity in the area, and they've organized protests to ask the district to divest from fossil fuels.

Another group I advise, ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, and Native American), spearheads celebrations for Black History and Hispanic Heritage Months that include activities like reading books on those topics to elementary students.

When kids are this engaged in giving back to their community, they are exercising empathy and problem-solving—essential skills in a healthy democracy.

Lem Wheeles

Connect historical lessons with the real world

Lem Wheeles, government teacher, Dimond High School, Anchorage, Alaska

In both my government and U.S. history classes, I host a debate set in the time period that the Constitution was being drafted. I assign roles—Federalist or Anti-Federalist—and give students some readings authored in 1788. Then, they debate whether or not to ratify the Constitution from the point of view they were assigned.

Sometimes when we're discussing contemporary issues or elections, students become hesitant or express disdain for how lawmakers are handling things. I keep asking questions like, "What can we do about it?" or "What needs to change?"

If there's one thing I hope everyone leaves my class knowing, it's that we have a participatory form of government, and if we don't engage, we're letting other people frame the debate and make the decisions.

Last year, I saw just how well that message got through. I was at a school board budget meeting, and I was surprised to see several of my students walk in to speak out against cuts that would have increased class sizes and reduced electives and activities.

They were fired up about proposed cuts to middle school sports, which wouldn't affect them since they were already in high school. The whole thing made me incredibly proud—they were well prepared and speaking up not only for themselves, but for others. That is how democracy thrives.

Florida professor Eric Fiske (middle row, far right), in New York, with his students at the National Model U.N. conference.

Don't be scared to cover elections—have fun with it instead!

Eric Fiske, political science professor, Hillsborough College, Tampa, Florida

The energy really builds in my classes when we talk about campaigns, elections, and voting.

We're living in politically charged times, and certainly in Florida there are vague and threatening policies that make educators think twice. But as a political science professor, teaching these topics is essential to my students' education.

In my honors American government class last year, I "ran for office" as a candidate from a fictional party and asked my students to be my campaign team.

Teacher Lauren Hallgring (far right) took her class on a field trip to New Jersey's Monmouth Battlefield State Park, as part of her state's middle school civics requirement.

They ran with it. The next thing you know, they are running social media platforms, having me sit for photo shoots, and polling their peers to determine my campaign priorities and slogans.

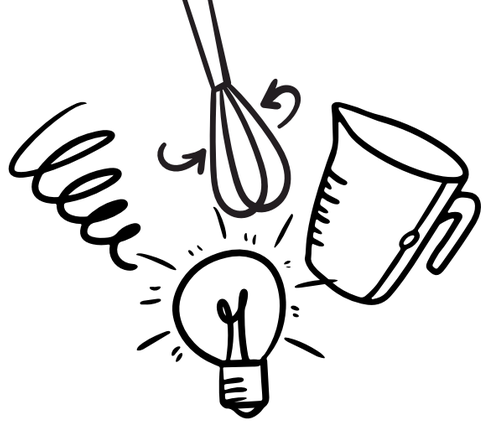
Once they were on a roll, I threw them some curveballs. When big things happened in the real world, I asked them how I, in my role as the candidate, should respond. I tell my students, "You can know everything there is to know about American government, but if you don't do anything with that knowledge, you're giving up your role in shaping the society you live in."

LEARN MORE

Go to nea.org/Civics for more ideas on promoting democracy throughout your school.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

PHOTOS FROM TOP: KEN CAVANAGH; COURTESY OF ERIC FISKE



WHAT'S THE Recipe FOR REACHING Boys?

By Mary Ellen Flannery

STEP 1: STOP SEEING THEM AS PROBLEMS.

STEP 2: BUILD CONNECTION AND ENCOURAGE VULNERABILITY.

STEP 3: BLEND, AND REPEAT.

During kindergarten labs, Samuel grabs a bright red, toy ear scope. "Mr. Taylor! Mr. Taylor!" he says urgently. Dwayne Taylor sits, tilts his head obligingly for his exam, and Samuel peers into the brain of the meanest teacher in the school.

"Ha! That's Mr. Taylor's favorite joke!" says Owen Glynn, a third grader at Frank Layden Elementary School, in Frontenac, Kan., who had Taylor for kindergarten and still pops by to say hi. "Mr. Taylor always says he's the meanest teacher in the school, but he's really the nicest!"

By "nicest," Owen means Taylor is a pro at cultivating connections with students. He tells his kindergartners he loves them. He talks about his own feelings: "I am so happy to see you," or "I am feeling really frustrated right now." And he helps his 5-year-olds find words for their feelings, too.

Taylor is aware of what pundits are calling the "boy crisis" in U.S. schools. Every day, he lays the foundation so his little ones can climb higher. In his classroom, he models how to ask for help, how to be vulnerable, how to be a friend and work in teams, and how to succeed in school and life. "Oh hey, what do I say? Teamwork is … " Taylor prompts. "Dream work!" his class sings back to him.

Quiz time!

Who are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, boys or girls? Answer: Boys. (It starts early: Preschool boys are five times more likely to be expelled than girls. According to federal data, Black boys account for half of all expulsions, even as they account for 20 percent of preschoolers.)

Who are less likely to take advanced placement classes? Boys. Less likely to go to college? Boys, by a mile, and the gap is getting wider.

More likely to suffer loneliness? Boys. (One in 4 say they have no close friends. That's a five-fold increase since 1990, with higher rates of disconnect among Black men and Black boys.) More likely to die by suicide? Teen boys. In fact, they are about three times more likely to die by suicide than teen girls.

The situation has become so dire that California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order a few months ago to address boy's suicide rates, reduce stigma, and expand access to work and mentorship opportunities.

"It is a crisis of connection," wrote Richard Reeves, founding president of the American Institute of Boys and Men, in a *New York Times* op-ed.

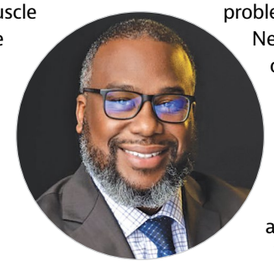
More male teachers would help, Reeves suggests, as would more apprenticeships and more male-friendly mental health services. "Doing more for boys does not mean doing less for girls," he notes. "As all the politicians leading on this issue correctly insist, gender equality is not a zero-sum game. We can do two things at once. We can take better care of girls and boys."

Back in Taylor's kindergarten classroom, sous chef Bennett is eager to participate in today's cooking lesson, cracking eggs like he's on *Cake Boss*. Taylor's boys laugh. They learn. They share. They care. And they giggle happily to learn that the largest muscle in the human body is … the gluteus maximus!

Let's talk about the letter C. Today, in Dwayne Taylor's kindergarten classroom, C is for cooking confetti cupcakes! Above, Taylor's sous chef, Bennett, nimbly cracks eggs.

Rethinking stereotypes

When Carlos Grant first became a high school principal in South Carolina six years ago, the student data that crossed his desk was alarming. "Our drop-out data, our discipline data, our college readiness data, all of it showed that our boys—all of our boys, but especially Black boys—weren't keeping up," he recalls.



Carlos Grant

His answer? "We began a concerted effort to talk about our relationships with boys, and it really changed the trajectory for many of them," he recalls. "We had to unlearn a mindset about boys."

The first step to reversing "problems with boys" is to stop seeing them as problems, says Joseph Derrick Nelson, an associate professor of educational and Black studies at Swarthmore College. "Don't see them as a problem to be managed but as a child with the same hopes and dreams as all youth."

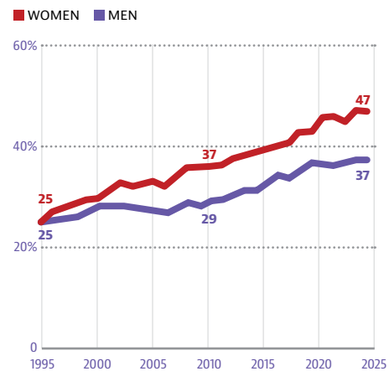
There are prevailing ways of thinking about boys, which sound old-fashioned, but persist today. "Boys don't cry. Hold your head up. Be strong," Grant reels them off. "Don't show fear. Don't show weakness." In classrooms, this may translate to: Don't ask for help. Be strong. Stay silent.

Most kindergartners haven't internalized these messages yet, notes

Missing Men on Campus?

There are now 2.4 million more women than men on U.S. college campuses, as the rate of boys attending college falls to record lows.

Percent of 25- to 34-year-olds with a bachelor's degree:



ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

PHOTOS FROM TOP: JOSH BEECHER; COURTESY OF CARLOS GRANT; CHART SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH 2024

WHAT'S THE Recipe FOR REACHING Boys?

Nelson. At young ages, boys are equally curious, joyful, relational, and warm. But by middle school and high school? "The older they get," he says, "the more they internalize these norms and the harder they are to undo."

Meanwhile, educators may have their own internal biases—boys are lazy, boys need discipline, and so on—that lead to unequal support and discipline, Grant notes.

"Boys aren't given grace. They're written up, they're labeled more quickly, and because of that, there's a self-narrative that exists. The more you tell somebody they're 'this way,' the more they're going to act 'that way,'" he says.

A key lesson for Grant and his colleagues: Stop backing boys into corners. "If I'm correcting a boy in my classroom and I'm doing it in a way that's embarrassing to him, that's devastating to him, and he decides to lash out to save face, to save his pride and dignity? Well, that's my fault, as an adult," Grant says. "I put him into that corner. I made a bad situation worse."

It's also important to know that acting out can be a sign of mental health struggles, rather than "boys being boys," says New York school psychologist Peter Faustino. For example, he says, "With depression, you might see boys become aggressive. It's easy to misinterpret those symptoms."

One in four men, ages 15–35, say they're lonely.
SOURCE: GALLUP, 2025

Teaching boys how to seek help

Outside Taylor's classroom door, he greets every kindergartner with a hug, high-five, handshake, or no contact. It's their choice, made by smacking a paper icon.

"Oh, you're coming in for the hug!" he says. His message to every child is clear: "CJ, I'm so glad you're here today. … I'm super glad you're here today, Tytan. … Come on in, dude, I'm so glad you're here today!"

After indoor recess, thanks to pouring rain, Taylor's kindergartners are a bundle of chaos in the halls. There is mayhem by the water fountain. When they return to class, Taylor is frustrated and he tells them so, calmly but firmly.

"Am I going to let what happened ruin my day?" he asks. "Nooo," they tell him. "Can I do it myself?" "Nooo," they say. To turn around his day—to get back to the "green zone," as Taylor calls it—he tells them he needs their help.

In Grant's work with older students and mentees, he also models "help-seeking behavior," as Faustino calls it. "One of the struggles young men deal with is their reluctance to ask for help," Grant says. "You have to model vulnerability. You have to show what it's like not to be okay—and that that's OK."

Grant tells the teens in Alpha GENTS, his fraternity's mentoring program: "I might look like I have it together but, buddy, … none of us have it all together.'"

Taylor says, "I tell my kids every day: There's nothing you could do to make me stop loving you. You might make me lose the rest of my hair! But I will never stop loving you."

What Works: Relational Teaching With Boys

"Relationships are the very precondition through which learning happens," says Swarthmore College educational studies professor Joseph Derrick Nelson. "If students don't think you like them, they are going to resist!" Here are four steps to practicing relational teaching:

1) Reach out and go beyond. Boys want educators to see their "personhood" as more important than school policies or practices. For example, during research interviews, boys talked to Nelson about teachers who kept snacks for kids or stayed after school to provide homework help.

2) Be a personal advocate. This is especially helpful for boys who are acting out or disengaging. "Maybe they play drums at church or they're in musical theater. Go see them in a place where they're successful," Nelson says. "It may open your mind about a particular boy, and then you can use that knowledge to reengage them in class."

3) Establish common ground. Are you wearing the same Timberlands? Watching the same TV shows? Talk about that stuff.

4) Accommodate opposition. Often, educators react to missed homework, phone usage, etc., with stiff consequences. These lead to ruptures in relationships, cautions Nelson. Instead, ask questions about what's going on.

Joseph Derrick Nelson

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

Create Community With Clubs

"Girls participate in everything compared to boys," says Johny Sozi, a Maryland computer science teacher. "You even see the difference at lunch—girls go in big groups!" One way to counter boys' isolation? Create clubs that provide community for them. (When possible, make sure to tap into salary bonuses negotiated by your union for club or team advisors!)

Go fishing! This fall, middle school teacher Jace Brescher had 86 students at his fishing club's interest meeting. "I was like, 'Oh man, how am I going to manage all these kids?'" recalls Brescher, who teaches in Jasper, Ind. Fortunately, parents help at the club's three-hour fishing events, which take place on two Saturdays in the fall and another two in the spring.

Typically, Brescher gets about 50 students at meetings and events. Of them, five or six are girls. The club is advertised to boys and girls alike, but Brescher notes, "It does attract more boys, and maybe what you'd call the 'troublemakers.' It's their outlet and they thrive out there."

Fishing equipment is donated. Prior experience isn't necessary. "We've got kids who are avid bass fishermen, flipping a jig around, and others who don't even know how to tie a hook on," he says. Everybody is happy when anybody catches anything!

Networking and interfacing

Sozi has about 65 students in the Computer Geeks club at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. About 8 in 10 are boys.

Thirty club members (26 boys) participate in CyberPatriot, a national competition that challenges students to secure virtual networks. It's a precursor to careers in cyber defense, Sozi notes. Another club group works on Python coding, while a third practices web design. All participate in what he calls an "incubator," where they float ideas and prototype products. Mostly, they meet during lunch.

"I find that male students generally have fewer friends. So, in a club like ours, they can connect through an area of common interest," Sozi says. "Many of these kids keep these connections for a long time. … They become meaningful people to each other."

Checkmate!

Illinois paraeducator Kathy Lachowicz is the head coach of the chess team at Alan B. Shepard High School, in Palos Heights—and the only woman coach in her high school's division. Of her 17 "chessletes," 14 are boys. They practice twice a week and compete against other local high schools for about seven weeks in the fall.

"I tell the kids, it's not about the [match] points, it's about learning new strategies and meeting other kids," Lachowicz says.

Some of her kids are really high-level thinkers, playing several moves ahead. Others are just winning the snacks she gives them. "I provide cookies, candy, stuff like that. After school, they're hungry!"

Clubs build needed community for boys today. (Left and below right) Jace Brescher's students catch fish and friendship. (Below left) Johny Sozi's "tech geeks" collaborate.

READ THIS

Want to learn more about teaching boys? For recommended reading, scan this QR code or visit nea.org/Boys.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JACE BRESCHER (FISHING PHOTOS); COURTESY OF JOHNY SOZI ("TECH GEEKS")

How AI is changing the way you teach

By Brenda Álvarez

EDUCATORS USE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO SUPPORT, NOT REPLACE, THE HUMAN CONNECTION IN LEARNING

"Artificial Intelligence (AI) is like having a personal assistant that wants to help you. It thinks the world of you. In fact, you *are* its world."

This is how computer science and media electives teacher Julie York explains artificial intelligence to her students at South Portland High School, in Maine. But, she continues, this is where it gets tricky:

So you have this biased assistant that thinks you can never be wrong or ask for something dangerous. Keep in mind this assistant only has a middle school education and lacks ethics, but is really fast at doing some things, but not all things. Sometimes, it will want to help you so much—just to make you happy—that it will lie to you.

Julie York

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JULIE YORK

Still under review

While proponents may promise that AI will revolutionize education, it's still being defined by humans.

For some, AI is a trusted tool, a helper, a thought-partner, and a guide that amplifies creativity and saves time. For others, it's a shortcut that risks stripping away what matters most in learning: The human connection.

So how are educators using AI, and what's a boundary they would never cross? Four educators—from California, Maine, Michigan, and Utah—are testing limits, setting expectations, and underscoring that the most important factor in using AI is the human one.

AI in elementary school

Two years ago, veteran high school educator Kecia Waddell switched to teaching elementary school. She was in unfamiliar territory.

Unsure if her teaching methods and style would transfer to second-grade students, Waddell turned to AI, a tool she had used previously with her high school students.

"I leveraged AI to help teach me how to better engage with students," says Waddell, a special education teacher at Monfort Elementary School, in Shelby Township, Mich.

She has used the technology to personalize assignments as well as to analyze students' individualized education program goals and align them with skill standards outlined in the district's report card.

For example, Waddell used AI to connect language and student self-expression in a classroom coloring activity. Waddell had her students explain to her what kind of coloring sheet they wanted. She would prompt AI with their requests.

"I'm typing out the words, but [the students] have to use language … and expand their vocabulary," Waddell says. "[AI] gives us superpowers for what we do for our young learners," she adds.

For her students, she says the technology builds on transferable skills they need for socializing, expanding their vocabulary, and writing.

"AI is predictive technology. It's designed to give plausible answers, not factual. You always have to check what it's saying," says Kecia Waddell (right), a special education teacher in Michigan.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF KECIA WADDELL

What doesn't Waddell do with AI? Give students unsupervised access to it or input data with identifying information. Human oversight is needed, she cautions.

"I want to have control over how I use it, and I don't want … people misusing technology," she explains.

AI in middle school

Instructional coach Kristin van Brunt approaches AI as an extension of critical thinking. "It's a helper, not a replacement for thought," says van Brunt, who works at Mueller Park Junior High, in Davis County, Utah.

She explains that if students were reading *Animal Farm*, she would require them to think about some of the themes in the book before turning to technology. "They have to think about it first, come up with ideas, and then put those into AI, and ask which one would be a good topic to explore," van Brunt explains.

Another approach is to have students find connections between a book and their own lives.

"Instead of saying, analyze the themes in *Of Mice and Men*, I would say, compare the theme in [the book] to a time that someone you know faced a difficult decision," she says. "They could use AI to come up with a theme, but they have to tie it to themselves."

AI

How is changing the way you teach

This kind of personalization, she believes, keeps students from having AI do all the work.

Throughout the years, van Brunt has used AI to prepare lesson plans and student activities, differentiate assignments to ensure students can engage with the material, and work one-on-one with other educators.

"It gives me a lot of time to do the other aspects of my job," she says. "I think AI gets a bad rap, but it can be so helpful."

Kristin van Brunt

What wouldn't she do with it? Force hesitant educators to use it. "But showing them ways [AI] has helped me … might help some of them," she says.

Weighing the risks

In San Diego, Calif., sixth-grade teacher Thomas Courtney isn't quite convinced about AI being the world-changing force it's hyped up to be. He describes his approach to the technology as "very careful."

"I'm introducing it to students," Courtney says. "But I also feel it's being introduced to me."

Students are allowed to use the technology as a first step to help generate ideas or pictures. But they're also required to go beyond the screen.

Students must connect AI-generated work to the classroom by either talking or writing about what was produced, and what they want to do with the information.

"They're the last filter," Courtney says. "It helps them to understand that AI is not doing [the work] for them. It's a tool that they used, and they still make final decisions."

Courtney wants his students to understand pride and authorship and is concerned about what he calls the "fast and easy" mindset. He had one student who misused AI to generate and submit more than 40 poems.

"The ultimate goal of education is that kids learn something they didn't know before. … But it takes the teacher to guide that process, and I just don't ever see an AI program doing that as effectively as a human in a classroom."

—Thomas Courtney (above), sixth-grade teacher, in California

"Some [students] are OK with their work being fast and easy, and I don't think that's a lesson I want students leaving my classroom with."

Courtney tries to avoid letting AI replace accountability. "If students are using AI, a good teacher holds them accountable for how they use it, … because there's an explicit explanation of expectations."

Unions can lead the way on AI in schools

Propose NEA's sample school board resolution at your next board meeting, as well as NEA's sample school board policy to expand safe, inclusive, and future-focused learning environments.

Sample School Board Resolution

1. Create an educator-inclusive advisory committee to guide AI research, procurement, piloting, and evaluation.

2. Assess risks such as data privacy concerns, racial bias, misinformation, plagiarism, and threats to jobs.

3. Require districts to disclose what data AI tools collect and how it will be used, ensuring families and school staff are fully informed.

Sample School Board Policy

1. Protect educators with high-quality, multifaceted professional learning opportunities to help them increase their AI literacy and understand what specific AI tools are being used in their schools.

2. Ensure all students have equitable access to AI tools, including assistive AI technologies to support diverse learning needs.

3. Call for all vendors of AI tools and resources to meet district standards for transparency, equity, and ethical decision-making.

LEARN MORE

Find guidance, resources, and learning opportunities at nea.org/AI.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

What keeps Courtney grounded is the irreplaceable connection between educator and student.

"Kids need to be around other humans," he says. "Friendships matter. There's a physical thing that can't be quantified by seeing your teacher's lit-up face tell you that they're proud of you, in person."

That presence, he believes, is what makes learning real.

"The ultimate goal of education is that kids learn something they didn't know before, and a tool doesn't do that," Courtney says. "A tool helps you get there. … But it takes the teacher to guide that process, and I just don't ever see an AI program doing that as effectively as a human in a classroom."

Kellan Edwards, a junior at South Portland High School, in Maine, learns about AI's possibilities and limitations.

AI in high school

Back in Maine, York worked with a group of her students to learn scriptwriting and produce a short video. It was a Spanish soap opera (or telenovela) that, in true fashion, involved a crime scene. The script called for a corpse. York considered having a student play the part, but they didn't have time for all that. So she asked AI to create it.

"All of the bodies were breathing," York laughs. "I needed to use three models to just get a dead body horizontal with an ax to its head."

After multiple AI prompts that generated various interpretations, York gave up. The final version was a barely-breathing body lying on the floor with an ax coming out of the person's mouth like a flower.

"I was just like, you know what, we're good. … This is the one we're using. I'm walking away," she says.

Turns out, AI can't make dead bodies. The AI models York used—Veo, Sora, and Kling—have built-in safeguards to prevent misuse or harmful behavior. But AI would never have told you.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JULIE YORK

'It's impossible to avoid'

York says she uses AI a lot, and she's been using it for a long time.

"AI has been a part of some [computer] programming for a long time," she says, pointing to Bluetooth and facial recognition as examples. "But then all of a sudden, these large language models came out, and I started seeing [it] in all my software. It is impossible to avoid."

AI is only getting better, York says, and compares it to the internet of yesteryear: "Using the internet meant your whole house couldn't have a phone or you had to wait 20 minutes for a website to load, and God forbid it had graphics! If you think about it as a tool, the internet now is almost ubiquitous."

She adds, "In five years, AI is going to look completely different, and … the babies being born today won't know [anything different]."

York encourages educators to learn how to effectively use AI, model it for students, and talk about the pros and cons. Follow your district's policy, if one exists, and don't ignore the tools' privacy policies.

"There are some AI programs that have really atrocious privacy settings," she says. "Pay attention to where the data is going."

Educators should not pretend AI doesn't exist, York advises.

"You want your students to be successful … and be prepared to go on their own in the real world," she adds. "And we can't *not* talk about things because we think they're bad. … Eventually, this is something they will have to face."

WATCH THIS

Scan the QR code to watch how Julie York approaches AI.

DO SCHOOLS START Too Early?

By Tim Walker

STARTING SCHOOL LATER MAY HELP ADDRESS SLEEP DEPRIVATION IN TEENS—BUT ARE DISTRICTS THINKING THROUGH THE PITFALLS?

In 2023, Florida became the second state in the country, after California, to mandate later school start times. The law instructed every school district to implement a new schedule with start times no earlier than 8 a.m. for middle schools and 8:30 a.m. for high schools. The move was likely to impact more than 2 million of the state's public school students and their families.

These two states—along with many districts across the country with similar policies—were responding to a growing body of research showing the benefits of more sleep for teenagers.

In May 2025, however, Florida stepped on the brakes. Lawmakers repealed the policy before it even took effect. Are the science and research wrong? Unlikely. Is the idea of later school start times a bad idea? Probably not, but that's not what is behind the misgivings.

8–10
The number of hours teenagers should sleep each night.

The issue, says Gordan Longhofer, president of the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association, was that the mandate would have likely led to chaos.

"Such an undertaking has to be designed at the local level—with the input of educators and others who know the community, the needs, and feasibility," he continues.

"These are the stakeholders.," Longhofer adds. "They should make this decision, too, not a lawmaker 400 miles away, saying 'do this or else.'"

Teenagers need more sleep

The campaign to start school later began in earnest in 2014, soon after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued findings that laid out a stark and sobering picture of how sleep deprivation harms students, especially high schoolers. The research revealed that adolescents who don't get enough sleep have an increased risk of being overweight, suffering from depression, and struggling academically. According to most surveys, the average teenager logs about 7–8 hours of sleep each night, when they should be getting somewhere between 8–10 hours.

That same year, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle schools and high schools delay class start times from 8 to 8:30 a.m. or later to align with the biological sleep rhythms of adolescents.

The idea has grown in popularity over the past decade as student mental health and wellness has become a front-and-center issue, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.

Do later start times help students?

No question, sleep deprivation among teens is a serious issue, says Joseph Buckhalt, a professor at Auburn University, in Alabama, who researches sleep, health, and adolescents. But the impact of later school start times is a bit overhyped, he cautions.

"One caveat is that we haven't waited long enough to see if there's really a positive effect," Buckhalt explains. "Are teenagers really sleeping longer due to later start times? Or are they just staying up later? Also, there are many other barriers to getting good sleep that might overcome the benefits of a later start time."

Buckhalt co-wrote a 2023 study that looked at the health benefits of later school start times among different socioeconomic groups. They found that only higher-income students had fewer depression symptoms from later start times.

For other families, pressures such as financial insecurity, long commutes, and other challenges essentially negated any benefits.

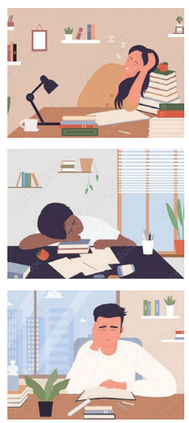
Buckhalt says no one should view later school start times as some sort of cure-all. There are, after all, other variables that contribute to sleep deprivation in adolescents—homework, too many extracurriculars, and, of course, the infamous "blue light" emitted from electronic screens as teens text and scroll through social media.

Still, early start times are not in sync with changing circadian rhythms. A teenager's internal clock moves to a different schedule, making students in that age group feel sleepy later at night than younger kids.

A domino effect

Despite the consensus around teenage sleep and health, the momentum behind later start times seems to have stalled.

Buckhalt calls the two state mandates "coercive," and believes advocates for the policies have erred by not involving education professionals and other stakeholders. In some cases, he says, they have also lacked transparency in the decision-making process.



The Science Behind Sleep Deprivation

While adolescents' sleep can be impacted by many variables, research shows that a change in their bodies during puberty is a major factor.

When puberty begins, a natural shift in teenagers' circadian rhythms—or internal clock—makes them feel sleepy later at night than younger kids. This delays sleep for up to two hours, to around 10 p.m. or 11 p.m., making it difficult for teens to get the recommended 8–10 hours of sleep.

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle schools and high schools delay the start of class to 8:30 a.m. or later to align school schedules to these biological sleep rhythms.

FACTOID SOURCE: NATIONAL SLEEP FOUNDATION

PHOTO AND ILLUSTRATIONS: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

DO SCHOOLS START
Too Early?

When Florida lawmakers passed their state law, the Palm Beach County union began working with the local superintendent and school board about implementation in county schools.

"It was going to literally be a math problem," Longhofer recalls. "You're talking about the schedules of 180,000 students in state-funded schools and getting the times worked out so that kids get to school on time, and people can have … a reasonable workday—whether they're teachers or parents. This was going to be a monumental task."

23%
The percentage of high schoolers who got at least 8 hours of sleep in 2023.

The same challenge faces every school district that has shifted schedules later. A shift of 30 minutes or even an hour later means that students will finish their day later than 3 p.m. That triggers a domino effect for everything from after-school activities and programs, parents' work schedules, child care arrangements, and after-school jobs.

Then there's the bus routes. For later school start times to work, districts usually have to remap bus routes and hire more drivers, even as they face existing driver shortages. Some districts implemented multiple new start times without enough new routes and drivers. Buses couldn't get kids to school or home on time.

'Are we really thinking this through?'

Many districts have flipped bus schedules, so elementary schools start first—even as early as 7 a.m.

"The thinking is that since sleep deprivation is an issue for older students, the [younger] children can handle starting school much earlier and free up bus routes in the process," Buckhalt explains. So far, studies have shown that these earlier start times have not had a discernible negative impact on elementary students.

But for Zach Fisher, a special education teacher in Louisville, Ky., too many lawmakers are not adequately weighing the disruptions of such a move. "Are we really thinking this through?" he asks.

Fisher says moving back the start times of elementary schools could hurt families at Churchill Park School, where he teaches. "We have a lot of working-class families, immigrant families. A lot of our parents are already financially strained and cannot find more day care if our elementary students start school early and therefore leave

Kentucky special education teacher Zach Fisher

earlier," Fisher explains. "Where are they supposed to go?"

Fisher also points out that lower-income parents often don't have the option to adjust work schedules to accommodate the new start times.

A complex issue

The Florida legislature's repeal of the state law (a move supported by the Florida Education Association), gave Palm Beach County and other large districts a reprieve from grappling with the costs and logistics of new start times in 2026. "We once again have the flexibility, the local control, to address the issue," Longhofer says.

28%
The percentage of public high schools that started at 8:30 a.m. or later in the 2020 – 2021 school year; 9 percent started before 7:30 a.m.

Educators unions across the country have similar concerns, tackling the issue through legislative action and collective bargaining.

The message is the same: Sleep deprivation among teenagers is a serious issue, and later school start times may be an answer, but the voices of educators and parents must be heard.

"This is a complex issue with a lot of moving parts," Buckhalt says. "However lawmakers and districts choose to address it, you have to get everyone on board."

Fisher believes in using research to support sound policies, but says lawmakers and the public need to understand the "real life … consequences they may not know or care about. But it's our job to help make sure they are aware."

PHOTO: TED WATHAN; FACTOID SOURCES (LEFT TO RIGHT): THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION; NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

NEA SHOE COUNCIL

WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?

The *NEA Today* Shoe Council did some *sole*-searching. Learn what they recommend.

We know that happy feet mean healthy educators—and the right pair of shoes can save your ankles, knees, hips, and backs! That's why *NEA Today* put together its first-ever, 10-member Shoe Council. Over the past months, these educators have laced up, slipped into, and walked hundreds of miles on concrete classroom floors, gym floors, parade grounds, and playgrounds. Now, we are *toe*-tally excited to reveal the brands that worked best for them!

Amber Jirsa

High school English teacher, Batavia, Illinois

A typical wearer of booties and heels (yes, heels!), Jirsa slipped into a pair of Toms Goldie Wedge suede booties and wore them for a recent essay unit. This meant much circulating among desks and squatting to chat with students. Her verdict? "So comfortable! I am a fan of wedges, and these did not disappoint!" Surprisingly supportive and easily matched with various outfits, Jirsa says, "I think they are a great value for the price." **Cost:** $100. **Hot tip:** Toms also provides a 15 percent discount for teachers.

You can try these shoes on, too!

Scan the code to use *NEA Today's* virtual reality technology and see what the Shoe Council's favorite kicks look like on your feet!

PHOTO: MARY RAFFERTY

WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?

Michelle Merciadez

Occupational therapist, Ewing, New Jersey

"From the moment I left my house, these shoes probably endured 7,000 to 11,000 steps daily—over blacktop, hard linoleum floors, dirt, grass, playground mulch, and gravel," reports occupational therapist Michelle Merciadez. Her favorite pair? The Vionic Uptown Loafer. These shoes combine a professional look with ample flexibility for Merciadez to work through "developmental positions" with students, plus suitable stability for balance equipment. As for comfort, they felt "custom molded to my feet," she says. **Cost:** We snagged a pair for $99 on sale, but they're typically around $130. (Merciadez's second pair of shoes, a Rykä sneaker, was also a winner. Find out why at **nea.org/ShoeCouncil**.)

Bryan Stork

High school counselor, Grandview Heights, Ohio

Something a student actually said: "Love your shoes, Mr. Stork!" Bryan Stork's new pair of Merrell Wrapt Sneakers have a cool look, plus, he says, they "literally feel like they are wrapped around your foot. I thought I was putting on a slipper." But this counselor's favorite is the Allbirds Couriers—and, he jokes, "Not just because my name is Stork." (Ahem.) Their cushioning and durability were top-notch. "If I'm honest, I'm not sure I would have considered these shoes because of the price. Now that I've tried them and gotten a lot of steps in them, I would certainly say they are a good value!" **Cost:** Merrell Wrapts (at left), $120, with 20 percent off for teachers; Allbirds Couriers, $98, with 15 percent off for public school teachers and staff.

Meera Ramchandran

Middle school science teacher, Milpitas, California

Spending days in a science lab, rebounding between stations, and hopping around spills, Meera Ramchandran prefers an athletic shoe. She even does a unit on biomimetic shoes, which incorporate elements from nature. (Goat treads, anyone?) Her typical go-to are Brooks. For Shoe Council, Ramchandran tried the uber-popular On Cloudsurfer. Her report: "[They] felt springy and gave me a somewhat bouncy air, which helped me feel more energetic, even at the end of the day!" They also earned compliments from colleagues and students. **Cost:** From $80–$160, depending on color and retailer. The On brand also offers 15 percent off for teachers.

Madison Sharp

Fifth-grade teacher, Georgetown, Kentucky

For years, Madison Sharp has been head over heels for Birkenstocks. Today, she is embracing a lesser-known German company, Stegmann, that boasts of gathering wool from the Tyrolean Alps, in Western Austria. "After trying the Stegmanns, I think I have a new favorite!" Sharp says. Her new Heidi Leather Sandals, she notes, "offer the same level comfort with a softer, cozier feel." They also look stylish and feel durable—even in her school garden! "Overall, they seem like a great value for the price," she adds. **Cost**: $120, Stegmann offers a 12 percent discount for teachers on all of their shoes, including clogs, sandals, and more.

Scan the code to try on these shoes with *NEA Today's* virtual reality technology!

PHOTOS FROM TOP: JEN POTTHEISER; COURTESY OF BRYAN STORK

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF MEERA RAMCHANDRAN; JENNIFER CHANG

WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?

Daniel Derflinger

Middle school and high school band and music teacher, Weatherly, Pennsylvania

Top brand? For their flexibility, breathability, and "ample support," the Kizik Irvine hit a high note with music teacher Daniel Derflinger. "We've been marching outside for weeks in preparation for upcoming parades. The Kiziks did quite well," he says. Derflinger typically wears Clarks, which look more professional, but, he notes, also have a narrower toe box that can constrict after a long day in band rehearsals. **Hot tip:** While this pair costs $99, Kizik does offer 20 percent off to public K–12 and higher ed employees. (Derflinger also tried out a pair of barefoot-style Groundies. Find out if they worked at nea.org/ShoeCouncil.)

Amy Dingfield

Elementary paraprofessional, Renton, Washington

As a library assistant, cafeteria monitor, recess supervisor, reading instructor, and more, Amy Dingfield walks more than 5 miles a day, traipsing across concrete floors, hardwood courts, ceramic tiles, asphalt, and grass. She needs a comfortable shoe with serious arch support. "With the amount of walking and standing I do, any tipping or flattening of the arch will cause me a great deal of knee, leg, and back pain for days," Dingfield says. Her new Reef Neptunes fit the bill. They're lightweight, with adequate toe room and arch support—and a nifty ability to convert from clog to sneaker style. On a scale of 1–5, Dingfield gives the Reefs a 5, but they don't beat her favorite Hokas. "They have the best foot support," she notes. **Cost:** The Reefs are $80, not including a 20 percent discount for students, teachers, and recent grads.

Alicia Diozzi

Middle school social studies teacher, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Not only does Alicia Diozzi teach social studies, but she also works as a walking tour guide in "Witch City," i.e., the storied town of Salem, Mass. For the Shoe Council, Diozzi tested a pair of suede Puma sneakers, designed to look like ballet flats. "The cushioning in the heel area is remarkable," Diozzi notes. Roomy, cute, with a "generous toe box" and "light" arch support, she says, this pair was comfortable from the moment she unboxed them—and they even earned a few compliments from her middle schoolers. **Cost**: $80, plus Puma offers 20 percent off to teachers. (Go to nea.org/ShoeCouncil to learn what Diozzi thought about the Dansko shoes she tried!)

Charmaine Emmanuel

Middle school classroom aide, Hollywood, Florida

"Shoes tell a story, not just of style, but of strength, movement, and service," says classroom aide Charmaine Emmanuel. "What we wear can reflect who we are and what we stand for." These Cariuma canvas sneakers in fire-engine red show Emmanuel's passion for color and creativity—and match her high-energy approach to helping students and assisting teachers. "They not only look good, but also provide the right amount of support for being on my feet throughout the day," Emmanuel notes. "Overall, they're stylish, comfortable, and dependable—everything I look for in a good pair of shoes." **Cost:** $89.

Molly Peddycoart

Elementary special education teacher, Elk River, Minnesota

"I am literally moving all the time, including running after quick kiddos!" Molly Peddycoart says. Typically, her go-to shoes are Asics. We asked her to try Orthofeet, which boast of innovative, pain-relief technology. "I really liked the look of the Orthofeet Strolls. … They're a little dressier than a traditional tennis shoe, while still having comfort and stability," she says. Orthofeet come with an optional orthotic insert, which Peddycoart needed to support her arches. From the start, they were comfortable, she says, but, "I will say, by the end of the day, my feet did feel a little tired." **Cost:** Currently on sale for $99, with a 10 percent discount for educators.

Scan the code to try on these shoes with *NEA Today's* virtual reality technology!

PHOTOS: JACQUELINE AGENTIS (DERFLINGER); COURTESY OF MEMBERS (DINGFIELD AND DIOZZI)

PHOTOS FROM TOP: SUSAN STOCKER; COURTESY OF MOLLY PEDDYCOART

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A Flower From *Every Country*

This beautiful flower garden is always in bloom at John Adams Elementary school in Alexandria, Va. Painted by students, the mural shows vibrant flowers from the many countries represented in the school's population. It pops with color on the wall outside the cafeteria—where students see this celebration of diversity every day.

"Our students love it," says fifth-grade teacher Jeffrey Nattania. "They see that all different kinds of flowers can thrive so beautifully together and grow in community."

Students often tell Nattania, "I see my country's flower, and it feels like me," or, "I feel like I belong in the mix."

That's what school is about, he says, "Planting seeds that grow and bloom together toward a common goal of a thriving education."

Does your school have a mural that captures the culture of your learning community?

Please share it for an *NEA Today* digital slideshow! Send it to nea.org/Mural.

PHOTO: JATI LINDSEY

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