

neaToday

CREATING MOMENTS OF Awe

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AND CURIOSITY
SOAR IN YOUR
CLASSROOM THIS
SCHOOL YEAR

PAGE 40

Ryan Tucek
teaches
students
about the
marvels of
the universe,
in Harrison
City, Pa.



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educator pay PAGE 11

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working conditions PAGE 34

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parenting styles PAGE 44

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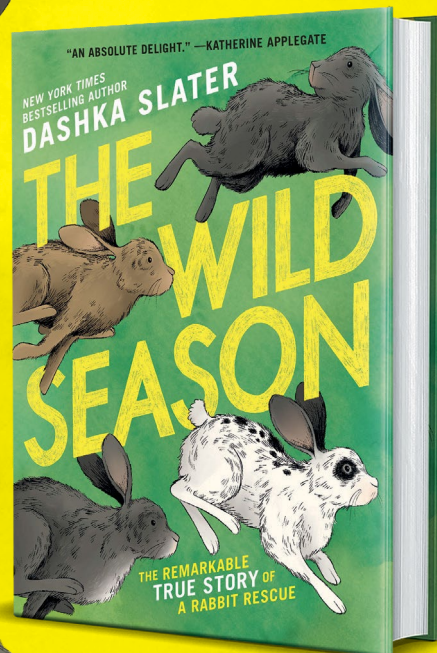
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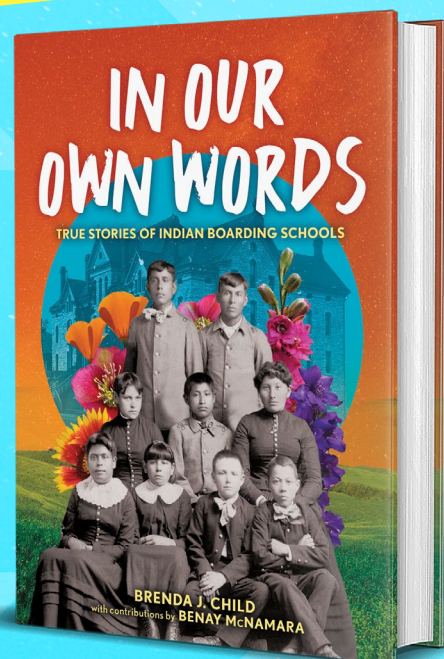
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To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

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

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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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Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!

Meet these inspiring educators and many others in this magazine.



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6 YEARS OF *Joy, Justice, and Excellence*

Dear NEA members, I was honored to serve as your president.

Leading this union has been the honor of my life. My term as NEA president ends in September, but as always, the future rests with you. You are upholding our vow to advance racial and social justice, and to promote inclusive, safe, just, and joyous school environments. You are demanding the respect of professional pay and high-quality working conditions for educators. You are supporting professional excellence and student learning.

You are still educating. Still organizing. Still fighting. And that means the story is not over. It means the curve of hope is still bending—because we are the ones bending it. When educators stand together, there is no force in this nation that can silence us. There is no enemy who can shrink us. There is no wanna-be dictator who can stop us.

Thank you for the privilege of taking this journey with you. The best chapters are still to be written—by your hands, your voices, and your unwavering commitment to public education, to our students, to each other, and to this union.

—Becky Pringle, NEA President

Thank you for the JOY you bring to education.

“Educators, you are leading the way. Guiding and protecting, nurturing and supporting our students all across this nation. Every day, all day, you provide our students with the tools they need to thrive and achieve their dreams.”

Uplifting students and watching their boundless curiosity grow—that joy is the common thread that we share as public school educators.



Together, we fought for JUSTICE.

“Immigrant families—with the courage and tenacity to move for a better life—help make our country the land of the free and the home of the brave.”



Together, we have fought for the rights of immigrant students and families, urged commonsense laws to prevent gun violence, helped address food insecurity, fought to ensure educators could retire with dignity by repealing GPO/WEP, and demanded justice for our students.

NEA members' commitment to EXCELLENCE continues to inspire me.



We navigated the challenges of the pandemic, demanded fair pay and respect, and stood strong against unprecedented attacks on public education and democracy. We will prevail!



“We will never allow any darkness to dim our light. We will stand in our power. Onward, NEA! Onward!”

In my farewell keynote at the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly, I told educators that we have a quantum entanglement, where we are always connected in our passion and power to defend students, our colleagues, public education, and our democracy.



MEET THE 2026 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Pennsylvania social studies teacher Leon Smith won the 2026 National Teacher of the Year Award—the nation’s highest honor for the profession. Upon announcing the award, the Council of Chief State School Officers lauded Smith’s commitment to critical thinking, civic engagement, inclusion, and elevating student voices.

NEA President Becky Pringle also congratulated Smith, an NEA member who teaches advanced placement (AP) U.S. history and AP African American studies at Haverford High School. “Leon embodies the core values of an exemplary educator,



sparkling imagination, curiosity, and critical thinking, and creating an inclusive environment where every student feels welcome,” she said. “His work paves the way to ensure a better and brighter tomorrow for all students.”

When Haverford students expressed frustration at the lack of diverse

perspectives in the curriculum, district leaders turned to Smith to co-lead an effort to establish a culture of more inclusivity and belonging. Smith’s dedication and work contributed to the development, language, and implementation of these goals across the district.

“It was important for me to use this opportunity to uplift the voices of students and mentees who felt the school environment was unsafe and exclusionary,” he recalled.

Smith’s leadership was instrumental in the creation of the first African American history course in the district, first as an elective, then as an AP class.

Smith’s leadership also extends to championing the recruitment and retention of teachers, especially educators of color. For most of his career at Haverford, Smith was the only Black teacher in his building.

PHOTO: COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

NEA DATA: A LOOK AT EDUCATOR PAY TRENDS

This spring, NEA released its annual educator pay data for K–12 teachers and education support professionals (ESPs). Although average pay increases in 2024 – 2025 slightly outpaced the rate of inflation, a look at the past 10 years shows teachers and support staff have actually lost ground, when accounting for inflation.

Here are some of the highlights:

The average public school teacher’s salary increased from \$72,000 in 2023 – 2024 to approximately \$74,500 in 2024 – 2025, a gain of 3.5 percent.

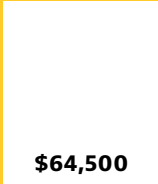
More school districts than ever pay starting salaries of at least \$40,000; 10,303 districts (91 percent of districts surveyed) have starting teacher salaries of that amount or more.

Among full-time support staff in K–12 schools, average earnings in 2024 – 2025 were \$36,360—about \$1,400 more than the prior year. Adjusting for inflation, ESP pay has fallen nearly 8.9 percent over the past decade.

Teachers earn 24 percent more on average in states with collective bargaining, and ESPs earn 15 percent more than their peers in states without collective bargaining.

Average Salary by Collective Bargaining Status

K–12 Teachers

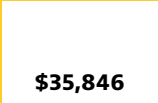


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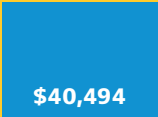


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SOURCES: RANKINGS OF THE STATES 2025 AND ESTIMATES OF SCHOOL STATISTICS 2026, NEA EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL EARNINGS REPORT 2026



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IS GRADE INFLATION THAT BIG OF A DEAL?

The most common grade today in U.S. high schools and college classrooms is an A, according to the College Board.

And it's not because all students are above average. Even as grades go up, student achievement—as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress—is going down.

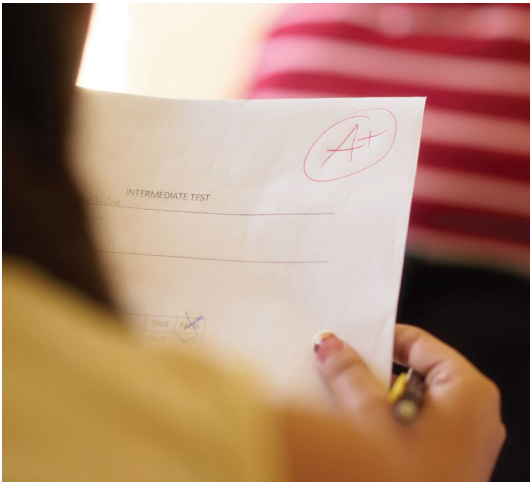
The cause is “grade inflation,” or the common, decades-old practice of handing out A's for lesser work, due to constant, consequential demands by students, parents, and administrators.

For example, take Harvard University, where last year, 84 percent of all

undergraduate grades were an A or A-minus. Meanwhile, in 2019, a high school in Arlington, Va., had 213 valedictorians among its graduating class of 595—and every one of them had a GPA of at least 4.0.

Grade inflation is prevalent—but does it really matter? New research says it may. A study co-written by a University of Texas at Austin economist found that high school students who experience more lenient grading are less likely to pass subsequent courses, to graduate from high school and go to college, and will earn significantly less money over the course of their lives.

Still, many educators say the outrage around grade inflation is misplaced and it's just another way to vilify educators, pile on “kids today,” and distract public attention from real problems facing education. Grading



often has nothing to do with learning, they say, and research has shown that it can increase anxiety and make students avoid more challenging courses. When it comes to incentivizing students or assessing what they've learned, there are better ways to do it than grading. “We need to end our reliance on traditional grades and create new systems based on what we know is true about learning and motivation,” Massachusetts teacher Seth Czarnicki writes in an essay for local public radio.

ARE STUDENTS STILL READING FULL BOOKS?

Amidst widespread national concern about student reading habits (or lack of) and excessive time spent in front of screens, a perception that books are disappearing altogether from schools has begun to take hold. Many believe that English language arts (ELA) teachers have mostly stopped assigning complete books or texts.

But is that really happening? A recent survey suggests that this concern may be exaggerated, but the picture is murky.

According to a 2026 RAND survey, during the 2024 – 2025 school year, two-thirds of secondary ELA teachers said that they planned to assign one to four full books to their students. And 24 percent said they assigned more books than were in their curricula.

“Altogether, these results suggest that nearly all secondary ELA teachers—about 90 percent—assign full books to students, although a sizable proportion of teachers assign a small number of books,” the authors of the report conclude.

RAND also found that roughly 80 percent of elementary school teachers reported assigning at least one full book a year but are generally more likely than their secondary school counterparts to not assign full texts at all.



Fewer books, however, are being assigned in low-income schools and in schools with a majority of students of color, revealing inequities in access, the researchers noted. Most teachers in these schools reported assigning about three full books in the school year—one full book less than their counterparts in more affluent schools and majority white schools.

These teachers were also more likely than their counterparts to report assigning no books or few books (one or two) and were less likely to assign a higher number of books (five to nine).

Many Teachers Change Lessons to Avoid Backlash

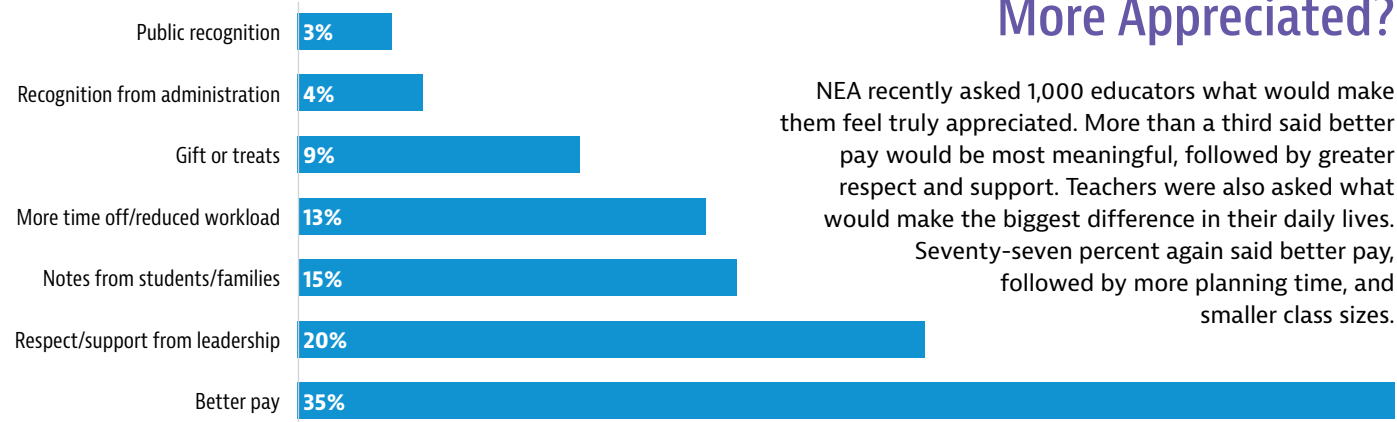
According to the 2026 iCivics Teacher Survey, 52 percent of teachers believe teaching civics “now feels difficult,” and 59 percent are concerned about a potential backlash for teaching something “the wrong way.”

Thirty-five percent report that the climate in their schools and communities has caused them to change or remove lessons to prevent any sort of potential backlash. The divisive political environment has made 21 percent of teachers think about leaving their position.

Overall, large majorities of teachers report a strong preparedness to teach civics (76.2%) and meaningful support from school or district administration (65.2%).



Which form of appreciation feels most meaningful?



What Would Make You Feel More Appreciated?

NEA recently asked 1,000 educators what would make them feel truly appreciated. More than a third said better pay would be most meaningful, followed by greater respect and support. Teachers were also asked what would make the biggest difference in their daily lives.

Seventy-seven percent again said better pay, followed by more planning time, and smaller class sizes.

SPECIAL ED CASELOADS ARE OVERWHELMING!

By Ali Schalop

"Drowning!" That's how special education teacher Meghann Hughes describes her workload and that of her colleagues. "The first thing that suffers is the students," she says.

While the number of students who qualify for special education support continues to grow, fewer teachers and support staff are available to help them. "Positions have not been able to be filled," explains Hughes, who works in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). "There are still vacancies for special education teachers and even more vacancies for paraeducators."

This isn't a new issue, and it isn't unique to San Diego. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of students qualified for special education services nationwide nearly doubled from 3.7 million during the 1976 – 1977 school year to 7.3 million in 2023 – 2024.

Compounding the problem, paraeducators—who often provide individual or small group support to students with disabilities—are consistently understaffed and underpaid, making an average of \$36,360 a year.

As of 2025, only 20 states had caseload limits. In Hughes' district, current limits are 20 for education specialist who handle mild or moderate cases; 12 for moderate to severe cases; and 16 for mixed severity. Hughes notes, "Some ... cases require several meetings, which takes me away from the classroom and working with the students."



Meghann Hughes

Caseloads in her district have become so overwhelming that, in January, 90 percent of San Diego Education Association (SDEA) members voted to strike.

SDEA had successfully bargained on the issue several years ago, but the language in the contract had a loophole. The district had agreed to reduce the maximum caseload assigned to each educator. However, Hughes recalls, the district continued to ignore those agreed upon contractual limits. Instead of reducing caseloads, the district chose to compensate overloaded educators

with end-of-year stipends ranging from \$500 to \$5,000, depending on the number of students assigned beyond the caseload limit.

"I don't think money is the solution to this problem. I want a more manageable workload so that I can, one, enjoy my job, and, two, provide the necessary services that these kids deserve," notes

Hughes, who says she essentially has two jobs. "I'm not only a teacher, but I'm also a case manager."

That includes managing paperwork, doing assessments and writing up the reports, scheduling IEP meetings, and consulting with the relevant service providers and parents.

SDEA and SDUSD came to an agreement that avoided a strike and held the district accountable for tracking and enforcing caseload caps. (On the opposite page, read about SDEA's wins and get tips for your union's next negotiation.) Hughes' opinion on the agreement? "It's a promising beginning." 🌟

BARGAIN THIS! Your Union Can Help Reduce the Special Ed Workload

The San Diego Education Association's (SDEA) hard-won contract language offers a model for other districts to help protect special educators and the students they serve.

If you live in a state that allows collective bargaining, your union can negotiate for this language to cut down on workload and ensure fair treatment for special educators.

If you don't live in a collective bargaining state, you can still negotiate with the district through your union and advocate for smaller caseloads at school board meetings and by talking with your state representatives.



STEP 1:
Negotiate caseload caps, when possible, and pursue formal agreements or policies that require caseload limits.

This gives the union a concrete, enforceable standard to hold the district accountable. In an earlier bargain, SDEA secured caseload limits lower than California's statewide standard. The new contract strengthens enforcement of the limits.



STEP 2:
File unionwide class-action grievances for every single violation.

Rather than individual teachers quietly absorbing overloads, SDEA made grievance-filing a collective, annual practice. This created a paper trail and built mounting pressure on the district.



STEP 3:
Make the district pay for class-size overages.

Previously, the district was fine with overloading teachers and paying a small, lump-sum stipend at the end of the year. In the new contract, SDEA requires overage stipends—monthly penalty payments charged when educators are assigned students beyond the contractual limits—to be paid within the next payroll period. This incentivizes the district to take action before it gets too costly.



A GENTLE SOUL WITH FIGHTER INSTINCTS

FOR NEA ESP OF THE
YEAR STANLEY "RIC"
CALHOUN, SCHOOL
SAFETY IS ABOUT
OPENING MORE DOORS
THAN WE CLOSE

By Cindy Long

As a campus supervisor at Inglemoor High School, in Kenmore, Wash., Stanley "Ric" Calhoun is intentional about making sure all students feel safe, seen, and supported, both emotionally and physically.

"I think of my role as relationship-building," Calhoun says. "My daily interactions go beyond supervision. I greet students by name and build trust through consistency. This visibility has created a culture where students feel comfortable approaching me with concerns, knowing they'll be heard and respected."

For Calhoun, a simple wave hello or goodbye goes a long way toward creating a sense of safety. "We forget we matter to one another. The simplest thing we can do is acknowledge when we come into each other's spaces," he explains. "The kids know I care and am happy to see them, and they wave back, which I need some days, too. What we put out there matters."

For his good work, Calhoun was named the NEA Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year at the 2026 NEA ESP National Conference, in Anaheim, Calif., in March.

In a statement released at the time of the award, NEA President Becky Pringle praised Calhoun's extraordinary commitment to and compassionate care for his students. "Ric goes above and beyond to create a positive learning environment for all students, and he takes the initiative to continually pursue new approaches that help all students learn at their highest abilities," Pringle said. "We are proud to give him this recognition and are grateful for all his work."

Calhoun will now serve as an ambassador for ESPs across the country, speaking about the importance and contributions of school support staff at local, state, and national events.

An advocate for inclusion

One of Calhoun's most impactful initiatives was to launch a racial justice video project, where students of color and those from other underrepresented groups shared their lived experiences in the Northshore School District.

"These videos opened a direct dialogue between students and staff, fostering empathy and awareness around race, religion, sexual

Campus supervisor Ric Calhoun knows the students by name at Inglemoor High School, in Kenmore, Wash. His goal is to create an inclusive, welcoming community for all students.

orientation, and ability," Calhoun says. "It prompted colleagues to examine their own practices and engage more thoughtfully with marginalized students. It helped staff better understand how their actions affect student well-being and created space for healing and growth."

As a football coach, Calhoun led efforts to expand Unified Sports



under the Special Olympics umbrella. "We brought together students with and without disabilities, fostering friendships and breaking down stigma," he says.

His goal? Creating a safe and welcoming environment. That means not only responding to incidents, but also preventing them by building relationships. Students now stand up for one another, he says, and bullying has decreased.

They also know they can trust Calhoun and other staff who engage with them positively, which extends to students' families.

"I've always believed that supporting students means supporting

their families and the broader community," he notes.

Recognizing that some students face food insecurity during breaks, he organized weekly snack deliveries to local neighborhoods. Staff donated funds, and Calhoun personally delivered a mix of healthy and fun snacks to high school students and their families.

Equity-focused leadership

Calhoun's union activism has been driven by a deep commitment to elevating the role of ESPs across his state. As vice president for ESPs in the Northshore Education Association and chair of the Washington Education Association ESP Bill of Rights Subcommittee, he's worked to strengthen the stature, stability, and effectiveness of ESPs through organizing, advocacy, and equity-focused leadership.

Calhoun points to the bill of rights as one of his most impactful contributions. The statewide campaign outlines the essential conditions ESPs need to thrive, including professional pay, access to training, job security, and respect.

"This initiative has helped shift the narrative around ESPs, positioning us not just as support staff, but as essential professionals whose work directly impacts student success," he says.

Equity is central to his union engagements. Calhoun helped establish affinity groups for educators of color and LGBTQ+ members and successfully bargained for regular meetings with his district's racial and educational justice department.

"As a multiracial man, I bring an intersectional lens to every role I hold. I advocate not only for racial justice, but also for individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ+ staff, and others whose voices are often overlooked," he says.

Paraeducator Kim Leatherman, a colleague and friend of Calhoun's, notes, "Ric has known and seen the impact

on students who are not culturally represented by their educators."

He has also built a close network of educators of color at his school, she says, adding, "This is a double win, creating a sense of belonging and connection for students and staff."

Calhoun's kind nature belies his tough fight for equity and justice, Leatherman says. "Do not let Ric Calhoun's kind, calm, teddy bear, disposition fool you. When it comes to his family, his students, his colleagues, ... Ric is a fierce advocate who takes every opportunity to be of service."

Always look forward with hope

Calhoun's daughter recently passed away after a two-year battle with brain cancer. As he prepares to use his platform as ESP of the Year to confront the tough fight our public schools face, he says he is inspired by his daughter, who maintained hope throughout her illness.

"My daughter always looked forward. She wanted to be a teacher, like my wife," he says. Calhoun's wife, Cheryl, also works at Inglemoor. It is his daughter's voice—her quiet insistence on reaching for what she could no longer see—that seems to guide him most.

"Towards the end, my daughter lost her eyesight. Still, she would always reach for her glasses to wear even though she didn't need them, saying, 'I can't see but I have hope,'" he shares.

Calhoun recognizes things are rough right now, especially in public education, but he maintains hope.

"I know that our schools and our union are more than equipped to push through all of the ugliness together," he says. "We'll do what we always do. We'll keep showing up for our kids and they will show up for us. No matter what, we'll always bring our glasses." 🙌

CELEBRATING 10 HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS INNOVATORS

NEA HONORS INSPIRING CHANGE-MAKERS WITH ITS MOST PRESTIGIOUS AWARD

By Brenda Álvarez

Advancing educational equity, advocating for civil rights, and strengthening underserved communities are just a few of the accomplishments of this year's NEA Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Award winners. Rooted in NEA's 1966 merger with the American Teachers Association (ATA), which represented Black teachers in segregated schools across the South, the annual event honors individuals and organizations that advance justice through education.

Lifting up students and communities

Educator Brian Whitecalf has a long history of combating disparities among people in his hometown of Grand Island, Neb., and empowering students to serve their communities. He once collaborated with students with disabilities to repurpose donated hotel soap bars for local veterans. The students attended the Indra House, a specialized public high school that teaches functional, independent living skills in a real home environment.

"After watching a video online, I thought about remaking the soap into larger bars, but I wanted [our work] to have purpose and creativity," said Whitecalf in *The Good News* series, published by the Nebraska Department of Education.

The students learned the art and process of soapmaking before repurposing the small soap bars into larger, newly molded bars. They also gained a deeper understanding of how to identify and address the needs of specific members in their community.

"The students did a fantastic job, and hopefully it will bring about a greater awareness that we can share, help, and care about each other, along with being wise stewards of our resources," Whitecalf said.

Today, Whitecalf is a community liaison at Grand Island Senior High and operates the school's Archipelago

pantry, which takes in donations and collections of food, clothing, and hygiene items for students who may need them. His work helps ensure that students and their families have reliable access to meals and essential supports.

Standing with immigrants

When the U.S. Department of Homeland Security led a large-scale federal immigration raid that swept through the Twin Cities in December 2025, **Education Minnesota** did what it has always done: It stood up for their students and families.

Deep community ties allowed Education Minnesota and its locals to move swiftly into action—organizing safety patrols around schools and ensuring that students could travel safely when families feared sending them into harm's way. They provided transportation, food, and clothing to families whose ability to work and take care of their loved ones was suddenly at risk. Their unwavering commitment to racial and social justice has helped build safer and more welcoming communities.

Building stronger communities

NEA also honored the following allies and partners with HCR awards for their impactful leadership and dedication to advancing justice, equity, and opportunity:

The Center for Immigrant and Refugee Advancement (CIRA) is a non-profit organization, serving Nebraska and southwest Iowa, that provides comprehensive legal, resettlement, and social services to immigrants and refugees. On June 10, 2025, Glenn Valley Foods processing plant, in Omaha, Neb., was ambushed by a large-scale, early-morning raid by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement



Brian Whitecalf



O'nae Chatman



Emanuel "Dupree" Jackson Jr.

agents. Seventy workers were detained without due process. Standing with them was a team of CIRA staff, who ensured no one was subject to inhumane treatment while in custody.

O'nae Chatman is a Mississippi-based author and motivational speaker who, through his educational consulting company, partners with public school districts, universities, churches, and community organizations nationwide to teach young people life skills that support academic success. His mentoring program focuses on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building skills, and responsible decision-making, along with other skills.

The Fairness Campaign led the effort to pass a historic Fairness Ordinance in Louisville, Ky., 25 years ago. As the first law in the state to ban discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, it paved the way for others to follow. A few months later, Lexington also passed a Fairness Ordinance. Today, 24 cities and towns across the state have enacted LGBTQ+ discrimination protections, covering nearly a third of Kentucky's population.

Girls Inc., based in New York, is a nonprofit that drives change for girls across the country. Through its mentoring and educational programs, the organization promotes leadership skills and empowers girls to be strong, smart, and bold. Key areas of work include addressing trauma and toxic stress, mental health, bullying prevention, healthy relationships, financial literacy, civic engagement, and supporting young people after a tragedy. Girls Inc., equips girls with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to succeed.

Hope-Esperanza has helped marginalized communities in Lincoln County, Nebraska, access essential services and build self-sustaining families since 2021. The organization's innovative programs include a weekly food distribution initiative for families facing language barriers and a community health fair offering vaccinations, physicals, free gym equipment, and mental health sessions.

Emanuel "Dupree" Jackson Jr. is a community activist, mentor, and founder of an organization he named after his father, the Emanuel Jackson Sr. (EJS) Project. Based in Florida, EJS provides a forum for young people to engage in honest conversations about issues affecting their personal growth, while emphasizing the importance of history, current events, and civic engagement. EJS has supported some 5,000 Palm Beach County teens with academic tutoring, mental health workshops, and career preparation.

The Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition provides Native communities in the Omaha and Lincoln metro areas with access to quality healthcare that reflects their physical, mental, and cultural needs. The clinics address the ongoing suicide crisis by creating safe spaces where Native young people can process past and present trauma and find support to heal and move forward.

Vital Immigrant Defense Advocacy and Services, or VIDAS, in Santa Rosa, Calif., provides trauma-informed, low-cost, or free immigration legal representation, community education, and deportation defense for vulnerable and low-income immigrant communities. VIDAS works to prevent unconstitutional immigration enforcement practices and protect immigrant rights. 🌟

Submit nominations for the 2027 NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards at nea.org/HCRAwards. Nomination forms and instructions will be available online until Dec. 4, 2026. For more information, email NEAHCR Awards@nea.org.

The Things Students Say That You'll Never Forget

OUR VOICES quick takes



"It was my first day as a teacher's aide in a first-grade classroom. A student walks up, gracefully touches my arm (I have fairly hairy arms), then looks up and says, just above a whisper, 'You're like a wolf man.' Then, he quietly walks away. That was my very first student interaction as an educator."

—Chad D.

"When teaching third grade, one of my students came up to me and said: 'I have some advice for you. Never kiss a hermit crab. It hurts when they grab your lip, and you can't get them off without help.' Sure enough, she had a small, bruised mark on her lip."

—Noydena Douglass, Oregon

"I had a third-grade student tell me I was his favorite teacher ever and that, 'When you die Mrs. S., I'm going to help carry your casket.'"

—Dawn H.

"Hamlet, ... ain't that a breakfast food?"

—Karin Ibrahim (right), Wisconsin

"I told my mom you taught us about orgasms.' (Organisms. I taught them about organisms.)"

—Anacris N.

"Last day of school, I had the children lined up to go home. One boy, who was very shy, kept telling those behind him they could go in front of him. Once it was just himself, and I reminded him he could wave, give a high five, or just say goodbye, he told me: 'I let the others in front of me so I could hug you the longest.' I literally cried."

—Kathy N.

"When I was teaching in an alternative school, one of my students asked me to attend their Narcotics Anonymous meeting to celebrate a milestone for their sobriety. One of the highest, yet most humbling honors I've ever received. We do so much more than teach content."

—Stacy Schmidt, Iowa



SHARE THIS

We want to know what's on your mind. We asked this question on NEA Today's Facebook page and received so many great answers! Keep an eye on facebook.com/NEAToday for our next question, and share this link with your fellow NEA members.

we are nea! EDUCATING EVERY STUDENT.

California Educators Win After 12-Day Strike



Teachers, counselors, nurses, and other certified staff in the Twin Rivers Unified School District, in California's Sacramento County, walked the picket line for nearly two weeks in March. Their demands? Fair pay! The power of

collective action paid off, leading to a tentative agreement with these key wins:

- 7 percent raises over two years.
- A \$4,000 bonus for educators.
- An increased hourly rate of \$60 for speech language pathologists.
- 100 percent employer-paid healthcare.

The California Teachers Association spearheaded the campaign, with support from NEA, and joined the broader We Can't Wait coalition—made up of 80,000 educators, in 32 California school districts, serving 1 million students.

NEA Members Mobilize for May Day 2026

Across the country, NEA members joined thousands of workers, families, and community allies for May Day Strong—a national day of action,

on May 1, to demand dignity, justice, and investment in fully funded schools, healthcare, and housing.

From rallies to teach-ins, educators stood up to economic inequality and called for pushing back against a system that favors billionaires over working people and communities.

Educators Making a Difference

NEA Defends Birthright Citizenship

Birthright citizenship, guaranteed by the 14th Amendment, grants U.S. citizenship to anyone born in the country, regardless of their parents' immigration status. It ensures students can fully access public education and

opportunities like in-state college tuition. As a case challenging the law—*Trump v. Barbara*—reached the U.S. Supreme Court this spring, NEA partnered with major labor unions to file friend-of-the-court briefs supporting citizenship protections. In June, the Court upheld birthright citizenship, denying Trump's attempt to redefine who is American.

Wisconsin Educators Speak Out for LGBTQ+ Students

The Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) helped defeat a series of bills targeting transgender youth. WEAC President Peggy Wirtz-Olson testified at the state Senate, providing powerful evidence of how that bill would harm students.

The proposed laws would have restricted gender-affirming care, sports participation for transgender students, and the use of students' chosen names and pronouns.

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers vetoed every single bill!



Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers vetoes legislation targeting transgender students.



ARE EDUCATORS' SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS PROTECTED BY FREE SPEECH?

NICOLE CENNAMO, FROM NEA'S OFFICE OF THE GENERAL COUNSEL, SHARES GUIDANCE ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND PROFESSIONAL PROTECTIONS



As public employers, schools and universities have broad authority to regulate educators' on-the-job speech. But off-duty speech—such as social media use—receives greater First Amendment protection.

What the law allows

For a post to fall under First Amendment freedoms, educators generally must show three things:

1. You are speaking as a private citizen.

Your post must be made in your capacity as a private citizen, not in relation to your official job duties. If your speech is tied to your role as an educator, it may be treated as speech on behalf of the school and lose First Amendment protection.

Context matters. A post about a national policy issue likely falls outside your job duties, while commentary closely tied to your subject area or classroom responsibilities likely does not. For educators at colleges and universities, the content of your teaching or research should be protected as academic freedom.

For pre-K–12 and higher ed educators alike, you can illustrate that you are speaking as a private citizen by avoiding references to your school, students, and specific workplace matters. Frame posts as personal views, rather than as a teacher or a spokesperson for your institution. Use personal devices and accounts, and avoid school-affiliated identifiers such as logos, classroom photos, or handles that reference your teaching role. Disclaimers like "these views are my own" can help, but they are not determinative.

2. Your post addresses a matter of public concern.

Even if you are speaking as a private citizen, your speech must relate to a matter of public concern—or an issue of political, social, or community importance—for it to be protected under the First Amendment. This can include education-related issues, such as systemic inequity or violence in schools, as well as broader issues like governmental misconduct or newsworthy events involving a public figure.

By contrast, speech that primarily reflects personal complaints or grievances is less likely to qualify. And criticism of

the personal impact of an institutional policy is usually not protected.

Before posting, ask yourself: Would this be relevant to people beyond my workplace? Framing your post in a way that contributes to broader public discourse, rather than being specific to your own employment situation, can be critical to ensuring that your post is protected under the law.

3. Your speech will not disrupt school operations.

Courts will balance your interest in free speech against the school's interest in maintaining effective operations. Even speech as a private citizen on matters of public concern can lose protection if it disrupts the workplace.

Schools and universities must demonstrate actual or reasonably foreseeable disruption, such as interference with your job performance, the institution's educational mission, or day-to-day operations. For example, a post that triggers significant community backlash during school hours (such as parents calling the principal to complain) could be cited as disruptive.

To reduce risk, avoid inflammatory rhetoric that could foreseeably interfere with school functioning. Do not encourage actions like walkouts or protests that would disrupt the school day. Finally, always be sure to post on your own time—never during instructional hours.

Beyond the First Amendment

State laws can further shape what is permissible. Some states provide additional protections for educator speech (including tenure protections), while others impose stricter limits (such as the potential loss of teaching licenses).

School districts and universities may also have social media policies addressing content neutrality, pro-

fessionalism, and interactions with students. Review these policies and your employee handbook carefully before the start of the school year.

Separately, be mindful of students' privacy. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts the sharing of certain student information. Posting identifiable student content without consent can create legal risk.

Where the union fits in

If you face discipline related to a social media post, contact your local union for support. Even without collective bargaining rights, your union can help identify tenure and other policies that may provide protection. If your union has secured bargaining rights, your collective bargaining agreement will likely provide additional protections. Your local union can also help you access legal support through the NEA Unified Legal Services Program, which your state affiliate administers.

One thing to remember

Social media gives educators a powerful platform to contribute to conversations about issues affecting students and communities. By being thoughtful about how, when, and why you post—maintaining clear boundaries from your official duties, grounding your speech in public concerns, and remaining mindful of potential disruption—you can engage meaningfully in public discourse while reducing risk to your professional standing. 🌟

LEARN
MORE

Take a deeper dive into your First Amendment rights

NEA's Office of the General Counsel offers a 30-minute online course covering the First Amendment's protections for educators' speech and best practices for securing social media accounts. To sign up, check out nea.org/FreeSpeech.

THE CHEAT SHEET: Social Media Missteps

What you choose to post online can have big implications for First Amendment coverage. Here are some common pitfalls to avoid:

- **Don't post during school hours.** Share content only on your own time.
- **Don't use school accounts or logos.** Never imply that you speak for the school.
- **Don't include your educator role in your bio or handle.** Maintain clear personal/professional boundaries.
- **Don't air personal workplace grievances.** Only posts that address broader public concerns are protected.
- **Don't employ inflammatory rhetoric.** Stay clear of community backlash that could impede school operations.
- **Don't encourage student walkouts.** Avoid promoting disruptions to the school day.
- **Don't share identifiable student information.** Always obtain written parental consent before posting student photos, videos, or other identifiable information.

ask the expert



YOUR UNION CAN HELP YOU PUSH BACK AGAINST JOB CREEP

By Audrey Nichols, bookkeeper/
administrative assistant and
Arkansas Education Association
board member

In my first job as a front office employee, back in 1996, I was asked to help change diapers for kids in pre-K, kindergarten, and even in the self-contained special education room. I have a son with Down syndrome, and I had compassion and a willingness to take on this duty outside of my job description.

My experience isn't unique. An office staff member is often asked to provide certain health services when the nurse isn't in the building. A teacher or paraeducator frequently runs a class for a colleague who is dealing with a discipline problem, or helps staff after-school activities—all without compensation.

Sometimes called "job creep," these extra duties can be added gradually or suddenly, but when your workload expands without compensation, the union must step in.

When I started my career, I felt as if pitching in outside of my job was being a team player. But it can have serious ramifications if something goes wrong. What's more, it is not the current staff's responsibility to make up for staff shortages. That leads to stress, burnout, and more shortages!

Some 30 years later, I'm a union leader and trainer for NEA's Education Support Professional Leadership Institute. I advocate on workload issues for my colleagues at Landmark Elementary School, in Little Rock's Pulaski County Special School District, in Arkansas.

If job creep is spiraling out of control in your school, here's how your union can help you push back.

1. Take a careful look at your job description and contract.

Note additional hours and tasks that are not in the description, and also look at what your contract says about "other duties as assigned." Take that documentation to your administrator and ask your building representative to join you. Be prepared to talk about the negative impact it has on your actual duties and the problems it creates, particularly if you don't have the training to fill in for others.

2. Foster a good relationship with your administrator at the start of the school year.

This way you'll avoid going into sensitive meetings as adversaries. At my

school, I asked our administrator if she'd consider becoming an NEA member—and she agreed! Now she understands union issues on a much deeper level.

Of course, not every administrator will be as cooperative. As a union leader, I've had to tell administrators that a colleague will do the extra tasks, but that we would grieve it. Often, the administrator will back off right away.

3. Ask your union reps to include the following language in your next contract.

If your contract includes broad language, like "additional duties as assigned," bring that to the attention of your local union. Use the draft language below to address these topics:

Overload and working beyond the school day or week: "In the event employees are required to perform duties in excess of provisions set forth in the contract, they shall be entitled to additional compensation."

Clearly state how much the additional compensation will be.

Additional students: "When teachers receive additional students on a temporary basis, they shall be compensated at the rate of [enter negotiated amount] per student, per day, or any part of a day."

Extra duties: "Unit members [education support professionals] may be requested to perform duties which reasonably relate to the duties contained in their job description. In addition, a unit member may be requested to perform duties which do not reasonably relate to the duties contained in their job description, provided that the district pays such employee assigned to work in a higher classification a [enter negotiated amount] differential pay above their regular rate of pay or the first column of the classification they are covering, whichever is higher."

"Unit members working in a higher classification for more than [enter negotiated number of] working days shall receive a [enter negotiated number] differential pay on the next consecutive working day."

"A unit member may be requested to perform extra duties in an equal or lower classification or fill a vacancy, provided that the district compensate such unit member at their normal rate of pay."

"Unit members shall not be left alone on a routine basis, nor serve as a substitute to be responsible for instructional education in the absence of certificated staff being assigned to the class. Any time unit members are in a classroom without a certificated staff member in excess of [enter negotiated number], administration shall be notified."

These are just a few examples, but the most important step is to start the conversation with your union representatives. Get to know your union contract at nea.org/UnionContract.

Audrey Nichols
is an educator in
the Pulaski School
District, in Little
Rock, Arkansas.



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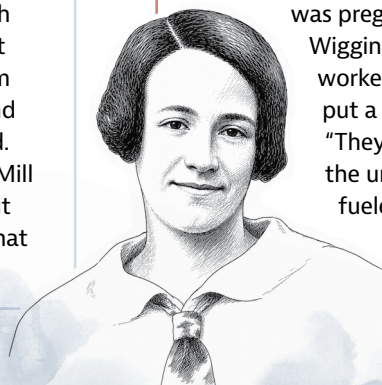
By Mary Ellen Flannery

American history includes “a long lineage of working-class heroes who, when faced with injustice and oppression, stood up, looked their bosses dead in the eye, and said, *enough*,” writes journalist Kim Kelly, author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*. But can you name any of them? Many legendary laborers are left out of history books. In detailing their lives and battles, Kelly exhorts us all to “carry the torch forward.” As Labor Day approaches, meet a few of them in these pages.



Sarah Bagley | AN EARLY REFORMER

In New England’s textile mills, in the mid-1800s, floor managers cared a lot about the health of their cotton threads—and not workers. To create hot, humid workplaces, they nailed shut the windows, making the threads less likely to snap but their “mill girls” more likely to break. Deadly “cotton lung disease,” or byssinosis, was common. As the first president of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, Sarah Bagley rang the alarm. “Whenever I raise the point that it is immoral to shut us up for 12 hours, ... I am told that we have come to the mills voluntarily and can leave when we will. Voluntarily!” Bagley raged. “The whip which brings us to Lowell is necessity.” Mill workers eventually won an 11-hour day in 1853, but it wasn’t until the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act that the 8-hour day became law.



Ella May Wiggins | MARTYR OF THE MILLS

In April 1929, workers at the Loray Mill, in Gastonia, N.C., went on strike, demanding a 40-hour workweek and a \$20 weekly wage. One of them was Ella May Wiggins, a balladeer who penned “A Mill Mother’s Lament” (later covered by Pete Seeger) and sang it on picket lines. On Sept. 14, an anti-union mob pulled Wiggins out of a carful of strikers and murdered her. “At the time, she was pregnant with her 10th child,” Kelly notes. Wiggins had made a point of involving Black workers in her union efforts. And while this put a target on her back, she fatefully said: “They’ll have to kill me to make me give up the union.” Five years later, Wiggins’ sacrifice fueled a massive textile strike involving 400,000 workers, up and down the coast.



Rose Schneiderman

A ROSE FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS

In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City killed 146 garment workers—mostly Italian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants, whose bosses had locked them into their 9th- and 10th-floor workplace. Some were as young as 14 years old. Days later, Rose Schneiderman—a leader in the Women’s Trade Union League who had led the garment workers’ strike two years earlier—told a memorial crowd: “Too much blood has been spilled. I know from experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. And the only way is through a strong working-class movement.” In 1933, then President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Schneiderman to the National Labor Advisory Board, where she advocated for domestic workers to get Social Security—something that wouldn’t happen until the 1950s.



Marvel Cooke

TRAILBLAZING JOURNALIST

Black journalist Marvel Cooke went undercover in New York City in the 1940s, posing as one of the domestic workers who gathered daily on street corners, waiting for white housewives to cruise by and hire them. Cooke was hired twice, Kelly notes, and paid \$3.40 for a hard day’s labor, scrubbing floors on her hands and knees. “I gathered strength as I scrubbed that floor. I cleaned it with the strength of all slaves everywhere who feel the whip,” Cooke later wrote in a five-part *Daily Compass* series entitled, “The Bronx Slave Market.” The answer, she said, was increased unionization of domestic workers.



Maria Moreno

CULTIVATOR OF JUSTICE

In the late 1950s, Maria Moreno, her husband Luis, and their two adult sons worked on Texas farms to support their family of 14, bringing home as little as \$114 a week, Kelly notes. Their eldest stopped eating to save food for his young siblings, causing him to go temporarily blind. Moreno began speaking out: “How do you think that I feel, seeing my son blind because we don’t got nothing to eat, while some other tables are full and wasting food!” Her story got the state welfare board to extend food assistance to farmworkers. She became the first female farmworker to be hired as a union organizer, by the AFL-CIO.



Suzette Wright | A VOICE FOR WORKING WOMEN

In 1993, Suzette Wright was a single mom in Chicago, taking college classes between shifts on a Ford assembly line. On her first day, male co-workers chanted “fresh meat.” Still, she kept on, for years, because she needed the money. “Every time something would happen, it was like a little pinch would be taken away from my personage,” she said. The final straw, Kelly notes, was Wright’s supervisor calling her to the front of a roomful of men and offering her \$5 for a sexual act. Later, the union president told her: “You’re a pretty girl, take it as a compliment.” Eventually Wright sued, winning a \$7.5 million fund to be split among 900 women workers who had been sexually harassed at the plant.

“We stood for inclusiveness and community, for our love of equity and justice—and we won.”

—Judy Heumann



Judy Heumann | DISABILITY ACTIVIST

When Judy Heumann was a student, school administrators said her wheelchair was a “fire hazard.” In 1970, when her teaching license was denied because of her disability, she sued the New York City Board of Education and became the first wheelchair user to work as a city teacher. She helped found Disabled in Action, a direct-action group that shut down the major avenues of New York City, winning legislation to end the isolation and segregation of disabled people. “We looked beyond how we each spoke and moved, how we thought and how we loved,” Heumann later wrote. “We stood for inclusiveness and community, for our love of equity and justice—and we won.”

Election 2026: Why Your *Vote Matters* for Students

By Joye Mercer Barksdale

FROM SPECIAL ED AND FOOD ASSISTANCE TO BOOK BANS AND VOUCHER SCHEMES, YOUR PUBLIC SCHOOL IS ON THE BALLOT THIS NOVEMBER

When Jacob Bennett was growing up, he felt more secure at school than anywhere else—especially compared with his turbulent, abusive home. He knew by age 10 that he wanted to be a source of security and encouragement for other children, just as his educators had been for him.

Bennett didn't understand back then how elections shaped the learning conditions at his school, in Maryland's Harford County. But today, as a teacher, voter, and elected member of the Harford County Council, he gets it.

"I signed up 21 years ago to be a teacher because I wanted to help take care of kids the way my teachers took care of me," Bennett says. "I can't really do that unless I am engaged in the political process."

He and other educators who have been elected to office have a close-up view of how elections—at the national, state, and local levels—directly impact

our students, educators, and school communities. In the midterm elections this November, they believe educators must forcefully turn back politicians who are committed to dismantling public education and other public services, and use their voices to persuade others in their communities to do the same.

What's at stake in the 2026 election?

NEA members are a force in elections! We live everywhere—in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. We reside in every congressional district and ZIP code, and typically vote at twice the rate of eligible voters overall.

Even though this is not a presidential election year, educators say the issues at stake call for a supercharged turnout in 2026. A flood of anti-public education candidates are running for Congress, statehouses, county and city governing bodies, school boards, and other offices.

At every level, they are pushing policies that harm students: Book bans that give politicians the power to overrule educators' expertise and experience; voucher schemes that siphon money and resources from public schools; union-busting measures that aim to take away workers' rights; and the defunding of safety-net programs that help students and struggling families access healthcare and food, among other damaging proposals.

And this year, the nation watched as immigration raids near schools terrified families to the point that many kept their kids at home.

"I've watched for a long time the way public education is attacked by so many different forces in society," says Timothy Surrette, a former middle school science teacher, now an associate professor of education at the University of Maine and an elected member of the Bangor School Committee. "Public education is the great equalizer, and its accessibility mission is so important.

We have to band together to protect that mission."

The president may not appear on the ballot this year, but the Trump administration's policies are, and his party controls both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. That means the candidates who win in November will determine whether the administration's agenda goes forward or goes bust.

"To me, it is crucial that every single NEA member vote and have a voice right now. We're talking about the future of not just our schools, but our society," says Ava Chiao, an independent studies teacher in San Jose, Calif., and elected member of the Cupertino Union School District Board of Education. "Education is a fundamental right, and we're the ones who can fight for our kids."

One of the Trump administration's signature items is especially dangerous,

Jacob Bennett, a teacher and county council member in Harford County, Maryland, says voting is essential in advocating for students.

these educators say: abolishing the U.S. Department of Education. It has the potential to wipe out expertise and disrupt funding to states and school districts, cause layoffs, reduce special education services and resources, and increase barriers to post-secondary education.

The shift, coupled with the administration's decimation of the offices overseeing civil rights and special education, makes students much more vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and even certain types of assault. Without the department as a shield, they and their families will have little recourse and few assurances of protection.

"We need to be advocates for public education," Surrette says. "One way you advocate is by looking at the candidates for office, understanding what their positions are on education, and voting."

When Chiao's peers sometimes question the value of their vote, she tells them, "Getting involved in politics is getting involved in the policies that govern our work. We can elect people who support public education, and we can even run for office ourselves."

How electing education allies helps your school

A few years ago, Bennett did not imagine he'd run for office. His plan was to teach for 30 years in his town and retire. But in his first year as a kindergarten teacher, 500 educators were cut from Harford County schools. Bennett was safe, but for the next few years he never knew if he'd have a job from one school year to the next.

That experience motivated him and his wife, Abbie, also an educator, to dig into their county's finances and priorities. He met with their representative on the County Council and was shocked by how little the



Timothy Surrette

Election 2026:

Why Your Vote Matters for Students

politician knew about local public schools. “Abbie and I kept complaining that someone needed to run against him,” he says. “And then we decided it was us.”

Bennett, elected in 2022, says he provides colleagues on the Council with a deeper understanding of the challenges educators and students face. Recently, when the county executive proposed reducing the education budget by \$20 million, Bennett persuaded the Council to cut the amount in half. “I didn’t want the school budget to be cut at all, ... but

ultimately we saved 120 positions.”

He also introduced a bill giving county workers binding arbitration rights that enable a neutral, third-party arbitrator to make the final—and legally enforceable—decision in a contract dispute between a union and the county. The Council unanimously passed it in 2025, even overriding the county executive’s veto. “There are people who would rather I not be a voice for working families,” he says. “But I’ve built coalitions and even



Jayne
Sawtelle

partnerships with unlikely allies who believe that together, we can stand up for everyday people.”

Before Bennett took office, the county executive tried to bar him, arguing that being a teacher created a conflict of interest. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in Bennett’s favor. But the county executive is on the ballot this year, and he introduced a bill to rewrite the Council’s charter to explicitly exclude public-service workers from serving. Election Day will determine whether this anti-public education, anti-public worker agenda succeeds or fails.

Elevating educator voices

Surette says that serving on the school committee means being able to “elevate the voices of educators and really make them a key part of the process.” This was especially valuable, he notes, when the board created, debated, and ultimately passed a policy, in 2025, that bars cellphones when class is in session. Surette says the change has improved students’ focus and engagement.

Jayne Sawtelle, a retired teacher and member of the Portland School Committee in Maine, says educators elected to governing bodies can help bring home the impact of policy choices made at the state and even national level. Sawtelle, who spent 30 years as a music teacher before running for school committee, points out that many Portland students were impacted when Congress carried out a Trump administration priority to cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—a food assistance program for low-income families.

Make sure your voting plan isn't top secret! Share it widely with family members, friends, and colleagues.

Do You Have a Plan to Vote?

When the Gallup organization polls Americans on the most trustworthy professions, nurses and educators are always at the top. This election year, be a voting influencer! Talk with your colleagues, friends, and family about the importance of supporting pro-public education candidates.

Create your plan to vote with NEA’s online tool, at edvotes.org/MakeAPlan. You can customize the tool to get voting and candidate information in your state and easily share with others. Highlights include:

- STEP 1:** Check your registration status, especially if it’s been a while since you last voted. Make sure you are registered to vote at your current address.
- STEP 2:** If you plan to vote absentee, request an absentee ballot. Depending on your state, you can either drop it off in person or mail it in.
- STEP 3:** Before going to the polls or filling out your mail-in ballot, familiarize yourself with who’s on your ballot and see the pro-public education candidates recommended by NEA.
- STEP 4:** Confirm your polling place if you’re voting in person. If you’re voting absentee, check where you can drop your ballot off. If you’re mailing it in, confirm the address and the date by which it must be postmarked.
- STEP 5:** Sign up for voting reminders from NEA, which you can receive by email or text. Find all of this information at edvotes.org/MakeAPlan.

“We need to vote for people who are fighting for us, not fighting to take away our voice.”

—Ava Chiao (right), a teacher and school board member in San Jose, Calif.

Fortunately, a local nonprofit, founded to support arts and extracurricular programs in public schools, stepped in to help. But that would not have been necessary if more lawmakers in Congress used their power to support working families and students.

“The foundation saved a lot of families from going hungry—families that were also on the verge of being unhoused,” Sawtelle says. “That foundation was supposed to help provide the ‘extras,’ but because of federal policy and how it affects what happens here, they are having to work with the schools just to provide the basics.”

Chiao, elected in 2022, says that her successful campaign was fueled by educators who understand how elected leaders can either support or undermine student success as well as educators’ working conditions. She knows educators in her wealthy Silicon Valley district who can’t afford to live where they work. And that hurts staff retention. She is urging her board to convert unused property into affordable housing, perhaps specifically geared toward educators. Chiao is in the minority on that issue, but Election Day could change that.

Make no mistake—your right to vote is on the ballot

Some politicians are working overtime to make it harder for Americans to vote. With the president’s encouragement, members of his party are advancing legislation to make it harder for certain groups—particularly communities of color, older voters, and students—to vote. Politicians in many state legislatures have already passed such laws and redrawn districts to dilute the voice of people who don’t agree with them.



Earlier this year, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a decision that dismantled a key enforcement tool of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The decision gives states the greenlight to redraw voting maps, even if those states have historically discriminated against voters based on race.

“Educators teach students that democracy is something we practice, protect, and pass on,” says NEA President Becky Pringle. “Voting is both a right and a responsibility, and every eligible voter should have equal access to the ballot.”

But that won’t happen without the right people in office.

“Who is creating these voter suppression laws? The people we voted for,” Chiao says. “That’s why we need to vote for people who are fighting for us, not fighting to take away our voice or fighting for whatever some millionaire or billionaire is asking them to do.

They’re not fighting for the students. We have to do that.”

The candidates and issues on the ballot, coupled with threats to the right to vote itself, make it even more imperative for educators to vote in 2026, Bennett says.

“The electoral process is like building a sandcastle. The sandcastle is still there when you leave the beach, but then the tide comes in and you’ve got to rebuild it the next day,” says Bennett, who likes to point out that his 2022 electoral victory highlights the importance of every vote: He won by only 92 votes. “If we want to preserve and restore the democratic values that mean the most to us, if we don’t want to lose the nation we’ve created and want to maintain it for our children and grandchildren, we can’t sit back and let the waves keep washing away what we’ve built.” 🏖️

Building Power at the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly

WITH PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER ATTACK, THOUSANDS OF NEA MEMBERS MEET IN DENVER TO STEER THE NATION'S LARGEST LABOR UNION

By Tim Walker

Roughly 6,000 educators from around the nation gathered in Denver, Colo., on July 3-7, for the 2026 NEA Annual Meeting and 105th Representative Assembly (RA). Every year, state and local unions elect and send thousands of delegates from around the U.S. to draft, debate, and adopt policies that set the course for the association.

The future was front and center as delegates, in addition to debating new policies and approving a new budget, elected a new leadership team to direct the association over the next few years.

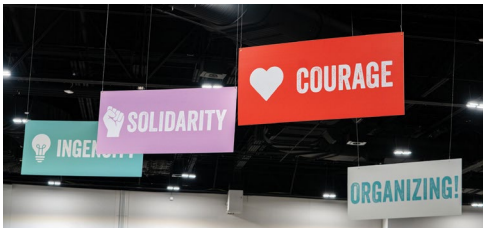
Delegates met the new ambassador for NEA's Read Across America, WNBA legend and Ohio Hall of Famer Helen Darling. They celebrated the 60th anniversary of the historic merger between NEA and the American Teachers Association (NEA recently named the ATA an NEA legacy organization, honoring its pivotal role in advancing educational opportunity and strengthening the teaching profession). And they took part in training to prepare for advocacy and organizing when they return home.

Becky Pringle says farewell

In her final RA keynote address, NEA President Becky Pringle, praised educators across the nation for their activism and resilience in the face of a relentless assault on their profession, their students, and their unions.



(From top) NEA President Becky Pringle delivers the keynote address at the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly (RA), in Denver, Colo.; RA delegates collaborate at a training session; energizing signs hang above the 6,000-person event.



"You have stood in your power," Pringle told the delegates. "I have never been more proud to call myself an educator. Across this country, I see you doing what I asked you to: You are fighting back. You are fighting forward when others have given in."

NEA Executive Director Kim Anderson paid tribute to Pringle, noting her superb leadership on member organizing, racial and social justice, community school expansion, and professional learning. "In every pillar of our union, thanks to you, we have gotten stronger."

Delegates honor excellence and elect new NEA leaders

Delegates heard from 2026 NEA Education Support Professional of the Year Stanley "Ric" Calhoun, National Teacher of the Year Leon Smith, and NEA Higher Educator of the Year Clinton Smith.

In one of the event's most poignant moments, NEA awarded its highest honor, the Friend of Education Award, posthumously to Illinois Education Association President Albert J. "Al" Llorens, who died last September.

On two of the assembly's four days, NEA reserved time to train delegates in the campaign strategies, skills, tools, and resources needed to advocate for public education—at the bargaining table, at the statehouse, or even during a run for office.

Delegates were also tasked with electing a new slate of NEA leaders. When the votes were counted on July 6, they elected Princess R. Moss as president, Noel Candelaria as vice president, and Robert Varela Rodriguez as secretary-treasurer.

The delegates also elected two NEA Executive Committee members. Cecily Myart-Cruz, an elementary and middle school teacher from Los Angeles and president of the United Teachers Los Angeles, and Shannon McCann, a middle school special education teacher from Seattle, Wash., will both serve three-year terms.

The new leaders will assume office on September 1. 🌟

New NEA Leaders Elected to Top Roles

A lifelong organizer who rose from a rural Virginia classroom, President-elect Princess Moss envisions a union where every member is engaged

By Tim Walker

Every year at the NEA Representative Assembly, delegates come together to do the business of the nation's largest labor union. But this year, in Denver, they were also tasked with electing a new leadership team, as NEA President Becky Pringle's six-year tenure came to a close.

On July 5, they cast their ballots for Princess R. Moss as president, Noel Candelaria as vice president, and Robert Varela Rodriguez as secretary-treasurer. The team assumes office on September 1.

These new leaders take the helm at a perilous time for public education, as the Trump administration has carried out a sweeping and destructive anti-public education agenda: Hollowing out the U.S. Department of Education, slashing funding, expanding access to federally supported voucher programs, and rolling back civil rights protections for our most vulnerable students.

Moss, who served two terms as NEA vice president and before that as secretary-treasurer, is a passionate advocate for public schools as well as a skilled and experienced organizer at the local, state, and national level.

The daughter of two school bus drivers, Moss joined the Virginia Education Association (VEA) as a student member while studying music education at the



NEA's newly elected leadership team: (center) NEA President-elect Princess R. Moss; (right) NEA Vice President-elect Noel Candelaria; (left) NEA Secretary-Treasurer-elect Robert Varela Rodriguez.

University of Mary Washington. She then spent 21 years teaching music in Louisa County Public Schools, a rural school district about 50 miles southwest of Richmond.

Moss first felt the power of collective action early on in her teaching career. She recalls her colleagues in the staff room talking about holding down second jobs and not being paid enough to make ends meet. Moss went to a meeting at her local, the Louisa County Education Association, and was asked to give a presentation to the school board about salary and benefits.

"It was amazing," she recalls. "The public and educators—members and non-members—came out to support us, and the board members listened to us. We came with data about our pay and pay in surrounding areas. We told our story. And they approved salary increases."

Moss quickly rose through the ranks of the local, eventually being elected VEA president, in 2005. She was elected to the NEA executive committee and then as NEA Secretary-Treasurer, in 2014.

Even as they face unprecedented attacks on schools, their profession, and their livelihoods, Moss believes educators can win hearts and minds to help reverse this destructive path.

"We are attacked because many politicians know that we have that power, and we can use it to make our schools stronger and our students' and educators' lives better," she says.

As president, Moss hopes to transform NEA by helping create a more proactive union—one that continuously organizes and engages every member year-round. "Many educators underestimate the power they hold," Moss says. "Organizing can be a frightening word, but it's really about members being able to talk about all the wonderful things they do for their students, about how they want to support each other and improve the profession. Every educator has a story." 🌟

What Makes a Happy Educator?

Better Working Conditions!

By Tim Walker

EDUCATORS ARE ORGANIZING FOR BETTER PLACES TO WORK AND LEARN

The cliché is no one goes into the teaching profession to become rich. But educators have a right to expect a clean, safe, and supportive working environment.

Hannah Ball, an elementary school teacher in the Poudre School District, in Fort Collins, Colo., didn't anticipate working in a classroom that topped 90 degrees. "It was unbearable," she recalls. "Students were passing out and behavior problems only got

worse." Unfortunately, extreme temperatures—including cold classrooms during winter—are among the many ways working conditions have declined.

"It's not OK to work in an unsafe classroom. It's not OK not to have enough time in the day. It's not OK that our mental health is being affected," Ball says. "We always say working conditions are students' learning conditions. ... But they are also our *living* conditions. We take so much of this job home with us."

Student behavior problems, lack of autonomy, increasing class size, crushing workloads, and an unsafe climate, are just a few of the working conditions that leave many teachers and school support staff burned out.

Workplace conditions were one of the major reasons educators in Albemarle County, Virginia, fought so hard to restore their right to collectively bargain. In 2024, they won the right to bargain for the first time.

"It wasn't necessarily about money. It was about our experiences everyday at work," says Albemarle Education Association President Mary McIntyre.

"I think [working conditions] are everyone's No. 1 concern, says Noelle Gilzow, president of the Columbia MNEA (Missouri National Education Association). "Especially in a climate where large salary increases may be unlikely, we're making sure leaders address these other issues."

Teachers' Top-Ranked Sources of Job-Related Stress

(Respondents were asked to name their top three)

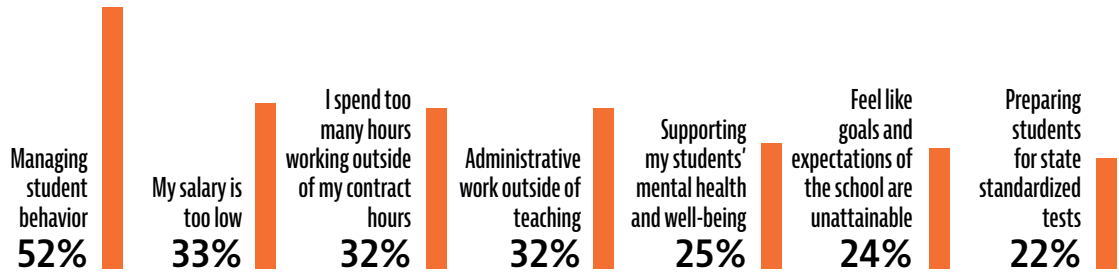


CHART SOURCE: RAND, 2026 STATE OF THE AMERICAN TEACHER SURVEY

Feeling Safer at Work

The percentage of staff in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education who are concerned with student behavior and mental health.

>50%

"Too often, when teachers and support staff are attacked, we're pretty much told to suck it up. Maybe we get a little pep talk," says Andrea Kelly, president of the Humboldt County Support Staff Organization, in Nevada. "That's not enough."

A 2026 survey by the RAND Corporation (paid for in part by NEA) found that more than one-half of teachers said managing student behavior was a top source of job-related stress. NEA members have also reported that student behavioral issues are a big concern.

Student misbehavior covers a spectrum of disruptions—from incessant personal device usage in class to more serious offenses, such as verbal or physical attacks on school staff. Educators and their unions have been instrumental in persuading district leaders and lawmakers to pass restrictions on these devices in school. But addressing extreme student behaviors is a much more complicated and urgent task.

Students exhibit these behaviors for a lot of reasons, says Stanley "Ric" Calhoun, a campus supervisor at Inglemoor High School, in Kenmore, Wash. "We want to be equitable and fair in how we support students," he notes. "At the same time, we shouldn't excuse behavior that puts our staff in unsafe conditions."

A 2025 report by the American Psychological Association and NEA revealed that 80 percent of teachers and 65 percent of school staff experienced at least one incident of verbal or threatening violence from students during the 2021 – 2022 academic year. Rates of physical violence were lower (56 percent of teachers and 53 percent of school staff) but still substantial.

The percentage of teachers who reported intentions to quit the teaching profession based on experiences with violence and concerns about school climate.

43%

Ric Calhoun says being equitable in addressing student behavior shouldn't come at the expense of protecting staff. (Calhoun was named the 2026 NEA ESP of the Year! Read the story on Page 16.)



PHOTO: LINDA WOO, WASHINGTON EDUCATION ASSOCIATION; DATA SOURCE: AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION AND NEA, "UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST EDUCATORS IN SCHOOLS," 2025

For decades, educators and their unions have led the calls for more resources and staffing to address the root causes of behavioral incidents. They have also demanded measures to protect and aid school staff.

Demanding workplace protections

In 2023, NYSUT (New York State United Teachers) successfully lobbied the state legislature to expand the Workplace Violence Prevention Act to include public schools. The law requires schools to collect data on violent incidents and develop mitigation efforts, among other measures.

Kelly led a four-year battle in her district to win a contractual clause stipulating that if a member of the school support staff is injured by a student, the district will provide paid administrative leave, instead of that staff member having to use sick days. Other districts have followed suit, and Kelly says the next step is making it state law. "It was huge getting that into the contract, but we're not stopping there."

And in March 2026, members of NEA Danbury, in Connecticut, established the state's first contractual definition of assault in a collective bargaining agreement for teachers. This provision makes it easier for educators to retain their full salary if they are out on workers' compensation as a result of a student assault.

Reducing Class Size

For many teachers, class size is the working condition issue. In a classroom with too many students, fostering a learning environment in which students thrive can be impossible.

According to data released by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2024, more than 1 in 4 of the nation's public schools dealt with teacher and staff shortages by creating larger classes.

Reducing class size can be complicated and expensive, but ... well ... so what?

Class size matters and is worth the investment. "Ample research indicates that children in smaller classes achieve better outcomes, both academic and otherwise.

Furthermore, class-size reduction can be an effective strategy for closing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps," writes school funding expert Bruce Baker in the report, "Does Money Matter in Education?"

The impact of large class sizes on a district's ability to recruit and retain teachers is undeniable.

After years of being told the number of students in a classroom didn't matter or that it was just too darn expensive to fix (or both), teachers, students, and parents have had enough.

Armed with this compelling evidence and their own stories, teachers have made class-size limits a focus of their collective bargaining and legislative advocacy. And when necessary, they have gone on strike in part to lower class sizes, with some degree of success.



Teachers' ideal number of students per class.

19

Upholding class-size limits

In April, a group of teachers in Denver, Colo., delivered a petition to the school board, calling for class-size and workload relief. They demanded that the district honor what had already been negotiated in the Denver Classroom Teachers Association contract the previous year.

The contract stipulated that beginning in 2026, the

district would work toward keeping K-5 class sizes at 30 students or fewer, track class sizes, and document efforts to reduce overcrowding. The district, Denver teachers said, was falling short on tracking these levels.

At a press conference, high school English teacher Josh Thompson painted a picture of what overcrowded classrooms look like.

"It's easy to throw out numbers, like 35 students in a classroom or 130 across 5 periods," Thompson said. "But in reality, it's students packed in with no space, and educators stretched thin, trying to meet every need. Then we're expected to plan and grade in chaotic shared spaces. That's how class size and workload collide."

The percentage of teachers who say smaller class sizes would have a major impact on improving their morale.

51%

Having More Time For Teaching

Teachers should have enough time in the school day for lesson planning, sharing best practices with colleagues, mentoring, and grading. But 84 percent of teachers said there is not enough time during regular work hours to perform these and other tasks, according to a Pew Research Center survey. The reason? Their workloads—cramped with administrative duties, ineffective professional development, or covering staff shortages—are too heavy.

"We seem to get a new curriculum every year," says Noelle Gilzow, president of Columbia MNEA (Missouri National Education Association). "So that eats up a good amount of time. Now schools are all data-driven, so much of planning time is taken up by data analysis."

Planning time—particularly self-directed planning time—is a key element of teacher autonomy, which is critical in job satisfaction, says Lora Bartlett, associate professor of education at the University of California Santa Cruz. Speaking at a Harvard Graduate School of Education panel in

January 2025, Bartlett said, "We are underutilizing teachers' expertise. They're feeling the disrespect, and they're not wanting to stay in the profession." Bartlett's research shows that satisfied teachers feel their expertise, their knowledge, and their perspective is valued.

Bargaining for planning time

Local unions across the nation, including Columbia MNEA, have bargained successfully for expanded planning time.

After winning the right to bargain, in 2024, Virginia's Albemarle Education Association (AEA) made planning time a priority when they headed to the bargaining table for the first time. In addition to duty-free lunch periods of 25-30 minutes and limits on required staff meetings and evening events, AEA also negotiated a minimum of 50 minutes of daily planning time for all licensed staff—a big win, especially for elementary teachers. While state law guarantees secondary teachers at least one entire class period or block of planning every day, it gives

Why it's So Hard for Teachers to Get Everything Done During the Workday

They have too much work

98%

Often spend time helping students outside of class

72%

Often perform non-teaching duties

65%

Often have to cover for other teachers when they're not available

51%

elementary teachers an average of only 30 minutes daily spread over a week.

"Our contract ensures planning time every single day, and more of it," says AEA President Mary McIntyre.

Percentage of teachers who said their morale would improve a lot if they had more time to plan during the day.

54%

Improving working conditions was a major incentive behind Albemarle County educators' push for collective bargaining, says Albemarle Education Association president Mary McIntyre.



Cooling Down the Classroom

Extreme heat in schools has become commonplace as buildings decay, outdated HVAC systems break down, and climate change brings higher temperatures everywhere, posing serious health risks to students and staff.

"Working in heat takes a pretty tremendous toll on your body, especially over an eight-hour workday," says Cris Fierro, a science teacher in the Poudre School District, in Fort Collins, Colo. "It's very difficult teaching students who are also not able to fully engage, because they're also struggling with how hot it is."

Classrooms are not the only locations affected by heat. For school bus drivers and students, the bus ride to school is another layer of exposure to extreme temperatures.

Many district leaders' message to staff, students, and families essentially amounts to, "Well, the school year is almost over, and here's a big fan for your classroom." But May is getting hotter, and



Members of the Poudre Education Association Heat Committee (left to right): Sarah Vaughn, Amanda Baldwin, Kim Carlson, Hannah Ball, Candice Mozer, and Cris Fierro.

oppressive temperatures can stick around long after the school year begins in August or early September.

Coping with a sweltering classroom isn't just a bothersome rite of passage before summer break. And, in Poudre, regardless of the temperature outdoors or in the classroom, school would always stay in session, forcing school staff and students to literally sweat it out.

Making the district feel the heat

Hannah Ball's elementary classroom, in Fort Collins, occasionally topped 90 degrees. Some classrooms in the district hit 100. "It was unbearable," Ball says. "Students were passing out and behavior problems only got worse."

In 2024, fed up with district's inaction, Fierro and Ball joined other educators to form the Poudre Education Association Heat Committee. They documented classroom temperatures across the district and called attention to the

The percentage by which air-conditioned classrooms mitigate the damaging effects of heat exposure on student learning.

78%

issue. They persuaded the district to adopt protocols for early release days, which went into effect for the 2025 – 2026 school year. Portable cooling systems were also installed in classrooms, which have been effective, despite being noisy and in need of constant maintenance.

While early release days are necessary in the short term, they can be hard for teachers and especially families. "It's not a long-term solution," Ball says.

Fierro also serves on a districtwide committee that is looking at shifting the school calendar to avoid the hottest days and weeks.

The ultimate goal of the heat committee's work with the district will be to bring air conditioners and cooling systems into each classroom, Ball says. "The world is getting hotter, and we need to do something, because teaching and learning in these temperatures can be dangerous."

The percentage of K-12 students in the 65 largest U.S. cities who attend public schools in extreme urban heat islands.

76%

Supporting Life Outside of Work

When Stephanie Castro, an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles, became pregnant a couple of years ago, she was understandably anxious about using up all of her regular leave to spend time with her newborn. California does not have statewide parental leave for public employees. That means educators in Los Angeles—the second-largest school district in the nation—had gone without this critical protection.

"It was very stressful," Castro says. "People should not be penalized for having a family."

Teachers are less likely than other working adults to report that their employers offer certain benefits to help them maintain a work-life balance, according to a 2025 RAND study. The report also found that three times as many teachers as similar working adults said it was difficult to change their work schedule or attend to personal or family matters while at work.

Parental leave and childcare could make an enormous difference in helping teachers manage work as well as household and family responsibilities. That's why

educators and their unions have been making the case for more leave as a way to keep educators in the profession.

Parental leave at last

In April, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) achieved a historic win. After a long and combative bargaining session with the district, the union secured four weeks of parental leave for school employees.

"It really shows the strength of our union," Castro says. "And it's a big win for people who are thinking about the teaching profession. They may want to be an educator, but they want to know: 'Am I going to be supported outside the classroom?'"

The California Teachers Association (CTA) is taking the UTLA win statewide. Erika Jones,

The percentage of teachers with children who said their employers offer paid parental leave that's distinct from other paid leave.

30%

CTA secretary-treasurer and an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles, reports that the state union is sponsoring a bill that would provide up to 14 weeks of paid pregnancy leave for pre-K–14 educators.

"The hope now is that educators won't have to sacrifice when it comes to their own family," Jones says. "They will see the benefits of having the time to heal and bond with their families."

In a historic win this year, United Teachers Los Angeles secured four weeks of parental leave for school employees.

The percentage of teachers who said their schools or districts did not provide any supports to help them balance home and work responsibilities.

56%



Creating **AWE** in the Classroom

By Cindy Long

THIS SCHOOL YEAR, SEEK NEW WAYS TO SPARK CURIOSITY AND WONDER IN YOUR STUDENTS

For science teacher Ryan Tucek, the excitement and possibility that come with a new school year are energizing. But capturing that excitement and extending it through the following months is what really sustains him.

As educators, we get a different group of young people each year, and “everything we’re going to show them ... is new,” says Tucek, who teaches physics and astrophysics as well as Earth and space science at Penn Trafford High School, in western Pennsylvania. “Relaying lessons in projects or experiments with real-world applications that build toward a big reveal, the kind that make your students go, ‘Ohhh!’ The anticipation of that? That’s the best part of my job.”

Those “ohhh!” moments come when educators take curriculum from memorization of facts and figures to true discovery, turning a drab, grey lesson into vibrant technicolor. Helping students find these moments of awe sets them up for a lifetime of wonder, curiosity, and the ability to look for and appreciate the beauty and connections that surround all of us.

Tucek strives to create those moments for his students as often as possible because he’s learned

they’re more likely to remember that lesson for the rest of the year, maybe even for the rest of their lives.

“Awe is what makes you go wow!” he says. “When you aren’t sure how something works, but then explore and come to understanding—those are the moments of awe that I want to see.”

Connecting with something bigger than ourselves

In the book, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, author Dacher Keltner writes: “As children develop, regular feelings of awe animate their curiosity in school and predict better academic performance.”

When educators tap into awe, Keltner finds, they quickly realize that so much of their work is getting students to be amazed, to wonder, and to question. Their students not only want to learn more, but they also feel more connected to each other and to the world.

After more than 20 years of research across 26 cultures around the world, Keltner identified eight wonders of life that spark awe: the moral beauty of others, collective movement, nature,



“Relaying lessons ... that build toward a big reveal, the kind that make your students go, ‘Ohhh!’ ... That’s the best part of my job.”

—Ryan Tucek (middle), science teacher, in Pennsylvania



(From top) Science teacher Ryan Tucek takes his students to the school planetarium at least once a week; Megan Donoghue captures students’ imaginations with games and fun facts about dinosaurs during “Dino Days.”

visual design, music, spirituality, big ideas, and encountering the beginning and end of life.

“Awe is the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world, like looking up at millions of stars in the night sky,” Keltner says.

It’s a feeling that we don’t immediately understand, he adds, but it can be sparked by everything from noticing someone’s exceptional courage and strength to experiencing the power of nature or feeling transported by soaring music or by the collective movement of people dancing.

Finding awe in the night sky

Tucek’s school, in Harrison City, is about 30 miles outside of Pittsburgh, and the night sky isn’t the inky black of more remote areas. But it’s dark enough for students to see the constellations they learn about in his class. The high school also has its own planetarium, which Tucek’s classes visit at least once a week. The planetarium itself is awe inspiring, but he says the real magic is applying what they learn to the actual night sky.

One of those occasions came last spring with the Lyrid meteor showers, which, according to

Creating AWE in the Classroom

"Awe happens when you are paying attention."

—James McDaniel, elementary school teacher, in California

NASA, are among the oldest meteor showers that stargazers have marveled at for nearly 3,000 years.

The students learned about the constellation Lyra in the planetarium. "Being able to find it in the sky, and then witnessing meteor showers, numbering 15 to 20 an hour, is an unforgettable experience," Tucek says.

Seeing a new life begin

James McDaniel, a fifth-grade teacher at Washington Elementary School in Sacramento, Calif., brought an incubator into his classroom with 12 fertilized chicken eggs inside, so students could experience the wonder of the beginning of life.

"I wanted them to see in real time the life process in a way you can't get from a textbook," he says.

The students monitored the eggs for 21 days, taking turns logging the temperature and humidity of the incubator, turning the eggs to prevent the hatchlings from sticking to the shell's membrane, and "candling" the eggs by shining a bright light on them to see the embryo as it grew.



Nicole Quinn

"When the first chicken hatched, there was an overwhelming sense of awe among the students," McDaniel says. "To see this baby chicken peck its way out of the egg—it was tremendous!"

He notes, "When [students] pay attention to the world happening around them, they can learn so much more than what's in a regular two-dimensional lesson. Awe happens when you are paying attention."

McDaniel also encourages his class to notice the plum tree in the school garden. They watch it through the seasons: From the vibrant leaves of autumn to the bare branches in winter to the tiny buds that form in late winter. The buds bloom into flowers, which bees pollinate. Then the leaves form, and plums grow and ripen, offering food for the wildlife. He has them pay attention to all of it.

"I go to my own senses of awe," says McDaniel. "I like to be out in nature myself. When I'm on a trail and I take in a panoramic view of my environment, I get a sense of awe as I witness all of these systems working together in harmony."

Experiencing beauty in kindness

Down the hall from McDaniel, Nicole Quinn teaches her sixth graders a lesson on "moral beauty," the first of the eight wonders of life identified by Keltner.

She shows a video of a man who lives in Bangkok, Thailand. The man performs acts of kindness each day on his walk to work. Under a leaky pipe, he places a nearby plant to catch the water. He stops to give money to a mother and her daughter, begging for education donations on a street corner. He helps a woman maneuver her food cart over a steep curb and then offers half of his meal to a hungry stray dog. He does this day after day. The plant grows into a flowering bush that attracts butterflies. He sees the daughter walking away from the street corner in a school uniform. A friendship flourishes with the woman with the cart, and the dog becomes the man's loyal companion.

Before the students watch the video, Quinn asks them what beauty is. Most answers

focused on appearances, but after the video, the discussion changed. They said there's beauty in doing something for others. They began to realize that beauty isn't superficial; it's much deeper and more expansive than how things look on the outside.

"The kids started to have this really profound conversation about what beauty truly means and how they can bring it into their own communities," Quinn says. "What really resonated with the class was the idea that there's so much beauty around us if we stop and really look at what is truly beautiful."

Creating 'aha' moments

Megan Donoghue was a theater major in college and worked as a character performer at Disney World. Now she teaches second grade at Citrus Cove Elementary School, in Boynton Beach, Fla., where she brings her theatrical energy to all of her lessons, like the ever-popular "Dino Days"! She "set designs" her classroom with dinosaur posters, pictures, stuffed animals, and costumes for her students.

"Awe, to me, means finding a connection with a subject that my students didn't know they had," she says. "It's the 'aha' moment."

LEARN MORE

Find Awe in Your Work and Personal Life

UC Berkeley's Greater Good in Education is a free, research-based, resource hub and professional learning community that helps educators bring more meaning and happiness to their life and their classrooms. Get more than 350 free practices at ggie.berkeley.edu.



James McDaniel's students watched baby chicks hatch in their classroom, experiencing the beginning of life.



Debi Lawson (below)—trained to teach about "moral beauty" by colleague Nicole Quinn (above)—gets inspiring answers.

HOW TO WORK ACROSS Parenting *Styles*



By Brenda Álvarez

**STRONG
EDUCATOR-
PARENT
RELATIONSHIPS
HELP STUDENTS
SUCCEED**

Like most educators, Chris Thomas has learned there is no single “right” way to raise a child. In his 26 years as a middle school teacher in Ann Arbor, Mich., he has worked with families who check grades daily, parents who prefer to step back and let children solve problems on their own, and caregivers who fall somewhere in between.

As a parent himself (with two high schoolers and a middle schooler), he understands why so many families blend different approaches to parenting.

“There are many right choices,” he says. “Ultimately, we all want healthy, highly functioning kids who care about their community.”

That mindset sits at the center of how many educators approach today’s evolving parenting landscape. Labels have multiplied in recent years, from “tech-conscious” to “free-range” to “lighthouse” parenting, just to name a few.

Learning to navigate those differences can be just as important as lesson planning or classroom management.



**Chris
Thomas**

Thomas says his own parenting style blends structure with flexibility. He and his wife try to give their children space to solve problems independently while also creating opportunities to check in and offer support.

Veteran educators say the key is to avoid assumptions and focus instead on communication, curiosity, and trust. The categories matter less than the relationships behind them.

Setting expectations

Lakeisha Patterson, a third-grade reading teacher, in Texas, and mother of two daughters, describes herself as a “hybrid” parent: Deeply involved while also intentionally teaching independence.

“I don’t want them to become codependent,” Patterson says. “I want them to learn how to navigate life and how to problem-solve and [think critically] without me being there.”

Her approach is shaped in part by her own childhood. Raised by a young mother with a strict parenting style, Patterson says she now thinks carefully about which lessons she wants

to carry forward and which she hopes to leave behind.

She says she is “adamant” about not perpetuating some behaviors, like being overprotective, but sees value in other lessons from her childhood.

That self-awareness carries into her classroom at a Title I school. At the start of every school year, Patterson sends families a survey asking what she should know about their child, what goals they have, and what support systems already exist at home.

The responses help her better understand students and their communication styles, as well as parents’ expectations.

Some families want weekly updates and regular reassurance. Others prefer only major communications. She tries to use the survey results as a road map for building trust.

“I struggle with understanding why people get upset about helicopter parents,” Patterson says. “The more involved, the more active, the more hands-on you are—great! That means we’re going to be in tune.”



**Lakeisha
Patterson**

Eight Parenting Styles to Know

Helicopter: Highly involved parenting focused on close monitoring and support.

Free-Range: Encourages independence, exploration, and problem-solving.

Tiger: High expectations and strong emphasis on achievement and discipline.

Gentle: Centers empathy, emotional regulation, and respectful communication.

Lighthouse: Provides guidance and stability while allowing children autonomy.

Tech-Conscious: Focuses on healthy technology habits, digital wellness, and balanced screen use.

Conscious: Encourages self-awareness, intentional responses, and breaking unhealthy generational patterns.

Lawn Mower: Attempts to remove obstacles before children encounter them.

HOW TO WORK ACROSS
**Parenting
Styles**

Still, she says strong relationships also require clear boundaries. Patterson establishes communication expectations early, including limiting late-night messaging and encouraging parents to address concerns directly with teachers before escalating issues elsewhere. “We’re a team,” she says. “We have to work together.”

Understanding different life experiences

Lindsey Smith, who teaches leadership and gifted and talented students, in Idaho, says one of the most important lessons for new educators is learning to lead with curiosity, not assumptions.

“Every single parent that walks through the door has a reason for how they show up,” Smith says. “They’ve got a whole context we don’t understand.”

Over 16 years in education, Smith has worked with families across the parenting spectrum, from highly structured to more laid-back households. Regardless of style, she says, her approach stays largely the same: Communicate clearly, establish trust early, and keep the child at the center of every conversation.

“My job isn’t to change their parenting style,” Smith says. “It’s to build trust and find common ground in supporting their child.”

She intentionally contacts each family with something positive at least once every quarter—even if it’s a quick note recognizing leaderships skills, organization, or growth in the classroom.

“Some parents, by the time they get to middle school, are used to getting calls from the school only when something is going wrong,” Smith says.

She says those early moments of positive communication help establish trust before difficult conversations ever become necessary.

Getting to know students

Crystal Boyd Funderburk, an occupational therapist in Ohio who has worked in education

for 18 years, describes her own parenting style as “drone-ish”—nearby and supportive, but intentionally staying in the background.

As a parent, she says she has always tried to balance guidance with boundaries. She wants her children to build independence on their own.

When her daughter was 12, Boyd Funderburk would place her phone, tablet, and smartwatch in a designated station at night instead of staying in her bedroom. Sleep and balance, she says, mattered more than constant access to technology.

At the time, her daughter didn’t always agree with those limits. Now in college, her daughter is starting to say, “I see that now,” Boyd Funderburk notes.

Professionally, Boyd Funderburk says that same philosophy carries into her work with families and students. Before reviewing evaluations or support plans, she tries to first understand the child in front of her, such as their strengths, frustrations, interests, and areas where they may need support.

“Get to know the kiddos,” she says. That relationship-building, she says, becomes especially important when working with highly involved families. Rather than framing parents as difficult, Boyd Funderburk tries to understand their involvement and how educators and parents can work together more sustainably.

She’ll tell a parent: “I want your student to lead, and I want you to be the supporting parent, like a supporting actor.” She asks them, “What is our end goal? A forever-dependent child or an increasingly independent adult?”



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“There are many right choices. Ultimately, we all want healthy, highly functioning kids who care about their community.”

—Chris Thomas, middle school teacher, in Michigan

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Planting Respect in Hawaii

By Mary Ellen Flannery

A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND HIGH SCHOOL COURSE IN HAWAII TEACHES FILIPINO HISTORY, CULTURE, AND PRIDE

When Michelle Aquino's great-grandfather came to Hawaii as a *sakada*, a plantation laborer, his bosses paid him a dime a day. A single cigar in the company store cost 5 cents, or a half day's wages.

"In the plantation hierarchy, Filipino workers came later [beginning in 1906], were paid the lowest, and given the most grueling jobs," Aquino recalls. That historical lack of status still affects how many people think, she says. Aquino grew up hearing Filipino jokes; her relatives were likened to termites. Sometimes, to avoid shame, the grandchildren of sakadas tell people they are Spanish.

"For many [Filipino] people, there's this type of identity crisis, of feeling less than," she says.

Today, a new Filipino history and culture class

for Hawaii high school students—developed by students and educators, including Aquino—aims to flip those feelings. The truth is, Filipinos are essential to agricultural and labor history, and to our current economy, Aquino says. The problem is students don't know it.

"Filipinos are never seen," Aquino says. "We're the third-largest Asian American population in the United States, but we're largely ignored."

Why learn this?

On a recent walk through Hawaii's Plantation Village, an outdoor museum of old plantation gardens and housing in Waipahu, Aquino steps back in time. Inside the simple wood-frame Filipino Family House (circa 1935), a leathery pig sits on the kitchen table and a porcelain Catholic saint on a small altar. Next door is dormitory-

style housing, where young Filipino men lived in the early 20th century. A pair of gnarled boxing gloves hangs from a peg.

In Aquino's classes at Farrington High School, in Honolulu, she asks her students to imagine what it was like for those men. "Close your eyes," she tells them.

Aquino describes the spartan rooms—the cramped beds, the cultural artifacts—and prompts students to think about the immigrant experience. "These men came on boats that took two weeks to come here, with a single suitcase. They carried basically two changes of clothes, a Bible, and a few little things from home," she says. While most intended to return to the Philippines, it could take six years to save up for a ticket. "The money they earned from the plantation company went



Michelle Aquino stands inside the Filipino family house at Hawaii's Plantation Village, in Waipahu. She says the artifacts remind her of her grandparents' home.

"[My students] have gone from learning absolutely nothing about their culture ... to speaking up and talking deeply about issues in the community."

—Michelle Aquino, Filipino and Asian American history teacher

right into the company store to buy food," she notes.

Lessons like these have been rare in Hawaii schools, even though 1 in 4 of the state's residents are Filipino. "A lot of my friends are second, third generation ... and they know nothing about their people. It saddens me," says senior Jo Salazar, who is a first-generation immigrant. "[In this class], not only do Filipinos learn about ourselves, other people get to learn about us as well."

Among Asian ethnic groups, Filipino students have a lower college-attainment rate than some, but culturally relevant lessons have the power to change this.

"A lot of research shows that if you're teaching the

What Does the Research Say?

CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

In the 2000s, educators in Tucson, Ariz., offered a Mexican American studies curriculum to students. A decade later, in 2014, research showed that participating students improved their standardized tests scores for math, reading, and writing, and were **9.5 percent more likely to graduate** from high school than their peers. Low-income and struggling students showed the highest gains.

Similarly, in San Francisco, after an ethnic studies program for ninth graders was implemented, a 2016 study showed that, among, participating students, **ninth-grade attendance increased by 21 percentage points** and earned credits improved by 23 percentage points.

Planting Respect in Hawaii



(Above) Farrington High senior Jo Salazar participates in a Filipino fashion show, staged at Hawaii’s Plantation Village. (Left) participants gather for Sakada Day.

kids about who they are and about their history and people, and you connect them with their culture, it will change their trajectory,” Aquino says.

‘Finally finding solidarity’

In 2021, a small group of Filipino students on Oahu got fed up. They started Hawaii’s Filipino Curriculum Project, aiming to get a

course developed, and reached out to Aquino, who had already added her own Filipino unit to Farrington’s Asian American history course. She soon came on board as a curriculum developer.

Two years ago, Aquino was one of two teachers piloting the first-of-its-kind course. The other was Raymart Billote, of Oahu’s Waipahu High School, who

had co-founded the curriculum project as a student. Now, the single-semester course is loaded with six units, including “civic action.” In Aquino’s class, it culminates with Sakada Day, in December, when students present their history projects—movies, comic books, fashion designs, and more—to community members.

“It’s like this day when they wake up and say, ‘hey,

I’m going to own who I am and my culture,” Aquino says.

It’s a powerful lesson: “In the two years that I’ve taught it, [my students] have gone from learning absolutely nothing about their culture, because of the shame their parents felt ... to speaking up and talking deeply about issues in the community,” she says. “We’re finally finding solidarity with each other.” ✨

Who is Michelle Aquino?

Filipino history teacher Michelle Aquino’s great-grandfather came to Hawaii for backbreaking work on a Kauai sugar plantation. When she visits Hawaii’s Plantation Village, in Waipahu, and sees traditional instruments, she thinks about him. “I wonder what instrument he played? Did he play the guitar? The bandurria [a pear-shaped, guitar-like instrument]? I’m wondering what songs he sang and what stories they told each other. Did they joke around? Because that’s the atmosphere in our family gatherings,” she says. “We joke. We tell stories. Sometimes my parents sing together, or reminisce about the old days.” These songs and stories are culture, identity, and history, connecting across generations.

WATCH THIS



Watch *NEA Today’s* video about Michelle Aquino, her students, and what they’ve learned together at nea.org/FilipinoHistory.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MICHELLE AQUINO

13 Things That Special Educators Do—and You Should, too!

By Mary Ellen Flannery

ALL EDUCATORS CAN BORROW THESE SPECIAL ED STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING AND BEHAVIOR

Let’s call them the secrets of special educators. They’re the skills, practices, things that special education teachers and paraeducators do all the time to reduce disruption and increase learning. And they’re not secrets they want to keep!

“A lot of what we do in special ed not only benefits kids with IEPs, but it benefits all kids,” says Lisa Moody, a special education teacher at Jefferson Elementary School in Omaha, Neb.

Here are 13 strategies to try in your classroom:

1 Provide positive behavior support, all the time. Not every teacher has to walk between desks with a bucket of M&Ms—but all should focus on seeing and supporting positive behaviors, Moody says.

“It could be the silliest thing, like, ‘I like how you’re sitting in your chair and waiting for math to begin. Way to go!’”

Specificity is key, says South Dakota teacher Eric Pedersen, who works in a contained classroom with students

working on emotional regulation at Aberdeen Central High School. For example: “The way you came in the room today was very appropriate. You said hello to me in a good tone of voice, which likely would result in somebody saying hello back to you!”

Moody does this constantly, especially at the start of the school year. It makes kids feel successful, she says. As a result, students gain confidence and feel good about school.

“It makes such a big shift in how kids see themselves,” she says.

“If you lead with verbal praises, you’re going to get kid buy-in!”

2 Celebrate the smallest successes! “I have kids who couldn’t open their Chrome-books and now they’re cranking out five paragraphs—and it’s because we celebrated every step forward,” says Brandon Thornton, a special ed teacher at Bloomington High School, in Illinois.



Lisa Moody



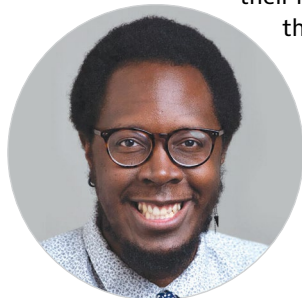
PHOTO: COURTESY OF LISA MOODY

13⁺ Things That Special Educators Do—And You Should, Too!

"My students will say to me, 'Mr. Pedersen, I need a little time in the space room.' And I'll say, 'That's a perfectly adequate way to advocate for yourself.'"

—Eric Pedersen, special ed teacher, in South Dakota

This wasn't an easy mind shift for Thornton, who started as a general ed teacher. "The special ed teacher celebrates when their kids recognize the multiplication symbol. My gen ed brain says, 'Oh no, you don't know what the times symbol is?'"



Brandon Thornton

3 Focus on kids, not content. Thornton originally taught gen ed math. Then, his first job as a special ed teacher was to co-teach English

literature for high school juniors. Literature! "What got me through is 'I teach kids,'" he says. "It's a much healthier mindset to know your content isn't the most important thing—the kid is."

4 Be an advocate for your kids. "I do think [special ed] teachers advocate much more frequently than I assume a gen ed teacher would," Moody says. "We have to step in and say, 'That's not best for that kid.'"



Sherry Shaw

"It's hard to have those [critical] conversations with educators, with administrators, but at some point, it becomes second nature."

Sherry Shaw, a para-educator in Wasilla, Alaska, single-handedly got her former school to build a "sensory room" for her special ed students. "I had this one student whose sensory needs were so high, I went to the principal and said, hey, we need



Eric Pedersen

space. Will you give me a classroom?"

5 Give kids time and space to calm down.

Shaw's sensory room was open to everyone. "Not just SpEd needs a sensory break!" she notes. Shaw

had dimmable ceiling lights installed and stocked the space with a trampoline, beanbag chair, coloring books, a ukulele ("My students at the time loved the ukulele!"), and tubs of tactile toys.

In Pedersen's classroom, students learn to ask for time in what they call the "space room." "My students will say to me, 'Mr. Pedersen, I need a little time in the space room.' And I'll say, 'That's a perfectly adequate way to advocate for yourself,'" Pederson says.



Georgia Green

Also, keep in mind that sensory stuff—like bumpy adhesive strips on desks—can help all kids to ground themselves and boost concentration, Shaw notes.

6 Ask for help. This is about advocating for yourself, Moody says. "As adults, we're sometimes afraid to admit to struggling. But I'm like, please I'll take all the help!" she adds.

7 Work with parents. Really. "Parents need to know you care for them and you care for their children. And, even if you're asking something hard of those children, it's because you have their best interests at heart," says Georgia Green, a special ed teacher at Gale-Bailey Elementary School, in Marbury, Md.

Green has two adult brothers with intellectual disabilities, who still live at home in Jamaica with their elderly mother. "They're the ones who motivated me to go to college and study special ed," she says.

When Green meets with parents, she shares this experience. "I let my hair down and be vulnerable," she says. By being her authentic self—and



sharing her personal history—she can develop deep, respectful relationships with parents. It also doesn't hurt that she frequently goes above and beyond to make little board games for at-home family play, or laminates personalized flashcards for parents to use with kids.

At the same time, you do need to set some limits, Thornton says. "I wanted to be that person who is available 24/7, but I reached a point where I was getting trauma-fatigue from that," he says.

Now Thornton sets the tone during the first week of class, telling parents the best time and ways to reach him. "I've stopped giving out my number, but I do have gmail on my phone!"

8 Talk to everybody in your building—and visit their classrooms, too! "If you're a gen ed teacher, you might typically stick with your cohort in your grade or department," Moody says. Special educators, on the other hand, often

team up with educators across the building. This kind of collaboration benefits students, but also educators, who learn from each other.

"I can go to just about any individual in my school and ask for help with something, or they can come to me and ask for my input in planning activities or helping students," Green says.

Special educators also visit other educators' classroom more frequently. Moody says: "There's power in seeing so many different classrooms."

9 Use universal design for learning. Sometimes teachers think that universal design is a strategy for kids with disabilities only. This isn't true, Moody says. Diversity in the classroom is today's norm—and it's increasing. Learn about universal design to help all learners. Get started at nea.org/UD.

10 Stay calm. "Adults yell at me all the time. But you have never yelled at me, not even once," a student told Pedersen. This is true all day, every day. Pedersen's voice is the same, even tone. "If somebody is heightened, and you react to them in a heightened manner, it does not help," he says.

11 Understand that behavior is communication. This is something that Clinton Smith, a professor of special education at the University of Tennessee at Martin, tells his students all the time.

He also encourages the "ABC" method to understand—and address—student behavior. A, stands for antecedent, or what happened before the



Clinton Smith

behavior; B, is the behavior; and C, is the consequence, which doesn't mean punishment, but does mean what the student gets as a result of their behavior, like attention. "If you understand this, you can address it," Smith says.

"Sometimes teachers don't see the antecedent," he notes. "Oh, you took recess away from this kid? Well, that's why he's cussing you out."

12 Use punishment as a last resort. If you hit the consequence first, you've just reinforced that "I'm a bad kid," Moody says.

A positive reinforcement strategy—for positive behavior—will be much more effective, Smith promises.

13 Forget yesterday's battle. "I worked with a teacher once who punished kids for things they had done the last time they saw them, and I was like, 'no, that was yesterday. It's over with,'" Shaw says.

As an educator, it helps to start fresh each day. "I tell the kids, if you struggled today, it's fine. Tomorrow is a new day," Pedersen says. "And I'll meet you where you're at tomorrow." 🌈



Are Young Educators All in on AI—or Not?

By Ali Schalop

ASPIRING AND PRACTICING TEACHERS WEIGH THE PROS AND CONS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

As the first generation of digital natives prepare to enter the classroom, artificial intelligence (AI) is just as new to them as it is to more experienced educators. Are young educators welcoming AI as a valuable classroom tool, or are they concerned about learning, creativity, and critical thinking, just like their more seasoned colleagues? Here, future and active teachers share how they are using AI—and predict how it may shape their future classrooms.

Is AI here to stay?

Ethan Rapp, a rising senior who is studying secondary history education at Pennsylvania Western University Edinboro, says he created his first ever lesson plan with the help of AI. “I asked AI to give me some ideas. I hated all of them, but it got me thinking about what was a good idea, what was a bad idea, and what I could use in the future,” Rapp says.

AI, whether you love it or hate it, is unavoidable in today’s world. The EdWeek Research Center found that the percentage of teachers using AI-driven tools in their classrooms nearly doubled between 2023 and 2025. Another survey, by Gallup, found that nearly 60 percent of teachers used AI in the past school year.



Ethan Rapp

THE PROS

Many overloaded educators already know that AI can help fast track some tasks. One national survey found that teachers who use AI tools at least weekly save an average of 5.9 hours per week. This is critical time that teachers, who face historic levels of burnout, can reinvest into other priorities.

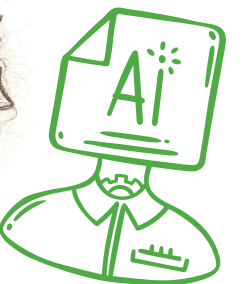
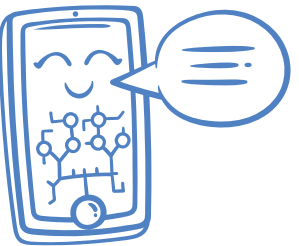
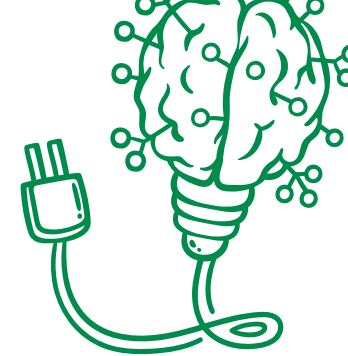
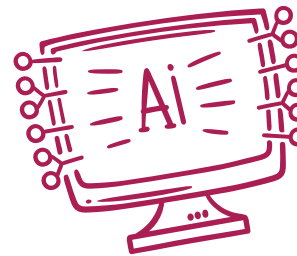
Kristin van Brunt, an instructional coach in Davis County, Utah, says, “AI gives me a lot of time to do other aspects of my job. ... It can be so helpful.”

AI can also function as an equalizer, helping bridge gaps for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Rapp says.

As long as a student has internet access, AI can act as a “personalized tutor” that’s always available to meet individual students exactly

“Some people might not want to talk about AI, ... but we can’t ignore it,” Rapp says. “It’s something that’s going to be around for a while.”

Susana Pacheco, a rising senior at Georgia Southern University, Statesboro Campus, agrees. “AI is just everywhere in terms of research, ... and everybody already has their own opinion of it,” says Pacheco, who is studying elementary and special education.



Susana Pacheco (right) sees AI as a powerful tool—but also recognizes its challenges and risks in the classroom.

where they are in their learning needs. Human educators, on the other hand, may need to cater to multiple students at once while dealing with multiple other demands and a busy schedule, Rapp notes.

Pacheco also says AI could be really helpful for language translation. She shares how growing up as a child of Venezuelan immigrants and a native Spanish speaker, she often served as a translator for multilingual learners. “AI would really help close that gap,” she says.

Under-resourced schools that lack dedicated multilingual support services can use AI to instantly translate communications between teachers, students, and families, Pacheco notes. This can also reduce the burden on students like her, who are informally pushed into the role of translator.

Many active teachers agree that AI can close persistent learning gaps. One poll found that nearly 60 percent of teachers believe AI improves the accessibility of learning materials for students with disabilities.

“I asked AI to give me some ideas. I hated all of them, but it got me thinking about what was a good idea, what was a bad idea, and what I could use in the future.”

—Ethan Rapp, secondary history education major, in Pennsylvania



THE CONS

Pacheco also has some big reservations about AI. She shares that she used one AI program with an option to create

individualized education programs (IEPs).

“It felt insane to me” she says. “IEPs specifically are so personalized. You need to know that student.”

She also worries that it may be dangerous to share students’ names, ability status, and other personal data with AI machinery, as users still don’t know where that data is going or if it’s protected.

Rapp has his own concerns. He warns that teachers should “never fully rely on it because of its hallucinations and miscalculations.” Rapp recalls how, when researching a paper, he asked ChatGPT for 10 court cases on homeschooling in Pennsylvania.

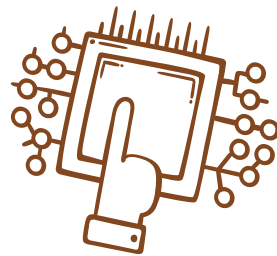
“Within those resources it handed back to me, some were federal court cases, some were not even related to homeschooling, and some were entirely made up,” Rapp recalls.

Even the co-founder of Anthropic, the maker of the popular AI bot Claude, told the Associated Press that all AI models suffer from hallucinations.



Kristin van Brunt

Are Young Educators All in on AI—or Not?



There is little evidence that future educators receive consistent training in the use of AI tools.

Pacheco says professors will devote a day to it in some classes. "There isn't any written curriculum on it," she says.

More pen and paper

As Rapp looks toward his future in the classroom, he imagines that schools will increase in-person assignments and predicts, "We're

going to see a lot more pen and paper."

Pacheco, who plans to become a math teacher, warns that AI is rapidly changing. "We can't predict how we'll be using it in even six months' time," she says.

Still, she remarks that AI simply can't do some projects. "I don't think a student is going to be able to get a physical model of the solar system done solely using AI," Pacheco says. "That will require some elbow grease for sure." ❧

Educator-Tested Tips for Using AI in Your Classroom

Try some of these strategies, recommended by fellow educators, for using artificial intelligence (AI) effectively and responsibly in your practice.

CREATE UNIQUE LESSONS

Oregon English teacher Cherie Shields says AI has improved her teaching methods. For her high school science fiction unit, she asked ChatGPT to generate 10 different project options. Instead of a traditional essay, the program suggested imaginative projects, such as creating and explaining a poster of an alien.

She encourages fellow educators to give AI a test drive, too.

"The best way to learn anything new is just to jump right in and try it out," Shields says.

Similarly, California English teacher Kim Lepre says AI can simplify and improve educators' everyday lives. Lepre uses ChatGPT to differentiate instruction, generate quizzes, and even email parents, saving more time to interact with students.

Through the website, Lepre created a new lesson for a unit about the Salem witch trials. The program helped her generate an article for her seventh-

grade students, plus 10 variations of a multiple-choice quiz.

DIFFERENTIATE MATERIALS AND RETHINK INSTRUCTION

AI can translate assignments into a student's native language or simplify materials for new language learners. For example, you could prompt it to "rewrite this at a fourth-grade reading level" or "translate this reading into Arabic."

AI can also present a different approach to instruction. The program can simplify instructions and reevaluate materials.

When Lepre got stuck while teaching a literature lesson about text evidence, she turned to ChatGPT for help.

"Something about the way that I was explaining to the students, ... it wasn't coming across to them," she says. So she asked ChatGPT to "explain evidence in a paragraph." In less than a minute, she was able to reintroduce the concept in a way her students understood.

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

There is no denying that some students are using AI to cheat. Some

districts have outright bans on the programs. But Lepre offers a different perspective.

"AI is already here. We can't run from it. Let's teach them how to leverage it," she says. "We have to prepare kids for the future, and the future is AI."

TRY THIS!

Lepre and Shields offer these five exercises to discourage cheating and to familiarize students with the limits of AI. The exercises build editing and fact-checking skills, too!

1. Talk with students about academic integrity policies, so they are clear about what is and is not allowed.
2. Design assignments that prevent the use of AI by requiring personal narratives and critical reasoning.
3. Teach students how to use an AI program to learn about new topics. Believe it or not, this can actually help prevent unethical use of the programs.
4. Ask students to evaluate information generated by AI.
5. Have students reverse engineer an AI essay by personalizing the text and adding missing details. They can also compare AI content with original writing.

LAST Look

QUIZ:

What Do Your School Supplies Say About You?

By Zach Maguire

THE SURVEY SAYS:

There's no wrong way to organize. What matters most is how you show up for your students. Rock the personality you have!

MOSTLY A ANSWERS The Organization Expert

You're everyone's go-to. You know where everything is all the time. You're dependable, organized, and always happy to share.

MOSTLY B ANSWERS The Prepared Pro

You might not be orderly according to everyone else's definition, but you have a system. You may be drowning in clutter, but you know exactly where that marker is when someone needs it. You thrive on organized chaos.

MOSTLY C ANSWERS The Community Helper

You might not be the most organized pencil in the case, but when someone needs a creative solution or brilliant new idea, you're the first person they ask.

MOSTLY D ANSWERS The Minimalist

Cool, calm, and collected, you don't have a collection of pencils or stacks of paper, but you always have everyone's best interest at heart! Your workspace might not be color-coded or expertly labeled, but when a student asks for help, you're always on it!

Rummage through your desk drawer, dig in your bag, or peek in your pencil case to answer these questions. Your go-to tools say a lot about how you prepare, adapt, and support yourself, as well as your students and colleagues. Take this quiz to see what your classroom essentials reveal about you.

Be honest: How many of your markers actually work?

- A. Every single one! I always check.
- B. Most of them.
- C. Maybe half? Not really sure.
- D. I don't use markers.

How do you feel about being organized?

- A. 100 percent obsessed. Color-coding is my jam!
- B. Everything has a place.
- C. There are better things to do with my time; everything will get put away eventually.
- D. There's not much to organize, but what I do have is tidy.

A student asks for a pencil, what do you do?

- A. Pull a fresh pencil out of a dedicated cup.
- B. Give them one, but make sure to get it back.
- C. Dig around my desk drawer to find one, but it's unsharpened and has no eraser.
- D. Tell them to ask around, because I don't have any extras.

What's your opinion on label makers?

- A. They're a complete necessity. Even my laptop is labeled.
- B. The labels aren't for me; they're for other people when they need something from my room.
- C. They would be great, if I had the time to use them.
- D. What's the point? I know what everything is already.

What does your pencil case look like right now?

- A. Everything is fresh, works, and is neatly organized.
- B. I have to search to find what I need, but I know it's always going to be there.
- C. Four pencils, a half-used eraser, and a dried-out marker.
- D. I don't have a pencil case, but I keep a pen in my bag.



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