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October 2026

neaToday

for NEA HIGHER ED

An edition of *NEA Today*

4 UNION STRONG POSTERS INSIDE!

Flip through to find them all!

DOUBLE SHIFT

THEY TEACH CLASSES, GRADE PAPERS, AND RUN LABS. THEN THEY CLOCK IN SOMEWHERE ELSE ALL WHILE LEADING THE WAY FOR ACADEMIC UNIONS.

University of Florida research assistant Lisa Coe works four jobs to make ends meet, PAGE 28

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A professor and her robots PAGE 20

Fighting for academic freedom PAGE 22

The real reason books get banned PAGE 50

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October 2026

Volume 45, number 2



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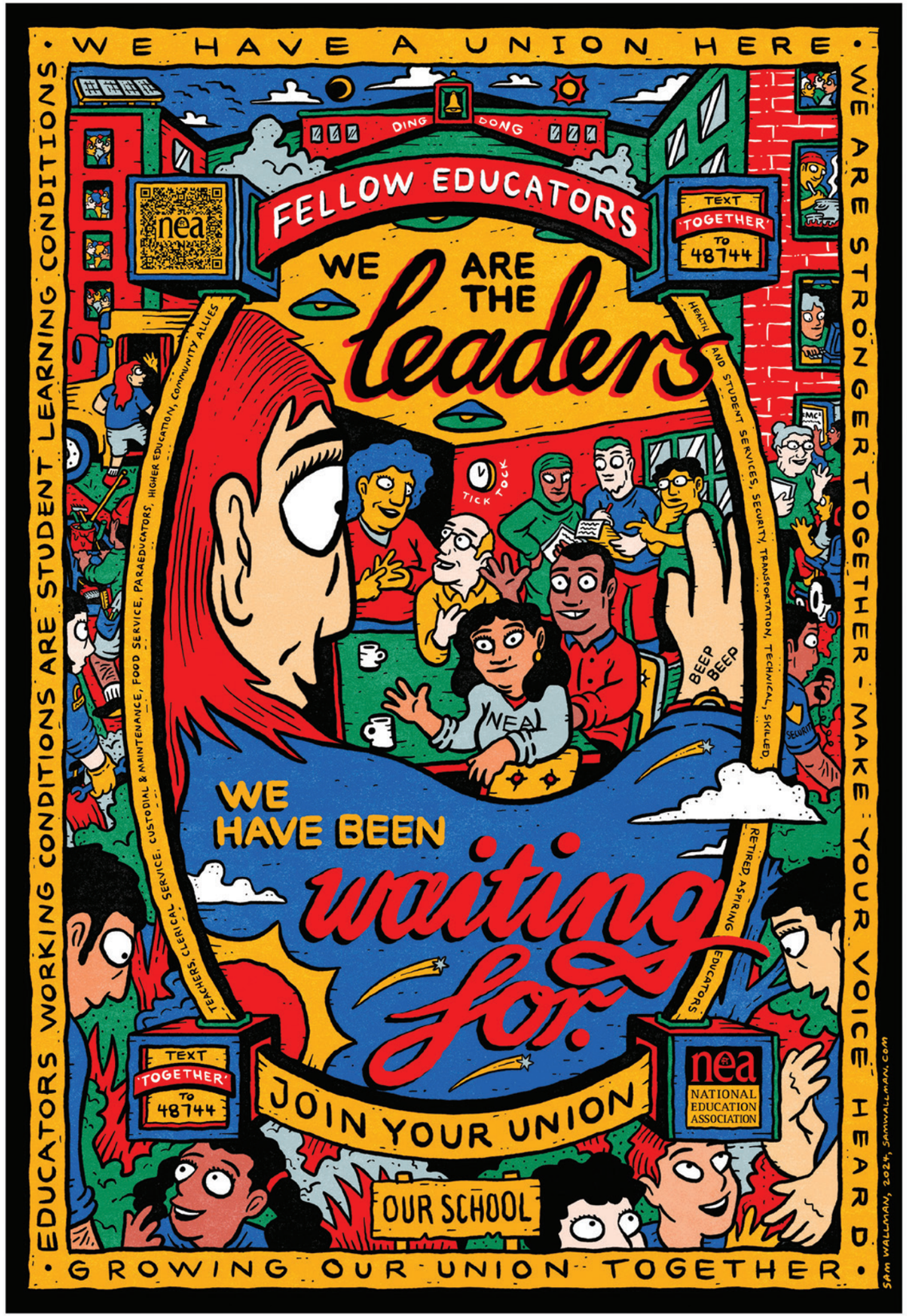
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OUR VISION IS A GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR EVERY STUDENT.

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

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These principles guide our work and define our mission:

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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.

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

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

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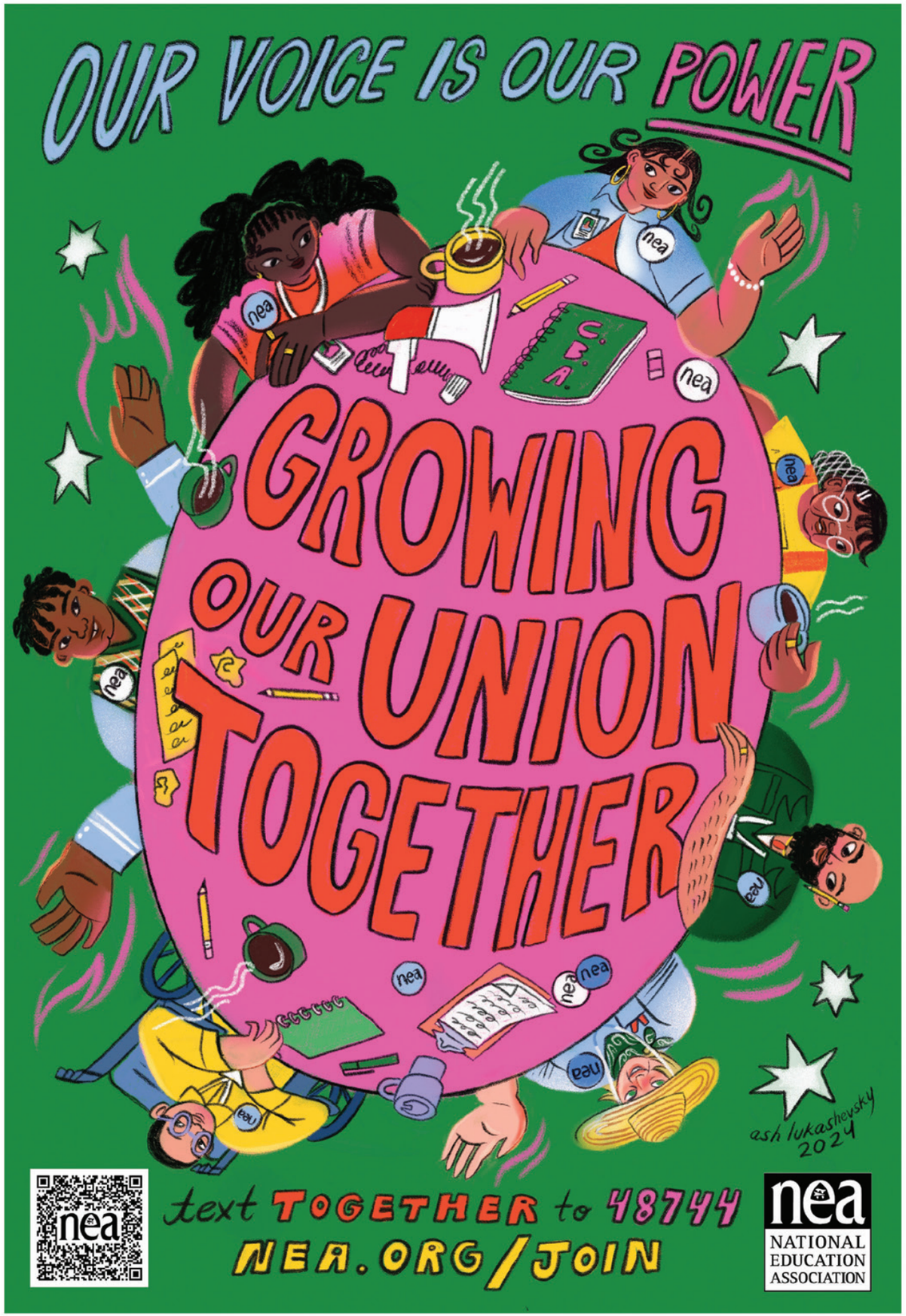


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PRESIDENT'S *viewpoint*

National Council for Higher Education
President Alec Thomson



What I Learned From My First Union

I hope you noticed that the cover of this magazine features a hardworking graduate student. I am excited to see this focus because my own journey into union activism started as a grad-student worker.

I did not enter graduate school as an activist, organizer, unionist, or agitator. But when the administration at Wayne State University, in Detroit, threatened to unilaterally reduce the health insurance of teaching and research assistants, the Graduate Employee Organizing Committee (GEOC) was created, and I became energized. In quick order, the GEOC ran a successful card drive, won a recognition election, and commenced contract negotiations.

The GEOC's efforts reshaped Wayne State and pushed me to see colleges and universities through a different lens. These changes, institutional and personal, were directly influenced by many individuals and groups. Unionized faculty members at my university, union organizers, and union members elsewhere—notably the grad-student union at the University of Michigan—provided support and guidance to help me and the GEOC develop a collective vision for our union.

I carried those experiences and lessons with me when I moved on to my teaching post at a community college, where I immediately helped support and grow that local union. Today, while I advocate on a broader national level, I come back to the foundational principles of my graduate-student organizing days.

Higher education is a public good that requires collective action to preserve and promote this resource. Our success requires that we recognize and advocate for all workers laboring at our colleges and universities. Look around, make connections with other departments and units. Those linkages make us stronger and build campuses that come closer to meeting the vision we have for higher education.

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PUBLISHER AND SENIOR DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
May Malik

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR EDITORIAL CONTENT AND PUBLICATIONS
Giovanna Bechard

EDITORS
Mary Ellen Flannery
Robin Terry Brown

SR. WRITER/EDITORS
Brenda Álvarez
Joye Mercer Barksdale
Cindy Long

COPY EDITOR
Judy Rowe

PROGRAM AND PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
Tammy Funderburk

NEA.ORG/NEATODAY
Tim Walker

SR. CONTENT STRATEGIST, NEA.ORG
Michelle Chovan

DESIGN AND ART DIRECTION
Stephanie Testa

ADVERTISING SALES
Shawn Stabell
sstabell@neamb.com

CONTRIBUTORS
Rae Carlson
Nichelle Marcel

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK:
MAIL: NEA Today, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036
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Building Our Power with President Princess Moss

Dear NEA members,

It is an honor to serve as your new president, and I am thrilled to lead the National Education Association to new heights, in direct partnership with you, our members.

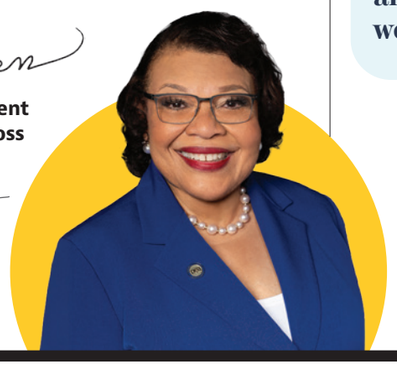
I am inspired by your dedication, how you show up every day for your students, your communities, and for each other. Together, we will build on our union's proud legacy to ensure every student, in every ZIP code, has access to a high-quality public education.

Through union-wide, grassroots organizing, we will fight for the resources, respect, and voice educators deserve, because when we invest in public education, we invest in the future of every student. We have been on defense for too long. We have been defending funding, defending rights, defending the very existence of public education. We must go on the offense. It's time to move from resistance to renaissance.

Sincerely,

Princess

NEA President Princess Moss





MEMBER VOICE

"President Moss' commitment to listening, leading with integrity, and drawing upon her wealth of experience and wisdom will strengthen our union and empower educators across the nation. In solidarity, we will continue advancing our mission, amplifying our collective voice, and advocating for the students, educators, and communities we proudly serve."

Alisa Downeye
Special education teacher, president of the Roanoke County Education Association, in Virginia

FAST FACTS

NUMBER OF NEA REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLIES I'VE ATTENDED:

37

NUMBER OF YEARS I SPENT IN THE CLASSROOM:

21



NUMBER OF SCHOOL BUSES IN MY OFFICE (I COLLECT THEM TO HONOR MY SCHOOL BUS DRIVER PARENTS):

40

!

If I hadn't become a music teacher, I would have taught social studies, which was my favorite subject starting in sixth grade.

Q&A

YOU ASKED, I ANSWERED



Chance Fields, Kansas National Education Association aspiring educator, Pittsburg State University chapter

Q

Why did you decide to go into teaching?

I'm the daughter of two school bus drivers, and my parents always told me and my two siblings that a good education was our ticket to a bright future. I can still hear my dad telling us to do well in school, get your education. That was the top priority for him. I went to Mary Washington College (now University of Mary Washington) on scholarships, and was inspired to become an education major by my music professors and also by my older sister, who was a math teacher. She had Virginia Education Association (VEA) journals delivered to the house—and I was so intrigued by them! I became a student member of VEA and, after graduation, got my first teaching job in Louisa County.



Ayana English-Brown, retired member of Prince George's County Educators' Association, in Maryland

Q

What are your objectives and goals for NEA?

Organize, organize, organize! We're doing a lot of that already, but I want to see us being more intentional. We have to build community in our ranks. I want to see NEA build more community with our members, so we can be the force to move forward a pro-public education agenda. We can't live in silos; we all need to understand there is more we can do to impact our livelihood and the students we serve. There is so much goodness in our professions. Every person brings a ray of hope to NEA. That's what we need, and I want to focus on our members, our 3 million rays of hope.

TRY THIS

Get Ready to Vote! Our future depends on it.

1

Make sure you are registered to vote at your current address. Many states cut off new voter registration several weeks before Election Day. Encourage your family, friends, and colleagues to do the same at nea.org/ConfirmRegistration.

Do this today

2

Check VOTE411.org to find your polling location. Created by the League of Women Voters (an NEA partner), VOTE411 is a one-stop shop for election related information. It provides nonpartisan information on absentee ballots, ballot measures, early voting options, registration forms and deadlines, ID requirements, and more. VOTE411 is also fully translated into Spanish. It is a must for making a voting plan.

Share widely

3

Spread the word by sharing this information on your social media, by text and email, and at social and family gatherings. We are educators. Sharing knowledge is our jam! Learn more at edvotes.org.

Let's do this November 3

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): NEA; COURTESY OF VIRGINIA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION; ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

PHOTOS: NEA

Your New NEA Team

A new leadership team took the helm of NEA on September 1, with officers and committee members whose experience in classrooms, schools, and communities will help guide the union's work in the years ahead. Nearly 6,000 delegates representing educators from every state and territory elected national officers this summer, during NEA's Representative Assembly, in Denver. Let's meet the people powering the union's next chapter!

THREE OFFICERS ELECTED FOR NEA'S HIGHEST OFFICES



Princess R. Moss, NEA president
Long before serving in national union leadership, Moss spent 21 years as an elementary school music teacher in Louisa County, Virginia. She is a skilled organizer and an outspoken ally of students, educators, and families—especially those from historically marginalized communities. Moss also has consistently worked to build collective power and elevate educators' voices.



Noel Candelaria, NEA vice president
A former high school special education teacher from El Paso, Texas, Candelaria began his career as a teacher's aide. For more than two decades, he has organized alongside members to build collective and political power to advance racial, social, and economic justice for students, educators, and communities.



Robert Varela Rodriguez, NEA secretary-treasurer
A special education teacher in California's San Bernardino City Unified School District for nearly 20 years, Rodriguez previously served on NEA's Executive Committee. A leader in education reform and a champion for diversity and LGBTQ+ rights in schools, he believes real and lasting change for educators, students, and public education can be realized through organizing and collective action.

EXPERIENCE AT THE TABLE

Two NEA Executive Committee seats were up for election—the winners were Cecily Myart-Cruz and Shannon McCann. Meet the whole team:



William (Bill) Farmer, a high school science teacher, from Evanston, Ill., is committed to dismantling systems that perpetuate inequities. He has facilitated professional development sessions to promote safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ+ students and staff.



Gladys Márquez is a high school bilingual English language learner teacher, in Blue Island, Ill. As the past chair of the NEA Hispanic Caucus, Márquez helped organize massive marches in protest of the national policy leading to the separation and incarceration of immigrant families and children.



Ronald Duff Martin is a middle school social studies teacher, in Eau Claire, Wis. Martin was the first Native American president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council and has centered much of his work on championing inclusion and acceptance.



Shannon McCann, a middle school special education teacher from Seattle, Wash., focuses on securing full funding for public education, increasing wages, strengthening union membership, and defending democracy.



Dr. Tia Mills is a special education teacher, from Baton Rouge, La. She served as president of both the Louisiana Association of Educators and the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators, where she led successful efforts to unfreeze educators' pay schedules.

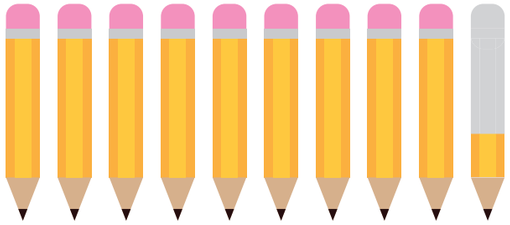


Cecily Myart-Cruz is an elementary and middle school teacher and former president of the United Teachers Los Angeles, who started out as an education support professional. She has a track record of organizing for power to support public education.

PHOTOS: NEA

Fast Facts

Stats worth reading on schools, campuses, ballots, budgets, and beyond



94%
The percentage of teachers who spent their own money on school supplies in 2024 – 2025. The average teacher spent **$665**.

SOURCE: RAND CORPORATION

+ $8,782
The difference in per-pupil spending on K–12 public education in states with higher unionization rates.

AVERAGE PER-PUPIL SPENDING

$23,382
High-union-density states

$14,600
Lower-density states

SOURCE: ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE

421,451
Signatures submitted to the Arizona Secretary of State's Office by the Arizona Education Association and Save Our Schools Arizona to put a school voucher accountability initiative on the November ballot. The groups collected **150,000** signatures more than required.



55%
The percentage of educators who say students spend three or more hours a day using technology in the classroom. **Nine percent** said their students spend all day on tech (including **20 percent** of middle schoolers and **15 percent** of high schoolers).

SOURCE: EDWEEK RESEARCH CENTER



MAMMA MIA!
The most performed school play in 2025 – 2026 was *Mamma Mia!* The second most popular play was *Hadestown: Teen Edition*, and *The Addams Family* came in third.

SOURCE: *PLAYBILL*

1 MILLION
The number of children in the United States who lost Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits in 2025 – 2026. The Trump administration, in 2025, enacted nearly **$187 billion** in cuts to the federal food assistance program to take place over the next decade—the largest cut in the program's history.

SOURCE: THE CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES

PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

NEWS YOU *can use*

IS TEACHER STRESS DECLINING?



Teacher well-being is a key driver in the decision to stay in the profession, and addressing burnout and exhaustion among educators should be a national priority. A new report by RAND underscores this urgency.

RAND's State of the American Teacher Survey, funded in part by the National Education Association, collected responses from 829 K–12 public school teachers across the country. RAND compared responses with a separate survey of similar working adults.

On each of the survey's four measures—frequent job-related stress, difficulty coping with job-related stress, symptoms of depression, and burnout—teachers reported experiencing poorer well-being than other working adults in 2026.

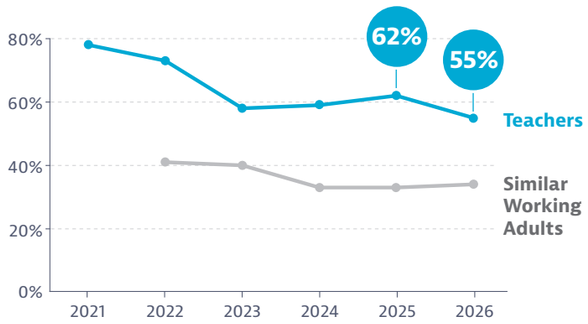
There is some encouraging news, however. Teacher well-being has leveled off since the pandemic and improved slightly this year. The number of teachers who reported experiencing frequent job-related stress has declined—from 62 percent in 2025 to 55 percent in 2026. And the share of teachers who reported difficulty coping with job-related stress dropped from 21 percent in 2025 to 15 percent in 2026.

RAND found that female teachers are consistently more likely to report frequent job-related stress than their male counterparts and similar working adults overall. In 2026, 59 percent of female teachers experienced frequent job-related stress compared with 44 percent of male teachers—a consistent gap since 2021. Female teachers are also more likely to report feelings of burnout than male teachers.

Overall, the survey found that the share of teachers who intended to leave their jobs was 18 percent, while about 1 in 4 teachers say they plan to continue teaching for "as long as they are able."

Frequent Job-Related Stress

(Percentage of teachers and similar working adults experiencing job-related stress)



ABOUT 1 IN 4 TEACHERS SAY THEY PLAN TO STAY IN TEACHING "AS LONG AS THEY ARE ABLE."

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

THE STATE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN HIGHER ED

Academic freedom has been under assault over the past two years, and a new global report underscores how this campaign has impacted the standing of U.S. higher education in the world. The 2026 Academic Freedom Index, an annual benchmark report surveying 179 countries and territories, measures five indicators of academic freedom: The freedom to research and teach; freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; institutional autonomy; campus integrity; and freedom of academic and cultural expression.

Over the last decade, academic freedom has declined in 50 countries, and only 9 countries have registered improvements. But this year's report focused on institutional autonomy, widely recognized as fundamental to protecting academic freedom. And it is on this specific measure where the United States has suffered the greatest decline—50 percent since 2015—and is now rated only "moderate."

The decline in the U.S. has been swift and widespread. The report says it began in 2020, driven mostly by state-level actions that have only accelerated under the second Trump administration. "Political interference in university governance, curricular decisions, hiring practices, and research agendas has increasingly become a feature of contemporary U.S. higher education," the researchers write.

The good news is that mobilizing by advocacy and legal action has led to some legal victories that have rolled back some of these intrusions and restraints—particularly in the area of research.

"Pushback by academic institutions, civil society organizations, and court action against illegal measures are key to protecting academic freedom," the report says. Academic research indicates a remarkable resilience of academic freedom, even in situations of democratic backsliding."



To learn more about current threats to academic freedom, turn to Page 16.

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

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NEWS YOU *can use*

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS STILL EXPANDING

In December 2025, the Trump administration abruptly cut $132 million in multiyear grants for Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) programs across 11 states and Washington, D.C. Like many of the administration's public education cuts, the rescinding of grants for community schools seems cruel in its intent to spread fear and hopelessness. But the community schools movement is resilient and is on the cusp of a historic expansion nationwide.

States like California and Maryland are incubating statewide community school systems that could serve as a blueprint for what a post-Trump federal education policy could look like, offering a vision for how to rebuild a better and more just education system.

In California Gov. Gavin Newsom's May budget revision for the 2026 – 2027 fiscal year, he reaffirmed his landmark commitment to community schools by proposing an additional $1 billion annually to expand the FSCS model across the state. That's on top of the $4.1 billion already allocated, which could more than double the number of community schools across the state.

Maryland is another state rapidly expanding its community school network, with the schools now making up nearly 50 percent of all public schools across the state.

Other states that have used state resources to expand community schools include New Mexico, Minnesota, Florida, Vermont, Kentucky, New York, Maine, and more.

Read more about community schools at **nea.org/CommunitySchools.**





HOW DO AI DATA CENTERS IMPACT SCHOOLS?

Amid the artificial intelligence boom, the construction of data centers is accelerating across the country, sparking concern about their potential drain on community resources. Another concern is nearby schools, specifically, how student learning is being affected by noise generated by the structures. The researchers found that students who attend school within a mile of a data center have lower math scores than those that are farther away. The proximity to these structures, they note, not other factors, was behind this decline.

AS OF JUNE, ALMOST

1,900

PUBLIC SCHOOLS SIT WITHIN A MILE OF AT LEAST ONE DATA CENTER OR ONE THAT IS APPROVED FOR CONSTRUCTION, ACCORDING TO BROWN UNIVERSITY RESEARCHERS.

PHOTO: LUIS GOMEZ; ILLUSTRATION: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES

THE STATE OF CHILD WELL-BEING

Despite some progress in family economic stability and community well-being (including child poverty) overall child well-being was lower in 2024 than in 2019, according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2026 Kids Count Data Book, which has been measuring child well-being across states since 1990. The report ranks and scores states based on indicators in four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. This drop in child well-being was driven largely by education.

Specifically, the report found that:

54%
of young children ages 3–4 are not enrolled in school.

70%
of fourth graders are not proficient in reading.

73%
of eighth graders are not proficient in math.



The education measure that saw slight improvement was the four-year high school graduation rate, which improved by 1 percentage point, up to 87 percent. Overall, 47 states experienced declines in education, "underscoring how deeply the pandemic impacted students and schools," the report said.

MORE TIME IN SCHOOL IMPROVES ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Four-day school weeks, later school start times, longer school days, and flexible schedules are just a few of the ways some districts are reconfiguring school calendars. While many of these initiatives may be successful, experts have cautioned school leaders not to decrease the amount of time—instructional time especially—in schools each week. Research has generally shown that K–12 academic performance suffers with less instructional time.

In addition, *increasing* students' time in school during the school year generally leads to improved achievement, especially in math, a 2026 University of Oregon study found.

Based on the authors' review of 174 studies, they recommend that states and school districts avoid reducing time in school and use instructional time more effectively. The authors also note that focusing on schools that offer less time already might produce the largest returns on time.

"As policymakers consider changes to school calendars, it's critical that decisions are grounded in strong evidence," said Elizabeth Day, assistant director of outreach at the HEDCO Institute for Evidence-based Educational Practice. "This research shows that, in most cases, more time in school leads to better academic outcomes, especially when that time is well designed and focused on learning."



"More time in school leads to better academic outcomes."

—**Elizabeth Day,** HEDCO Institute for Evidence-based Educational Practice

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK IMAGES; ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

ISSUES AND *action*

A FEDERAL GRAB FOR COLLEGE OVERSIGHT COULD PUT STUDENTS AT RISK

By Joye Mercer Barksdale

For decades, accreditation has quietly performed a crucial job: helping to ensure the academic and financial integrity of higher education institutions. But that and more will change if the Trump administration's proposals go into effect, giving the federal government more control over which colleges and universities receive accreditation.

One of the most profound impacts would be on federal student aid programs, because students can only access these programs, such as Federal Pell Grants and student loans, if they attend accredited institutions.

The Trump administration wants to:

- Give the federal government more authority over what faculty teach, research, and publish.
- Make it easier for organizations to gain official recognition as accreditors without any proof of expertise, quality, or past success.
- Roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that support students and impact faculty hiring.
- Force colleges and universities to accept all transfer credits, regardless of where they were earned.

"Together, these changes push college accreditation away from its original purpose of quality assurance and make it a weaker system that can be easily evaded and used to push federal political agendas—leaving students to pay the price," says a July 2026 report by the Center for American Progress (CAP).

No one claims accreditation is perfect, but it provides a measure of transparency and accountability. Samuel Dunietz, an NEA senior policy specialist, compares accreditation to a home inspection. You've fallen in love with the charming Cape Cod across from the park, but is it structurally sound? To find out, you need an impartial inspector.

"Just like a home inspector, accreditors are independent, not beholden to institutions or to the government," Dunietz says.

Liz Wright, an at-large higher education member of the NEA Board of Directors, says accreditation "shows that the college or university actually does what it says it will do in offering classes with academic value; that the people who are teaching know what they are doing; and that the institution is economically viable."



Liz Wright

The CAP report notes that the administration's changes "could ultimately leave students with fewer protections against low-quality programs, reduce the value of their degrees in the labor market, and even limit their exposure to diverse perspectives and areas of study that are critical for civic and economic participation."

NEA members' voices will be heard, Dunietz says. The union's continuing engagement is crucial, says Wright, because the Trump administration's goal is as straightforward as it is dangerous: to amass control over higher education.

"We have had one of the greatest higher education systems in the world, and I am afraid we are losing that," she says.

"But as union members, we are so powerful," Wright adds. "When people in a collective come together and realize the importance of something, when we bring our voices and our varied talents, there is so much we can do. That's the whole history of unions in this country."

(NEA members participated in public comment on the rule in September. At press time, the final rule was expected by November 1.)

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LIZ WRIGHT

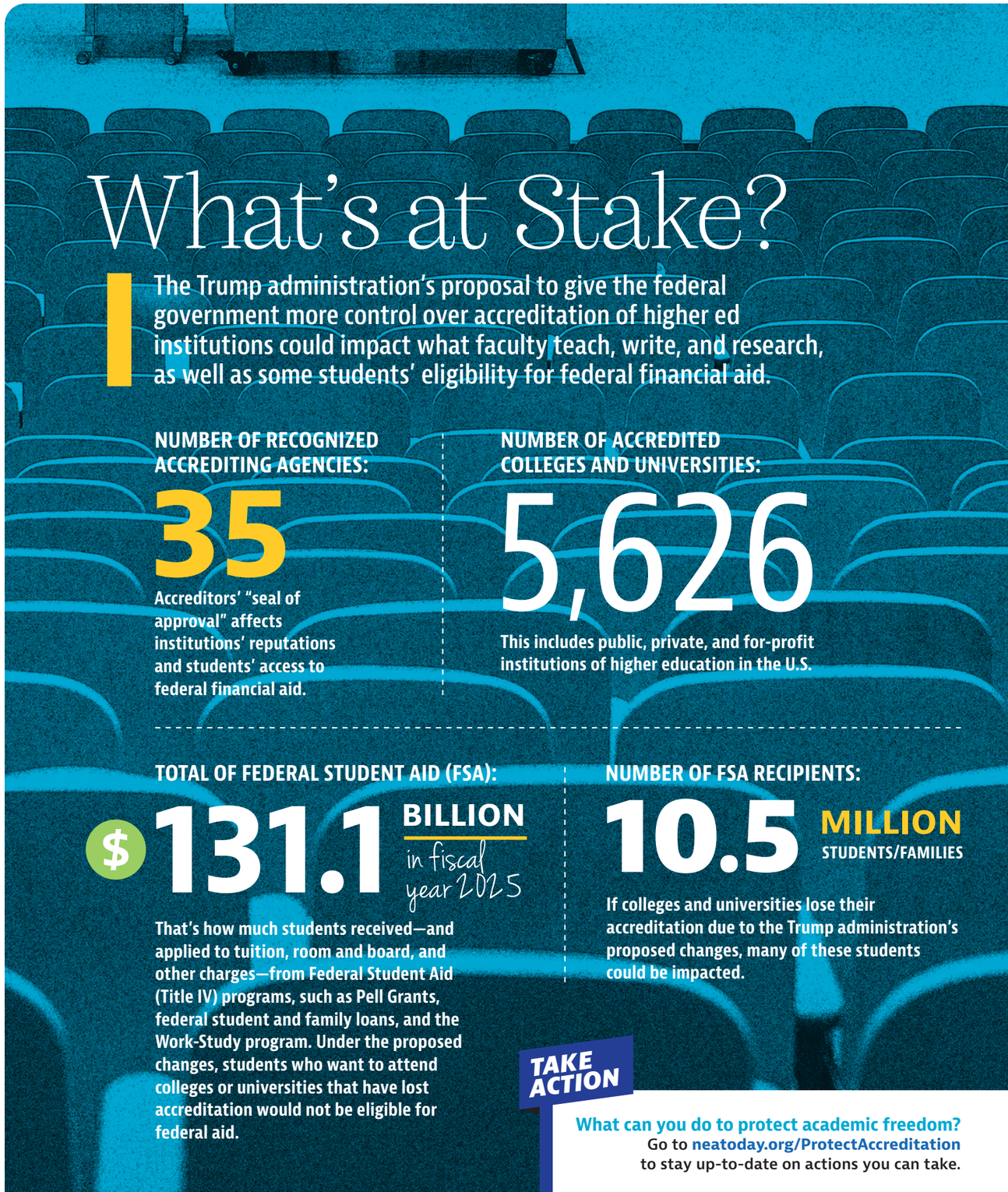


PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK; FACTS: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2024 – 2025 (TOP, RIGHT); U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (ALL OTHERS)

EDUCATION SUPPORT *professionals*



ESPS: FIND YOUR POWER!

By Nichelle Marcel, preschool special education paraeducator, Colorado Education Association

I'd like to share a bit about how I've found my power and how each of us can find our power in the union.

I consider myself a baby in this union work. My journey is just beginning, and I have so much to learn. But I hope my story sparks courage for you to tap into your own power.

I was a stay-at-home mom, dropping off my twins at their elementary school each day. One day, a paraeducator at the school, who'd seen me at several Parent Teacher Organization meetings, stopped to ask me a life-changing question. "Are you interested in getting a job here?"

Fast forward eight years, and I now work at an integrated learning center for 3- to 5-year-olds. I am a severe-needs paraprofessional, working with children who have significant cognitive, medical, or behavioral challenges. I help students with daily-living skills, personal care, and specialized learning goals.

Throughout my time as a paraeducator, I've encountered people who don't understand what I do. Their limited perspective has sometimes made me question my work and my purpose. It's taken me time to understand that the care and dedication I show students is valuable and important.

It's also taken time for me to understand that I have power. We all have power as paraeducators, as bus drivers, as food service workers, and as every education support professional (ESP) reading this column.

We want more training

I'd like to share a story of a student who is on an individualized education program (IEP). He prefers to play alone, but this is something we're working on as a team.

I decided to join him one day as he played trains alone on the carpet. We took turns connecting pieces to build the track. He happily drove his train around the track and allowed me to follow with mine. We continued this way for a few minutes—and I felt good about the progress we were making together.

Suddenly, without warning, he wanted to take my train, which quickly escalated into an emotional and physical reaction. I was able to address the situation and did the best I could in that moment. But I left that day thinking, this is not OK. Not for him, and not for me.

I must admit, the training the district provides doesn't always meet the needs of my students or prepare me or my colleagues to best handle these situations.

Paraeducators and all ESPs need training to support our success and that of our students. We have the desire and the ability to do more, but we need a contract that empowers us. Our students deserve better, and so do we!

Power in numbers

The good news is that we have our union. Last spring, my local began negotiating our first contract, and we began building language around safety and training. For example, the contract acknowledges the importance of paraeducators having specific details about the students they support. It also states that severe-needs paraeducators should have access to core components of a student's IEP. Additionally, the contract includes the formation of a district and union committee to assess and prioritize training needs and procedures for paraeducators.

Securing this contract language allows us to develop on the skills we need to serve all of our students, including my student with the trains.

Power through our union allows us to advocate for student needs at the most foundational level, while also speaking to our needs as ESPs.

While the union begins at our local, we also have connection and power at the state and the national levels. Our opportunities and power expand when we work together, whether locally, statewide, or nationally.

For me, that has meant leadership development, connection with fellow members of color, and the opportunity to be in community with all ESPs.

We all know this work is difficult and means late nights, a lot of text chains, and difficult conversations, but my union siblings in Colorado and across the country have kept me going and filled my cup on the days I needed it. My power is fueled by my ESP siblings and the important work we do to push for the change we deserve.

It wasn't easy for us to start our union. Negotiating our first contract was difficult, and we were told some of our positions may be cut. Some days ended in tears, and I often wondered what's next.

But I believe in the power of the union. We are our union. Together, we are stronger. Together, we are heard. We know that there is power in numbers and collective action, which is most important for pushing change.



The Paraeducator Association of Cherry Creek (above) empowers nearly 1,000 paraeducators, including Nichelle Marcel (opposite), to advocate for the respect, resources, and stability needed to create better schools.

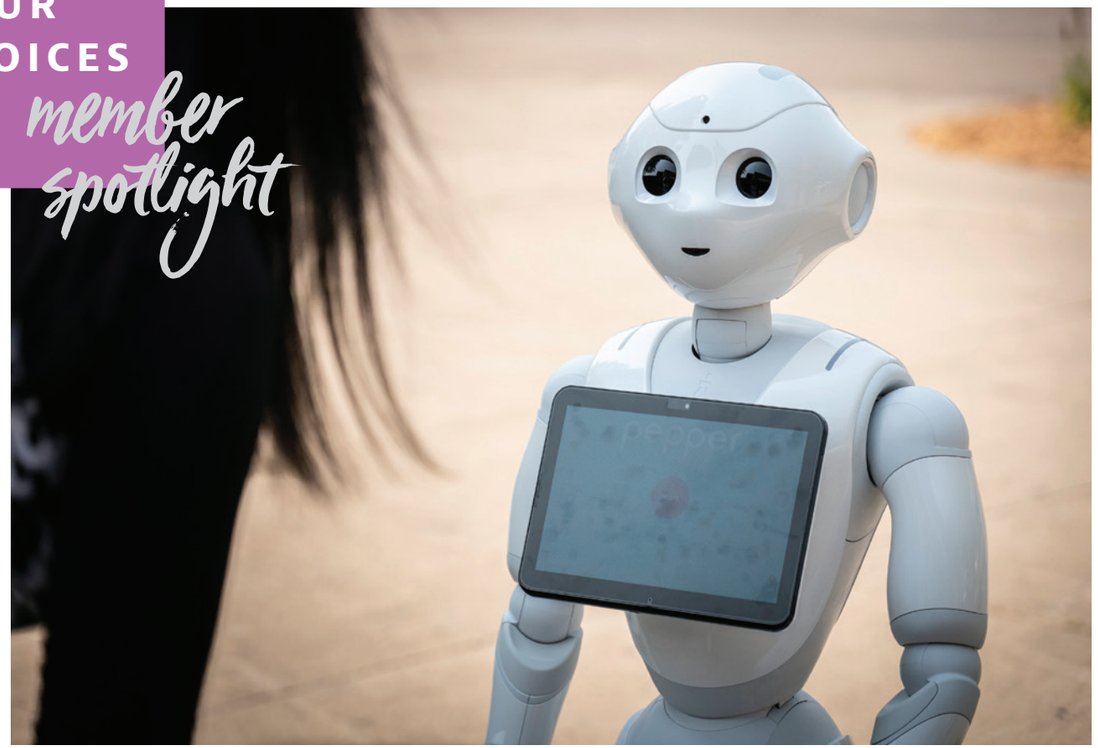
But it starts with me, and it starts with you, when we commit to standing in our power. Sometimes power is having courageous conversations with your co-workers or administrators. Other times, it's making your voice heard on issues you care about at the local, state, or even at the national level.

Finding your power can look different for each of us. I'm asking each of you, today, to be brave enough to stand in your truth and unleash your power!

Nichelle Marcel is a member of the Paraeducator Association of Cherry Creek, in Colorado.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NICHELLE MARCEL

PHOTO: COURTESY OF COLORADO EDUCATION ASSOCIATION



MEET THE PROFESSOR AND HER ROBOTS

ARSHIA KHAN SAYS ROBOTS MAY 'EXTEND A GOOD LIFE' FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

By Mary Ellen Flannery

A couple of years ago, in a Minnesota nursing home, NEA Higher Ed member Arshia Khan asked a human-shaped robot named Pepper to demonstrate its usefulness to *CBS Evening News*.

As the television cameras rolled, Pepper held a screen between its glossy, articulated hands, showing old black-and-white family photos to a resident named Jill, who was 83 years old and living with Alzheimer's disease. First an image of her brother as a child, holding their puppy. Then Jill's old rodeo horse. "I loved my horse, Lucky Strike. … He took us to the different rodeos, and I always ran first," Jill told reporters.

This is what "reminiscence therapy" can look like, when the robot is programmed by Khan and her team of students at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD). And it's just one possible support that robots may someday provide to people living with dementia.

What can a robot do?

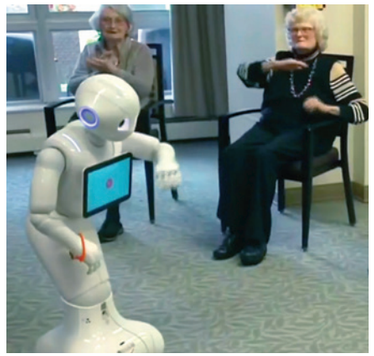
Khan is a professor of computer science at UMD and also the department's director of graduate studies. Since 2022, she and her students have deployed humanoid robots to nursing homes and memory-care facilities across Minnesota, through a $2 million grant Khan won from the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

The robots are all Peppers, manufactured by a Taiwanese company and programmed by Khan and her students in their computer science lab. The 4-foot-tall humanoids look a little like children—with big eyes and soft featureless faces.

"They're cute," says Khan, which is the intent. "Have you heard of 'uncanny valley'?" Khan asks. "Uncanny valley is a concept that the more a robot looks human, the more the creepiness factor increases.

"Pepper is a good balance, humanoid but cartoonish. When I've tried it with adults with mild and moderate and advanced dementia, I haven't had a single one react negatively," she says. "So, I'm pretty

PHOTO: DAVID COWARDIN/UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA DULUTH



Minnesota professor Arshia Khan programs robots to help nursing home residents with dementia.

comfortable bringing these robots out to people with cognitive decline, to help improve their cognition, mood, quality of life, and daily living activities."

Currently, Khan and her students have Peppers in 10 nursing homes, she says, where they lead bingo, karaoke, and dance activities, and even tell "Dad jokes." Most important, the robots involve residents in 15- to 20-minute sessions involving mental and physical exercises. Their interactions are aimed at engaging and entertaining residents, and improving their mood and cognition, including their ability to focus, store, and retrieve information.

Indeed, in 2024, Khan completed a clinical trial that found her robots improved mood and cognition, specifically attention span, among nursing home residents with dementia. Khan's findings depended partly on self-reported data by residents, but she also used electronic skin sensors that the patients wore during therapy.

"As an engineer, I feel I can't rely on self-reported data," Khan laughs. The electronic data also showed that participants' attention is improving, she says, confounding the typical decline of dementia patients.

The future is near

Khan's vision isn't to create some kind of dystopian landscape, where armies of robots replace human caregivers. The robots are "just tools" for caregivers, she says. "Microwaves did not make all the cooks disappear!" she notes.

Robots can tell people with dementia when to take their statins and serve them up, on time, like an intelligent pillbox. They can lead classes of seated yoga or golden-oldies karaoke.

"Maybe you have a gardener who can't remember to water her plants anymore. If you give them a robot plant, along with the living plant, the robot plant can say, 'hey, it's time to water us!'

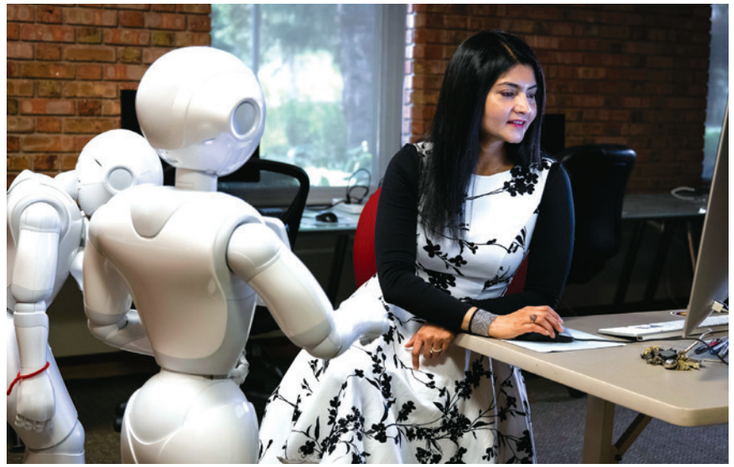
"We are building that plant right now," Khan says.

Since the pandemic, Khan's use of robots in nursing homes has gained more "understanding," she says. "People used to make fun of me, like I'm going to 'unleash my robots' on some poor vulnerable population," she notes.

But the pandemic made two things clear to observers: 1) Nursing home staff and clinicians are exhausted and stressed; and, 2) older adults are often isolated and lonely. "And loneliness exacerbates cognitive decline," Khan adds.

Looking ahead, the goal isn't just to help people with dementia in nursing homes, Khan says. Eventually, if programmers can keep up with what people want and need, and manufacturers can make them affordable, robots could help people live at home independently for as long as possible.

"It's all human-centered," she says. "It all has to be human-centered."



Who is Arshia Khan?

In addition to her lab work, Khan (above) is piloting a course on human-robot interaction this fall, as well as teaching a familiar (to her!) course on the Internet of Things, in which students build objects with sensors. A real example from one of Khan's students? A litter box that signals when a pet cat has an infection. One of Khan's favorite classes to teach is Digital Justice, which explores how technology "is unjust to certain populations," she notes. "For example, say a person with a diverse background goes into the emergency room," Khan explains. "This person is saying they have too much pain," but an AI that has ingested racist ideas about pain will tell doctors that their patient's pain "is insignificant."

PHOTOS (FROM TOP): CBS EVENING NEWS WITH NORAH O'DONNELL (SCREEN GRAB); DAVID COWARDIN/UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA DULUTH



NEA HIGHER EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR

‘Start Drawing Lines in the Sand’

FIGHT FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND GROW YOUR UNIONS, SAYS NEA’S HIGHER EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR

By Mary Ellen Flannery

NEA Higher Educator of the Year Clinton Smith has been involved in the Special Olympics for decades. At the USA Games in 2022, he coached an athlete named Sam.

“Sam was in a track event. And right after the starting gun, another runner in his heat went down hard. Just fell. And the field took off,” Smith told delegates at the 2026 NEA Representative Assembly, held this summer, in Denver. “Sam stopped. He turned around, went back, and helped that athlete up. And then—instead of sprinting for the finish line—he linked arms with him, and they walked across the finish line together.

“Sam didn’t want the medal more than he wanted that person to finish the race. *That* is solidarity,” Smith told the nearly 7,000 union members.

“I think about Sam a lot when the work gets hard—because it does get hard. And it’s tempting, when it’s hard, to just run your own race. Remember, an individual is a spark; a collective is a wildfire. Alone, they can ignore us. Together, they have to face us.

“Be someone’s Sam. That’s our mission. Stand up for each other.”

PHOTO: RYAN OLIVER

Meeting the challenges ahead

Smith, a professor of special education at the University of Tennessee at Martin who has worked in K–12 and higher education for 30 years, said he doesn’t take the NEA honor as “compliment,” but rather as a “challenge.”

He knows faculty and staff face growing hurdles. Among the many challenges: State and federal funding cuts; the erosion of shared governance; and attacks on tenure and academic freedom, or the ability to do research or debate issues in classrooms without political interference.

Smith’s answer? “To keep fighting. To bring more people into this work. And to make sure the next 30 years look better than the first,” he says.

Smith points to “the seven powerful verbs” championed by former NEA President Becky Pringle.

“First, we *educate*,” Smith told his NEA colleagues in July. “That’s the foundation of everything we do. But part of that mission—a part we sometimes skip—is educating the public about what we actually do and what we’re actually up against. … Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. That’s not a talking point. That’s a fact the public needs to hear. And we need to say it like we mean it.”

Second, educators need to *communicate*, Smith said. “Now, I coach sixth-grade boys’ basketball, and I will tell you—there is no situation in my professional life that has better prepared me for difficult communication than trying to run a half-court offense with 12-year-olds who think they’re Steph Curry.

“At some point every season, I am standing on the sideline watching one of my guys dribble directly into triple coverage. And I have to make a choice—do I stay quiet, or do I say something? I say something. Every time. Because silence doesn’t teach anybody.

“On our campuses, we have to make the same choice. Our value, our research, our expertise—none of it speaks for itself. We have to speak for it. Clearly, consistently, and without apologizing.”





(From top) NEA Higher Educator of the Year Clinton Smith notes, “Faculty get asked to pour everything into students’ futures while having no certainty about their own.”; Smith with athlete Sabrina Molina at the 2023 Special Olympics Tennessee Summer Games.

> **“Let’s go back to our campuses and do what we do. Let’s demand what’s fair.”**
> —Clinton Smith

Organize, mobilize, and more

The third verb is *organize*. “When you organize, you look a colleague in the eye and say: We are stronger together, and there is a place for you here,” Smith said. “That’s the whole pitch. And it works. You can’t truly fight for students without also fighting for the people who teach them.”

Next? *Mobilize*. Find the room where decisions are being made “and pull up a chair,” Smith said. Take your energy into faculty senate meetings, into shared governance, he urged.

Then, *legislate* and *elect*. Know your legislators by name. Show up in their offices. “Support candidates who understand what public education is worth,” Smith advised.

And finally, the seventh verb: “When they come for our contracts, when academic freedom gets attacked, when tenure gets treated like a suggestion, we *litigate*,” Smith said. “Look at the NEA’s injunction against the higher education ‘Dear Colleague’ letter. That decision protected real people—faculty who would have lost protections they’d spent careers earning.

“That’s what it looks like when we stop asking politely and start drawing lines in the sand.”

Every NEA member needs to do this work, Smith said. “Let’s go back to our campuses and do what we do. Let’s demand what’s fair. Let’s bring out the brilliance in every person we serve.”

PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM): RYAN OLIVER; COURTESY OF CLINTON SMITH

HIGHER EDUCATION *bulletin board*

The latest news on NEA Higher Ed members around the country

COLLEGE STAFF WIN BIG RAISES IN OREGON

By Mary Ellen Flannery

Just 1 in 5 classified staff at Central Oregon Community College, in Bend, Ore., were paid a living wage in 2025. The other 78 percent relied on the college's food pantry for meals and its used-clothing closet to stay warm.

By 2028, however, more than 3 in 5 of the college's staff will make a living wage—which is $26.81 an hour in Bend—thanks to the solidarity of union members.

"We knew we had a lot of talented people, and a lot of people dedicated to working in public education, but they simply couldn't afford to live in this community," says union president Scott Dove, an academic technology specialist. As a result of poor pay, last year the unit had a 17 percent turnover rate.

In October 2025, the union—which includes academic advisors and custodians, as well as financial aid and e-learning specialists—affiliated with the Oregon Education Association, which helped them gain more power at the bargaining table, Dove explains.

Last spring, when administrators refused to budge on pay raises, even while acknowledging they could afford them, union members set a strike date for April 2.

On April 1, they settled the contract.

The new agreement achieves two things regarding pay: It eliminates the three bottom steps of the salary schedule, increasing the floor from $18.91 to $23.23 an hour; and it applies 15 percent raises over three years. For the lowest paid staffers, this means 28 percent raises.

The union also negotiated improvements to healthcare benefits that will save each member $900–$2,000 a year, without changes to coverage.

"We do feel really proud and excited of what we accomplished," Dove says.

Union members and supporters rallied on campus.



The Secret to Success in New Jersey



Jenna Lucente

In May, faculty at Salem Community College—in one of New Jersey's poorest counties—won 11.5 percent raises over three years. The keys to their success?

1) **"Preparation,"** says union president Jenna Lucente. "We read the contract like 90 times. We'd sit there together and be like, 'What about this paragraph? What about that paragraph?'"

2) **Relationships.** "We do not have an attitude of us versus them. We just think of it as us," Lucente says. This means coming to the table with a smile, a willingness to listen and, most of all, a confidence that everybody has the same goal: for our students to do better, she says.

Finally, FAMU's Persistence Pays Off!



Samique March-Dallas

In April, the faculty union at Florida A&M University (FAMU), a historically Black university, ratified a new contract after 64 months at the bargaining table.

"It has been a long, arduous journey," says United Faculty of Florida-FAMU President Samique March-Dallas, an associate professor of finance.

The new contract provides the largest raises in March-Dallas' 15 years at the university. The highest-paid faculty (mostly in business and engineering) got $6,750 raises; the middle tier (mostly in the sciences) received $5,750 raises; the third tier (mostly in the humanities) got $4,500. For the lowest paid faculty, this means 7-9 percent raises; for the highest paid, 4.5-6 percent. While these raises are substantial, they do not erase the gulf between FAMU salaries and those at other research institutions in the state.

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): COURTESY OF JENNA LUCENTE; ALEX LEDGERWOOD; THE BEND BULLETIN/DEAN GUERNSEY

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

News Flash! Union Members Get Paid More

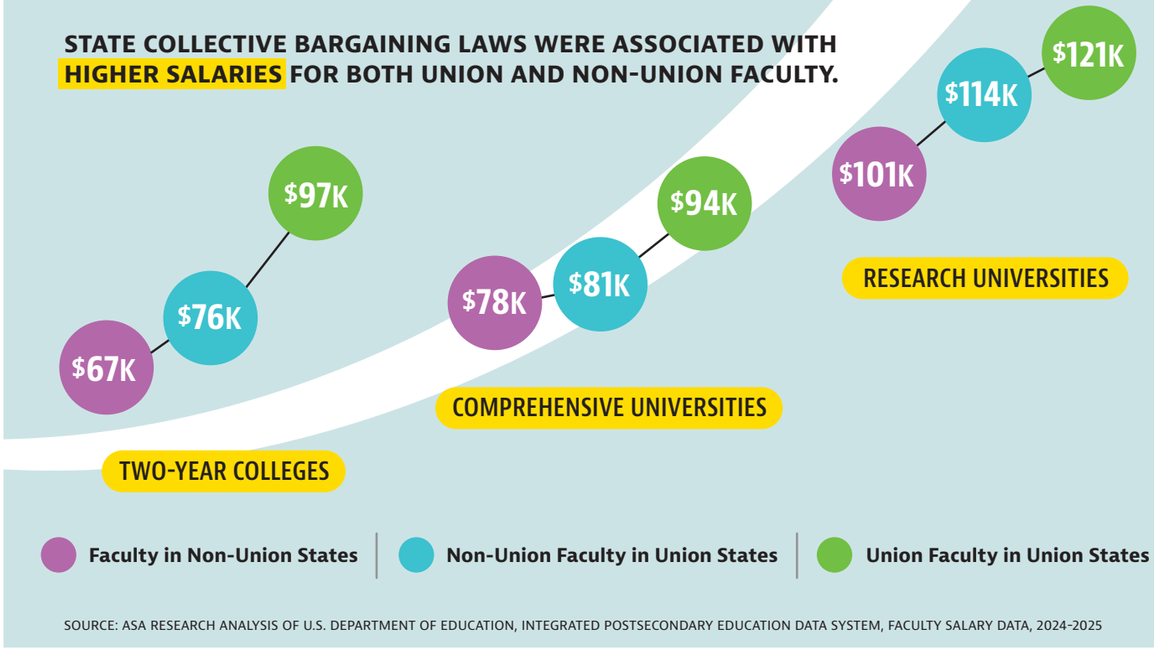
When it comes to salary, it pays to be a union member

The evidence is in: Faculty who belong to unions get paid more than faculty who do not.

The union advantage is especially large at community colleges, where union faculty earned an average of $19,000 more in 2025 than their non-unionized peers working in the same states—and an average of $30,000 more than faculty in states without collective bargaining, according to the 2026 NEA Faculty Salary Report. At research universities, the average difference is $20,000.

That union faculty get paid more than non-union faculty is not at all surprising to NEA Higher Ed members.

"We have power on these issues—and it's through collective bargaining. The power is at the table," says Alec Thomson, president of NEA's National Council for Higher Education.



SOURCE: ASA RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, INTEGRATED POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM, FACULTY SALARY DATA, 2024-2025

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

What Being a Union Organizer Taught Me

By Mary Ellen Flannery

In my regular job as an editor and writer for *NEA Today for Higher Ed*, I talk to a lot of faculty and staff. I love these conversations! Ask a faculty member about their research, and the next thing you know, you're learning why zebra fish are far superior to lab mice.

Lately, these conversations have turned dark. Often, we talk about the erosion of shared governance and faculty's loss of autonomy and academic freedom. One Florida professor told me how she self-censors her syllabi, afraid to use the word "racism." So many NEA Higher Ed members feel unsafe, unheard, and even under attack by campus administrators and lawmakers in some states.

My response? I'm sorry. It's awful. And also: Get active in your union.

So, when I was invited to join the United Faculty of Florida's effort to grow their union and power at Florida State University (FSU), I said yes. While the idea of knocking on doors and asking faculty to say yes to membership was a bit daunting (I don't want anybody to yell at me!), I know that now isn't the time to stand on the sidelines.

Unions have never been more popular with the American public—and never so under attack by billionaires and the politicians who do their bidding. A new Florida law, aimed at eliminating public-employee unions through heightened thresholds for annual certification, meant faculty needed help—and fast—in building their membership and muscle.

Here's what I learned from the experience:



1

SOMETIMES NON-MEMBERS ARE NON-MEMBERS BECAUSE THEY HAVEN'T BEEN ASKED TO JOIN.

I rarely volunteer for more stuff to do, but somehow, I am often "voluntold." That's how I've ended up as a union steward, a travel softball coach, a frequent foster mom to litters of adorable puppies, and so on. I know that if you just ask somebody to do something, they'll often say … um, okay.

One morning in Tallahassee, when a colleague and I popped our heads into a film professor's office and introduced ourselves, he quickly retorted: "Yeah, joining [the union] has been on my list to do." How about we get it done now, we asked. His answer: "Um, okay."

LESSON LEARNED:
People just need to be asked! Make the ask.



2

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER. (FOR EXAMPLE, I STILL CAN'T SAY NO TO MY SISTER.)

Midweek, I was walking around the statistics department with FSU religion professor David Newheiser and Michigan political science professor Alec Thomson (who also had volunteered to help).

A day earlier, I had left some flyers with a senior statistics professor who told me it's essential "to have a union with equal power to administration." So, when David, Alec, and I walked into a young professor's office, I wasn't surprised to see our paperwork on his desk. I also wasn't surprised when he told us, "Yes, I'm joining. I talked to a colleague about it at lunch today."

LESSON LEARNED:
It's hard to say no to somebody you work with every day. Reach out to the people in your department, in your lab, on your hall, and ask them if they're union members.

3

PEOPLE WHO LIKE PEOPLE CAN DO THIS. BUT SO CAN PEOPLE WHO DON'T LIKE PEOPLE.

I was paired on campus with FSU faculty, as well as NEA Higher Ed members and staff from around the U.S. Some of us were extroverts. Some not. Some liked to ask about faculty's summer research plans or favorite local hikes, and would have stayed forever in that one office to learn about Afro-Caribbean dance as a form of protest. Others stayed focused. We dressed in union T-shirts. Or not. Some of us (OK, that was me!) complained about the heat, while others praised the sun, because it's not like this in Chicago!

The point is, we were different people with one enormous thing in common: We believe faculty and staff should collectively bargain.

LESSON LEARNED:
You don't have to be a certain kind of person to do this work. You just have to believe in what you're doing.



SUCCESS!

In one week, our team of unofficial "organizers" talked with 451 FSU faculty members, in person. Meanwhile, another team had 100-plus conversations at Florida A&M University, the smaller, historically Black university across town. Many of these conversations turned into commitments to join the union, ensuring FSU and FAMU faculty can keep their union and their union contracts (which protect them from political firings and program closures) for at least another year.

Personally, I had knocked on 100-plus doors. Only one person put up their hands and said: "No. Just no." (There was no yelling!) The most frequent response? "Thank you for being here."

TAKE ACTION

The New Guide to Transformational Conversations

You can do this! Use NEA's new guide for one-on-one recruitment conversations, specifically written for NEA Higher Ed members, to grow and strengthen your campus unions. Check it out at nea.org/RecruitHE.

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK



GRAD EXPECTATIONS

By Mary Ellen Flannery with photos by Justin Green

TODAY'S GRAD EMPLOYEES TEACH, RESEARCH, AND JOIN THEIR UNIONS TO **ENSURE A BETTER FUTURE.**

Who will grade the midterm exam and run Tuesday's discussion section? Who will set up the lab (Atwood machines, yes?) so that undergraduates can prove Newton's second law ($\Sigma F = ma$), and understand its application in rocket science?

Who literally gets their feet wet, exploring how to remove microplastics from local watersheds? Or their hands dirty, as they dive into colonial archives for lessons on today's tax codes?

In other words, who ensures the U.S. sets the pace for global innovation? And teaches the first-years?

Faculty and staff know the answer, but outside of academia, many don't. It's the unsung, underpaid, overworked hero of higher education: The graduate assistant.

Campuses can't function without them. But they're hardly paid like the mission-critical workers they are. Nick Filannino, a graduate worker and botanist at the University of Florida (UF), makes about $2,000 a month and drives a 23-year-old Crown Vic. Meanwhile, molecular geneticist Lisa Coe (opposite) bartends to pay her bills.

Life as a graduate employee is a series of financial problems and power imbalances. But UF grad workers know the solution. It's to strengthen their NEA-affiliated union, UF-Graduate Assistants United (UF-GAU), which represents more than 4,000 on campus.

Thanks to the union, Filannino has dental insurance for the first time in his adult life—and for just $20 a month. Health insurance costs him about the same, "and it's very good insurance," says Filannino, who is the union's new co-president. "I'm not afraid to go to the doctor!"

More and more U.S. grad workers see the power of unionizing. Indeed, they represent one of the fastest growing sectors of U.S. organized labor, according to a 2024 Hunter College study.

Recently, *NEA Today* visited UF to document the work of UF-GAU members and their efforts to grow their union.

133%
THAT'S HOW MUCH THE NUMBER OF UNIONIZED GRAD WORKERS IN THE U.S. INCREASED FROM 2012 - 2024.

1 IN 4
THAT'S HOW MANY GRAD WORKERS BELONG TO UNIONS NOW.

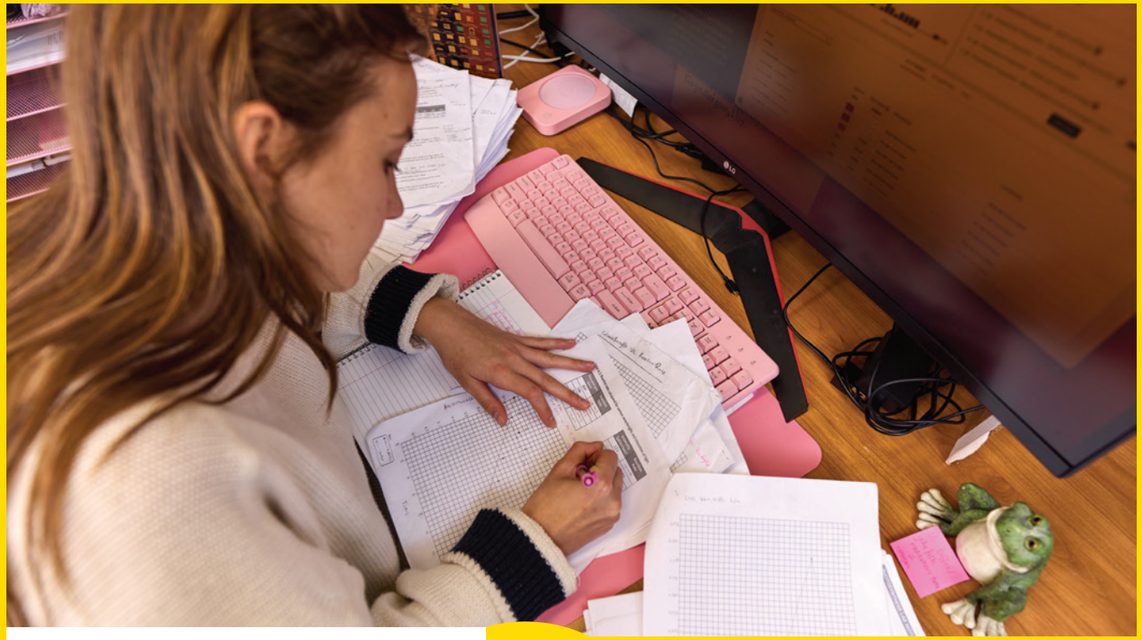
SOURCE: THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PROFESSIONS, AT HUNTER COLLEGE



What's In Her Glass? From Day to Night, It's Microbes to Martinis.



While Lisa Coe studies for two graduate degrees at UF, a Ph.D. in biology and a master's degree in science education, she works four jobs. By day, she's a research assistant, paid by UF through a U.S. National Science Foundation fellowship, who works with phytoplankton and bacterial cultures to understand the molecular genetics underlying sulfur metabolism. Eventually, these experiments will better inform the connection between the sulfur and carbon cycles. "To put it simply, I like figuring out how microscopic organisms that we can't even see with our own eyes have such a big impact on Earth," Coe says. The other three jobs? She works as a freelance photographer, hosts a weekly trivia game at a local restaurant, and mixes drinks at a Gainesville bar a few times a week. "You'd be surprised at the similarities [between lab and bar work]," she says—and not just the stir-and-poof! Both are seemingly singular pursuits that depend on collaboration. "A lot of solutions in the lab come through interactions with others," she says.



They Grade Like Professors, But Eat Like College Students.



You'll not find Ellie Bollich's name in a course catalog. But she has taught hundreds of UF students about plant biology, plant taxonomy, photosynthesis, the sensory biology of vertebrates, and more. Three times a week, she runs three-hour Intro to Bio labs, which include giving and grading quizzes, lecturing for 10 to 40 minutes, and guiding students through the lab activities. Additionally, Bollich holds weekly office hours, proctors exams, and grades piles of student assessments (above). As a paid teaching assistant (TA), Bollich is the point person for students with questions. "At the end of the semester, I spent two straight weeks answering emails!" she says. Lately, reading those emails has been a tougher-than-usual task: "My glasses broke, but I can't afford to get new ones," she says. For her TA work, Bollich is paid about $2,000 a month. Her biggest expense? Food. (She can't live on ramen alone!) Meanwhile, Bollich is also pursuing a Ph.D. in biology through the mammal lab at the university's Florida Museum of Natural History. "My main thing is small mammals, specifically shrews, and the relationship between species," she says.

HOW MUCH ARE GRAD ASSISTANTS PAID? THE ANSWER DEPENDS ON THE FIELD.

$24,000
NATIONAL AVERAGE

- **$26,000:** Computer and information sciences
- **$26,000:** Biological and life sciences
- **$25,000:** Physical sciences
- **$25,000:** Engineering
- **$24,000:** Mathematics
- **$23,000:** World languages and literature
- **$23,000:** Philosophy and religion
- **$23,000:** Psychology
- **$22,000:** Architecture
- **$22,000:** English
- **$21,000:** Parks and recreation
- **$21,000:** Education
- **$20,000:** Visual and performing arts

SOURCE: THE 2026 NEA HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY SALARY ANALYSIS, SEE NEA.ORG/HE.



Florida's Grad Assistants Are Racing to Build Stronger Unions

Since taking office a few months ago, Filannino, alongside co-president Hannah Jacobs, and other UF-GAU members have been hustling. The challenge? To grow their union in the face of a new state law threatening to decertify UF-GAU and other higher ed unions. No union means no collectively bargained contract, plus the loss of a powerful counterweight. "[Grad assistants] can get into a sinister place," Filannino notes, unable to say no to unreasonable or rapacious demands by supervisors who hold all the power over assistants' potential degrees and academic careers. "[The union] can step in and say, 'These are the rules and everybody needs to abide by them, and if everybody isn't, we'll have to go into the grievance process.'" In talking with current and potential union members, Filannino is encouraged. "I don't know if hopeful is the right word," he says. "But I am realizing there is so much more love and community in my spaces and in this world, and even in the state of Florida, than anyone would have you believe."



"I AM REALIZING THERE IS SO MUCH MORE LOVE AND COMMUNITY IN MY SPACES AND IN THIS WORLD."

—Nick Filannino (on bike, and at table, in blue), graduate worker and botanist at the University of Florida

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In many rural counties, school districts depend on a federal program that is increasingly undependable

Into the WOODS

By Joye Mercer Barksdale



With a master's degree in geology, Janna Privette imagined a career in a college lecture hall, not a kindergarten classroom. But she decided academia wasn't the right fit, and life had a plan of its own.

She and her husband moved to Kooskia, Idaho, "Gateway to the Wilderness," in 2015, for his job, and she landed at Clearwater Valley Elementary School. Privette loves the natural beauty she sees from every angle: the basalt canyon walls of the Clearwater River, the landscape of pines, firs, and cedars.

What she doesn't love is the unreliability of a key funding source for her school: the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. The federal program is becoming as unpredictable as Idaho wildfires. It's reauthorization expired on September 30, and educators in the more than 700 counties that receive SRS funds—spread across 41 states and Puerto Rico—are once again waiting on Congress.

"In most communities, public schools don't get the resources they need," says Privette, whose school sits on the Nez Perce Reservation, along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. "But in my district, there's always this awareness that our money is especially uncertain. It makes it hard to know what we can plan for long term and even what we can negotiate for as a union."

Idaho teacher Janna Privette must now contribute toward health insurance because of unstable federal funding for rural schools.

PHOTO: COURTNEY KAMMERS

Federal payments for national forests

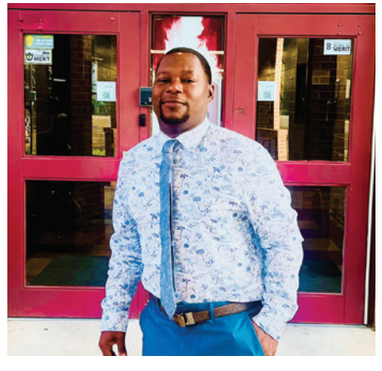
The SRS program was created through the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000, and provides funding to 4,400 school districts. Payments for fiscal year 2025 totaled $253.8 million—an amount that's dwarfed by, for example, the $19 billion in Title I funding that supports public schools in low-income communities.

But educators say that while their SRS funds may not seem like much, the money helps keep schools open, school buses running, class sizes manageable, and educators working. It also supports local road repair and maintenance, wildfire preparedness, emergency services, and other public services.

The SRS program is the outgrowth of a program started in 1908 to compensate counties for non-taxable public land. The name may call up images of *Little House on the Prairie,* with Laura Ingalls running blissfully through the prairie to a one-room schoolhouse, but in the context of SRS, "rural" refers to national forestland.

The payments vary widely based on acreage, and Congress must reauthorize the program periodically. Reauthorization often comes several months, if not years, after the program's expiration.

Case in point: When the SRS law expired in April 2023, the program was reauthorized in December 2025, thanks in large part to advocacy by NEA and its partners. The legislation essentially provided back payments for the time that had already passed. That law then ended last month. Districts, anticipating another lengthy delay in reauthorization, are scrambling to make "just in case" plans. It's a routine they know all too well.



Mike Watkins, a school principal in Mississippi, knows how unreliable federal funding hurts students.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MIKE WATKINS

"Every May you have PTSD," says Joseph Hantho, a high school science teacher in the Stevenson-Carson School District, located in Skamania County, Washington, where 80 percent of the county is national forestland. "You start thinking: Am I going to have my job next fall?"

But for Hantho and his colleagues, the program is about more than the budget. It's also about stability, dignity, and the ability to plan.

A lifeline in forested counties

In the past, timber companies had a huge footprint in forested counties as major employers and taxpayers. They leased substantial portions of these lands from the U.S. Forest Service, which then shared revenues with counties. "When timber receipts were great, schools benefited," says Zeke Lee, a legislative director at the National Association of Counties who oversees Western public lands.

But in the 1980s, restrictions on logging, pressure from overseas competition, forest health issues, and other challenges shrank the timber industry. The SRS law was intended to provide a six-year time frame for attracting new businesses. In many areas, however, SRS funding became a lifeline.

Mike Watkins, who served as principal of Mississippi's Okolona High School until July, notes, "There used to be a lot of furniture factories in this area, but the main one shut down last year,

Into the WOODS

around Thanksgiving. The city wants to bring in industry, but a lot of people just don't want to come here." Now the principal of a school in the county next door, Watkins says of Okolona High: "Not having businesses really hurt us. … So if Congress is not funding SRS, they're hurting students, the people who will eventually be in our workforce."

Declining funds

The original SRS law has often been extended over the past 20 years, but the funding has decreased almost every time.

After the previous expiration, in 2023, a round of SRS payments was distributed in spring 2024 that amounted to approximately 20 percent of previous payments, leaving some counties with an 80 percent decrease in SRS funding. Districts, not knowing when the law would be reauthorized, sketched out various scenarios: staff reductions, school consolidations, half-day kindergarten, and cutting sports and extracurricular programs. In some places, these weren't just hypotheticals.

The Stevenson-Carson district decided to close the Wind River Middle School after the 2024 – 2025 school year, saving more than $600,000. Students moved to the high school. Hantho, who was already teaching three periods of science—and serving as class adviser for student government for grades 10–12—was assigned two periods of middle school math.

The school's staff numbered 52 in the 2023 – 2024 school year, but by 2025 – 2026, only 36 staff members remained. The school district is planning more possible layoffs. And this one will bring Hantho closer to losing his job. "If you have 100 jobs and only 20 people to do them, that's a huge problem."

Privette's original school district, Mountainview, spanned 8,300 square miles. It was the sixth-largest district in the continental U.S., covering more



In Joseph Hantho's school, in Skamania County, Washington, educators always worry about layoffs.

area than New Jersey. But in June, the district was split into two smaller districts. School board members believe that separate districts will be more likely to win support for tax levies that can generate additional support.

But the new Clearwater Valley district is already forecasting a shortfall for next year, partly because administrators opted not to build SRS funds into the budget. To make up some of the money, the district asked employees to contribute to the cost of their health insurance. That decision was also driven by inflation. "This is the first time in the history of our schools we've had to do that," Privette says.

Jaime Green, a former superintendent in northwest California's Trinity County and a leading advocate on rural schools, has championed SRS for years. When he meets with members of Congress, he always shares this cautionary tale: In 2016, after renewal of the SRS law was delayed, his district cut back on repairs and maintenance. The consequence was a mold outbreak that shut down two schools.

'Your people are your school'

Privette's town of Kooskia is in Idaho County and features 4.4 million acres of forestland, more than any other in the U.S. It's at the high end of SRS recipients, with payments totaling $6.6 million. In Skamania County, Washington, where Hantho teaches, payments amount to nearly $2.5 million for nearly 850,000 acres of forestland.

The tiny town of Okolona, where Watkins worked, is in Mississippi's Chickasaw County, with 26,000 acres of forestland and SRS payments of about $135,000—minuscule compared with others. But Melissa Sadorf, executive director of the National Rural Education Association, says the impact of funding cuts can be worse in very small districts. "For educators navigating tight budgets, even relatively small cuts translate into difficult decisions about staffing and programs," she says.

Green notes: "You go to a city or suburb, they have a drama and performing arts school, a science and tech school, and other options. In towns like mine, your people are your school. We have to be the jack-of-all-trades for all kids. For us, that makes the SRS program critical." He adds, "All we want is enough money to fully educate our kids."

To learn more about rural schools and check for updates on legislation, go to nea.org/RuralSchools.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JOSEPH HANTHO



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By Mary Ellen Flannery

PAYING UP

MINIMUM-SALARY LAWS ARE A GROWING STRATEGY FOR RAISING EDUCATOR PAY

In Meredith Hattan's 23rd year of teaching, she will make $58,000. With extra duties—keeping the books at every middle and high school basketball game, officiating volleyball matches, working a summer job—she'll clear $60K.

Teachers in her rural Illinois district start at $44,593 per year. Their "saving grace" is that some are still on their parents' health insurance. "Rent here is like $850, so that's probably a whole paycheck," says Hattan, a second-grade teacher in Lacon, Ill., and president of the Midland Education Association.

Who wants to do this job, for that money? Two decades ago, 50 people applied for a single position at Midland Elementary School. Now, school officials are hiring uncertified teachers and saying they don't have a choice. "We just take whoever we can get," says Hattan, who has a master's degree and notes that she has done "everything" to get as far along the salary scale as possible.

The shortage of teachers is a national problem—but some Illinois lawmakers think they have a solution. What if they gave those new teachers a $15,047 raise?

About a half-dozen states considered new minimum-salary bills in 2026, ranging from Minnesota to West Virginia. In Ohio, a bill proposed by former teacher, Rep. Joe Miller, to set the bar at $50,000 is still pending.

Last year, U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders introduced federal legislation, the "Pay Teachers Act," to set a national minimum salary for teachers at $60,000. "The situation has become so absurd that just four hedge fund managers on Wall Street make more money in a single year than every kindergarten teacher in America combined," said Sanders, in a media statement.

'Will I be able to stay?'

This past spring, Lewiston, Maine, high school teacher Cam Bigelow traveled to the State House, over and again, to spread the word: Find the money to pay teachers more.

"I'm only 26," he told lawmakers—and the future is dim. How will he ever buy a house? How will he afford children? "I'm the young teacher you say you need to avoid the teacher shortage you say you want to avoid," he says, and yet, a few years ago, his starting salary was $43,000.

Raising the minimum sends a message to the future early-childhood educators inside Lauren Remington's classroom, at St. Croix Regional Technical Center, in rural Calais, Maine. "My students are passionate about working with children, but they're also asking practical questions: Can I afford college? Will I be able to stay in Maine? Will I ever be able to buy a home or support a family as a teacher?"





In Maine, lawmakers agreed to an incremental approach: By 2029, every teacher will get at least $50,000. In Maryland, the law also provided a runway. Passed in 2021, the required $60,000 minimum didn't go into effect until July 1, 2026. The law includes an additional $10,000 for teachers with National Board Certification and an extra $7,000 for board-certified teachers who opt for low-performing schools.

Now, after 10 years working in public schools, in Frederick, Md., pre-K special education teacher Zoe Haughwaut will finally make $60,000—and quit the part-time job at Starbucks that she's had for 11 years.

"Everybody is so excited for the $60K! And yet, people also are upset about $60K," she says. Yes, it's a victory. At the same time, a single adult with two kids in Frederick County needs twice that amount to pay their bills, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.

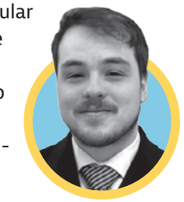
Zoe Haughwaut



Rents here "are insane," Haughwaut says. She also pays $800 a month for her family's health insurance. The new minimum is a "good step forward," she notes, but it's not the end of the journey.

By setting a minimum, Maine legislators "demonstrated [the state] values educators," Remington notes. "But … it's important to recognize that $50,000 is still a baseline. It was never meant to be the finish line." States still need to reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, she says, and invest in experienced teachers.

Many educators point to New Mexico's approach. Not only did that state raise the floor to $55,000, it raised pay for veteran teachers to at least $75,000. Notably, in Maine, Maryland, and New Mexico, educators continue to bargain for salary scales with regular steps that go beyond the minimum, avoiding the "salary compression" trap that raises pay for new teachers and ignores mid-career and experienced educators.

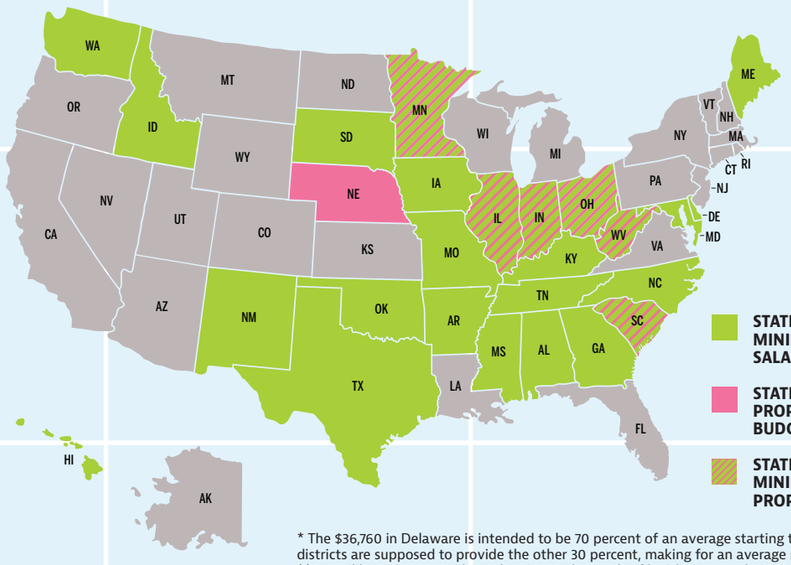


Bigelow's advice? Get involved in your union and participate in its lobbying days. Tell lawmakers your personal story, but also explain how educators' low pay affects current and future students. "It's very much about having personal, one-on-one conversations with lawmakers," he says.

PHOTOS (FROM TOP): COURTESY OF ZOE HAUGHWAUT; COURTESY OF MAINE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION; ILLUSTRATIONS: XINPING LI

MINIMUM TEACHER SALARIES ACROSS THE U.S.

Many states have minimum teacher salaries, set through legislation or administrative code since 2020. Recently, lawmakers in at least a half-dozen states have proposed legislation to create or raise those bars.



STATES WITH MINIMUM TEACHER SALARIES

STATES WITH PROPOSED BILLS OR BUDGET MEASURES

STATES WITH EXISTING MINIMUMS, PLUS PROPOSED BILLS

STATES' MINIMUM SALARIES

AL: $47,600
AR: $50,000
DE: $36,760*
GA: $43,592
HI: $64,226 **
ID: $50,252
IL: $45,080
IN: $45,000
IA: $50,000
KY: $29,804
ME: $45,000 now; $50,000 by 2029.
MD: $60,000
MS: $43,500
MO: $40,000
NM: $55,000
NC: $48,000
OH: $35,000
OK: $41,601
SC: $50,500
SD: $45,000
TN: $50,000
TX: $33,960
WA: $40,000
WV: $39,057

PROPOSED BILLS OR BUDGET MEASURES IN 2026

IL: Proposed $60,000; failed.
IN: Proposed $60,000; failed.
MN: Proposed $60,000, and $80,000 with master's; failed.
NE: Proposed $50,000; failed.
OH: Proposed $50,000 in 2026 (HB 191); *still pending at press time.*
SC: Approved $50,500 in 2026; up from $48,500.
WV: Proposed $50,000; failed.

* The $36,760 in Delaware is intended to be 70 percent of an average starting teacher's salary and is provided by the state; local school districts are supposed to provide the other 30 percent, making for an average minimum of around $47,000.
**Hawai'i's minimum teacher salary is not the result of legislation or administrative code. It is collectively bargained by the Hawai'i State Teachers Association and the State of Hawai'i Board of Education.

Be Careful!

Not every law raising teacher salaries is a good one. Some don't come with adequate funding to help districts, especially rural ones, meet the new bars. Others are laden with poison pills.

Take the 145-page LEARNS Act in Arkansas, which raised starting teacher pay from $36,000 to $50,000 in 2023. Was this a good bill for public schools? Hint: As Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders signed it, she was flanked by Christian-school students.

LEARNS created a voucher program that directs $310 million a year to families that homeschool their children or send them to private school. And while raising starting salaries for public school teachers, it erased the state's salary steps for experienced teachers and removed the state's fair-dismissal act. A federal trial to determine the law's constitutionality is scheduled for July 2027.

"All public school teachers, regardless of party affiliation, know this bill is bad for us, and worse, it's bad for our kids," said Fayetteville High School teacher Jesse Buchanan, during public testimony in 2023. "We're so certain of it that we're here to protest our own pay raises—in some cases, up to $15,000 pay raises!"

Arkansas isn't the only state to offer money to new teachers while tearing down public schools and unions. In Tennessee, in 2023, politicians raised teachers' pay to $50,000, while also making it more difficult for them to join unions.

Looking back now, Little Rock fifth-grade teacher and union leader Kristy Mosby doesn't think there was anything she could have said to stop Arkansas lawmakers. She tried, asking them in 2023: "How about we invest in evidence-based interventions that actually work, such as smaller class sizes, ... school social workers, ... community schools?"

Mosby's advice? Take a hard look at legislation. "Does it consider all educators? Because to raise teachers' pay without also giving a raise to [education support professionals] is, well, I can't think of a word bad enough." And don't fall for shiny measures that increase new teachers' salaries, but doom them to a lifetime at that level. In Arkansas, because of the way the law diverts public money to private schools, many of Mosby's colleagues with 15 years of experience are also making that same $50K.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ARKANSAS EDUCATION ASSOCIATION



$48,112
THE NATIONAL AVERAGE STARTING TEACHER SALARY

SOURCE: NEA'S EDUCATOR PAY REPORTS, 2026.

15
THE NUMBER OF STATES THAT PAY TEACHERS AT LEAST **$50,000**

WHAT ABOUT SCHOOL STAFF?

Minimum-wage laws would most benefit our lowest-paid workers.

In Minnesota, the average education support professional (ESP) would need a nearly $30,000 raise to get to a living wage, according to NEA's ESP Earnings Report.

That's why Bill Schwandt was so excited to stand next to U.S. Sen. Edward Markey, from Massachusetts, last year, on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, as Markey introduced legislation to set a minimum wage of $30 an hour—or $45,000 a year—for instructional aides and other school support staff.

"It's great to see legislators taking notice and saying these are essential school employees and we need to do better," says Schwandt, an elementary special ed paraeducator and union president in Bloomington, Minn.

This is personal

This year, Schwandt talked with state lawmakers about a bill that would have created a $25 per hour minimum wage for Minnesota ESPs who work at least 14 hours a week and regularly interact with students.

Schwandt's approach to lawmakers relies on a combination of personal stories and facts and figures about the impact of chronically low ESP wages on students and school systems. He tells them about a co-worker who works three jobs to support her family "and is just running on empty." But he also produces data on the ESP turnover rate, for example: "We have roughly 320 special-ed para jobs in our district, and 40 of them are open right now."

$38,494
THE AVERAGE EARNINGS FOR K–12 AND HIGHER ED EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

1 *in* 3
THE NUMBER OF K–12 ESPS WHO EARNED LESS THAN **$25,000** IN 2024–2025.

SOURCE: NEA'S ESP EARNINGS REPORT, 2026.



They won't choose us

In Maryland, a bill that would have required the state to study the cost of a $25 hourly wage for ESPs passed the state Senate this year, but (like Minnesota's) didn't get a final vote.

Stacy Tayman, president of the Calvert Association of Educational Support Staff, testified in favor of the bill. Tayman first reminded them of who ESPs are and what they do, and then explained how poor pay has led to a revolving door of custodians, cafeteria workers, classroom aides, and other critical staff.

Recently, Tayman did some quick math with candidates running for local offices. Imagine an instructional assistant with nine years in Calvert County schools, she told them. This person has typical bills: $1,500 a month for housing, $400 for groceries, $350 for transportation, and $250 for utilities.

Her balance at the end of the month? Negative $512.

State legislation would help, Tayman says. "If you give districts a choice, they're not going to choose to invest in their ESPs," she says.

Tayman's advice? Lawmakers need to hear over and again what ESPs do—and why their work matters to students. "No matter how many times we say it, it does not penetrate the minds of lawmakers," Tayman says. "We're all student-centered. But districts and the state don't seem to understand that."

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARYLAND STATE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION; ILLUSTRATION: XINPING LI

TEAR IT & SHARE IT

MYTHS ABOUT EDUCATOR PAY

You've likely heard all the tired myths and half-truths about pay and public schools. Unfortunately, some promote these myths to justify decisions about school funding—and specifically educator pay. With the arguments below in your toolkit, you can help change the narrative about our profession.

By Tim Walker

MYTH

Teachers have summers off.

WHAT TO SAY

Students have summers off, not teachers. Educators spend summers working second jobs, teaching summer school, preparing new lessons, and taking professional development trainings.

And then there's this: Teachers on average work 53 hours a week—seven more hours than the average working adult and roughly 14 hours over the standard 40-hour work week. And a quarter of that time is uncompensated. So, any time teachers get off during the summer is, to say the least, well-earned.

(STATISTICS FROM THE RAND CORPORATION)

MYTH

Teachers get great benefits, doesn't that make up for less pay?

WHAT TO SAY

This argument doesn't hold up to scrutiny, especially when you look at the teacher pay penalty that has grown steadily over the past 30 years. This is the gap between what teachers make weekly compared with other college-educated workers in other professions. This gap grew to a record 26.9 percent in 2024, up from 6.1 percent in 1996. Furthermore, over the last decade, inflation-adjusted weekly wages for teachers declined by $46.39, but increased by $220.46 for other college graduates.

The so-called "benefits advantage" for teachers is roughly 8 or 9 percent over similar workers from 2020 – 2024. But over the same time frame, the teacher wage penalty grew substantially, far exceeding any advantage in benefits. The total compensation gap between teachers and other college-educated workers widened to -17.1 percent in 2024, the largest on record.

(STATISTICS FROM THE ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE)

MYTH

States are strapped. We can't afford to pay educators more.

WHAT TO SAY

Of course we can afford to pay educators more. It's a question of priorities. Disinvesting in public schools, in educators, in students is a choice. Too many states are doubling down on huge income tax cuts, which mostly benefit the wealthy, even if it means billions in lost revenue and even less ability to invest in public education.

And the top education priority for lawmakers in many states are universal voucher programs that siphon billions from public schools to primarily benefit well-off families. Average public school teacher pay was $18,859 less in states that offered universal or near-universal voucher programs.

(STATISTICS FROM THE KENTUCKY CENTER FOR ECONOMIC POLICY, 2024 ANALYSIS)



ILLUSTRATIONS: XINPING LI



What I Wish I Knew

By Rae Carlson

English teacher, Nebraska State Education Association



IN THIS ESSAY, TEACHER RAE CARLSON SHARES 10 (PLUS!) LESSONS SHE LEARNED IN THE FIRST DECADE OF HER TEACHING LIFE

It was 3:52 p.m., in January of my first year. My students filed out of the classroom, scattering to their extra-curriculars, not realizing the chaos and devastation they laid in their wake. In just 52 minutes, on what was supposed to be an exciting day one of a multiday project, my seniors had rejected not only the ideas I presented to them, but also the idea of me being their teacher. For months, I had been repressing my feelings of insecurity and inferiority.

That afternoon, I broke—deeply questioning if I was meant to be a teacher. I cried for the entire half-hour drive back to the town I lived in, and then found myself on my bathroom floor, still crying.

Feeling helpless, feeling lost, I called my college mentor who was a fourth-year teacher, and poured my heart out. After 80 minutes of tears and affirmations, she said, "Rae, you are not able to reach them all, but you should never stop trying."

Those words sit with me even to this day, and have made me realize there are other things I wish I'd known as a first-year teacher. Here are 10 key insights I've gained over the years that still help me today, and hopefully will help you, too.

1 Read your contract.

Know what you're required to do and what you're not contractually obligated to do. You *can* say no to things. It doesn't make you any less of a teacher if you choose yourself, your happiness, and your time over doing a bunch of extras.

In our system, we reward those who overextend themselves with accolades and awards. But an exhausted educator isn't good for students, and is more likely to burn out and leave the profession.

2 Do not pour from an empty cup.

By the very nature of this profession, we embed pieces of our souls into our daily work. But when you overly invest emotionally, you burn the candle at both ends. This expectation of sacrifice is a systemic crisis. We cannot "self-care" our way out of it, and it very quickly leads to profound demoralization.

PHOTO: BILL SITZMANN

3 Cry, if you want to.

You may try to hide your struggles, your pain, and your tears, because maybe you feel it makes you look weak and vulnerable when you want to feel intelligent and powerful. But showing emotion is a sign of strength and empowerment.

4 Protect and make space for your hobbies.

We do this weird thing when we become educators: We make teaching our identity, and we lose our sense of self, of who we were before we became teachers.

You cannot let your career consume your entire identity. Nurturing your hobbies isn't a luxury, it is a necessity. Your well-being depends on having a life outside the classroom.

5 Refuse to feel guilt when you are doing your best.

On difficult days, it is okay if your 100 percent looks like someone else's 50 percent. If the kids were safe, cared for, and managed to learn something, you did well enough. This is a grace we need to extend not only to ourselves as educators, but to our students as well.

6 Build lasting relationships that sustain you, not drain you.

Find your marigolds—the people who put nutrients back into your soil, like marigolds do. When you've got a bunch of marigolds surrounding you, you will have support when dealing with difficult conversations, classroom behaviors, unfair administrators, and so much more. For me, and hopefully you, that's our union.

7 Don't let the fear of consequence keep you from speaking up and speaking your truth.

So often, newer educators fear speaking up and speaking out—even when they witness a clear educational injustice—because they worry about losing their jobs. Being part of the union doesn't just secure your position; it protects your right to stand up. It strengthens your armor when you choose to do what is right, even if everyone else around you is doing what is wrong.

8 Remember the support professionals who are there to support the students—and you!

The people in your building have your back—whether they are custodians, secretaries, nutritionists, or serve in another staff role. Include them in every way you wish to be included.

9 Be human.

When we step out from behind the curtain of perfection and show our students our humanity, we give them permission to do the same. Keep in mind that you're shaping the youth who will inherit this world. Keep at it.

10 Get involved.

Your voice matters. When you aren't part of the conversation, decisions are made about you, not with you. If you don't like the direction of your contract or a school program, you have to get involved. Work through your union to step up, make your voice heard, and drive the changes that directly affect you and your colleagues.

Carlson teaches English and runs the Educators Rising program for future teachers at Bryan High School, in Omaha, Neb., and also is chief negotiator for the Omaha Education Association.

Bonus item!

I was lucky. I joined NEA as an aspiring educator more than a decade ago, and knew to turn to the union during the hardest moments of my first year. Not everybody does—and we need to change that. So, my final piece of advice is for my peers, those of us who have found the power of the collective. Find that early career educator, and be their marigold. You might just become the phone call they need to make on the hardest day of their career.





LISTEN UP!
To hear audio from harvest day and see more of Lindstrom and her students, go online to neatoday.org/Bees.







On harvest day, students scrape, or "uncap," the combs, check moisture levels with a refractometer (left) and use an extractor machine (top, middle) to remove the honey. Tasting is mandatory!





Kristen Lindstrom

Buzz, buzz!

LOOK INSIDE NEW JERSEY'S SWEETEST CLUB

By Mary Ellen Flannery
Photos by Rav Carlotti

TODAY IS HONEY HARVEST DAY—a twice-annual highlight for Pascack Valley High School's 5-year-old beekeeping club, in northern New Jersey. And students are buzzing!

Inside biology teacher Kristen Lindstrom's classroom, the school's club members are scraping honeycomb and watching their amber harvest drip from a whirring extractor machine.

"That smells amazing," says Lindstrom. It tastes even better. "This flavor profile is caramelly, like the cream in a Cadbury egg," says student Derek Soto, as he thoughtfully licks a bamboo spoon.

Beekeeping is a cross-disciplinary project. At heart, it's all science, as students manage the hives' health and learn how bees fuel the local ecosystem. But it's also a bit B-school, as students and staff clamor to buy the $20 jars and candles.

"It's liquid gold," Lindstrom says.

To get started, Lindstrom worked with a local master beekeeper and her school nurse to write a plan for school board approval in 2019. Then, to pay for the hives and equipment, she won a $2,000 grant, funded by Sustainable New Jersey. "There are a lot of grants out there for people looking to start programs," she promises.

Today, tens of thousands of bees live in hives behind a stockade fence—with windows—on school grounds. Does anyone ever get stung? Nope. European honeybees are sweet (no pun intended), non-aggressive flyers, plus Lindstrom and club members wear hooded, head-to-foot beekeeping suits.

The biggest issue is time. Every week, Lindstrom pulls frames and checks on the bees, even in summer. Still, beekeeping with students is "incredibly rewarding," she says, because it engages them so much. "We're competing with sports, sports, sports," Lindstrom says, but club members show up, suit up, and talk endlessly with her about mites, tulip poplars, and more. "It's an unbelievably tactile learning experience," she says.

ILLUSTRATION: ADOBE STOCK

NOT WAITING TO LEAD

★ ★ ★

Across the country, young educators are stepping into public office, bringing fresh ideas, classroom knowledge, and a commitment to their communities.

By Brenda Álvarez

At 20 years old, Kevin J. Lopez Cruz is balancing college classes, campaign events, and a future he once imagined would unfold entirely in higher education.

"I never wanted to run for anything," says Lopez Cruz, an English major at Bowie State University, in Maryland, and an NEA aspiring educator. "I always wanted to be a professor."

But as he watched political decisions shape his community in Prince George's County, he decided waiting wasn't an option.

In June, when voters elected Lopez Cruz to the county's Democratic Central Committee, he became the youngest Latino Democrat elected in the state's history.

A NEW GENERATION

Lopez Cruz is an alum of NEA's See Educators Run program, which trains educators and support staff to run successful campaigns and advocate for public education. It has helped launch a growing number of educators to enter politics, years—or even decades—before conventional wisdom says they should.

Their campaigns come as the nation debates the age and health of its longtime political lawmakers. The average member of Congress is nearly 59 years old, and more than a dozen members over the age of 80 are seeking reelection, according to *NBC News*.

For Lopez Cruz and other educator candidates, running for public office is about expanding representation in government.

"I hope young people … look at me and say, 'This is possible. I can do this,'" he says. "I really hope that message travels far and wide, showing people that these things are possible."

PUBLIC SERVICE NOW

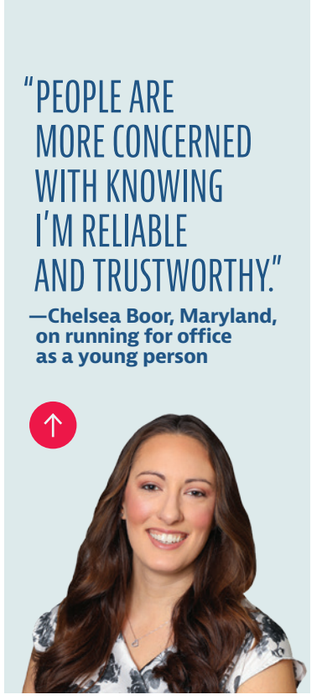
Unlike many candidates who spend years climbing political ladders, Chelsea Boor, 34, arrived through the classroom and also received training through See Educators Run.

A Spanish teacher in western Maryland, Boor decided to run for Allegany County Commissioner in the 2026 election so she could help shape the community her young children will inherit.

For more than a century, Boor's family has called the county home, giving her deep roots in the community she's now seeking to serve.

"I want my kids to not feel like they have to go somewhere else to get an education [or] a job," she says.







IDEAS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Freddy De La Trinidad is a bilingual social studies teacher in Rockford, Ill. When he first decided to run for public office, with the help of See Educators Run, he was 31. Today, the 37-year-old is running for reelection, in November, as a Winnebago County Board member.

He decided to run because he wanted to represent his neighbors and believes "regular people," such as teachers and nurses, should serve in public office.

As a younger elected official, he finds value in pairing fresh ideas with the institutional knowledge and experience of longtime leaders.

"We actually agree a lot more than we disagree," De La Trinidad says of his colleagues of different generations. "We respect each other and are here for the betterment of our district. At the end of the day, that's what we're elected to do."

BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE

One misconception about younger candidates, all three NEA members say, is that voters are primarily concerned about their age. On the campaign trail, they've found something different.

Boor says conversations rarely focus on how old she is. "People are more concerned with knowing I'm reliable and trustworthy," she says.

Lopez Cruz says, "People are actually relieved that someone else is running for a change."

For De La Trinidad, campaigning taught him that "people want to be heard," regardless of a candidate's age.

Should You Run for Office?
Yes, you should. Go to **nea.org/See-Educators-Run** for support!

4 STEPS TO GET READY TO VOTE

1. Confirm your voter registration.
2. Research candidates and issues before Election Day.
3. Find pro-public education candidates in your state, then encourage your friends and family to vote for leaders who champion safe schools, strong educators, and student success.
4. Before heading to the polls or filling out your mail-in ballot, familiarize yourself with who's on the ballot.

Preview your ballot, see which candidates NEA recommends, and find helpful voting resources at NEA's edvotes.org.

PHOTOS: JONATHAN LOPEZ CRUZ; CHRISSTUDIO; KANE PHOTOGRAPHY

By Brenda Álvarez

WHY BOOKS ARE TARGETED

From laws that made it illegal to read to today's battles over classroom libraries, book bans have always been about who gets access to knowledge.

Why books? It's a deceptively simple question. But when asked why books have become the latest political battleground, Hawai'i middle school social studies teacher Aaron Kubo says: "Books are where we keep knowledge. When students realize this, … they begin to understand what they can do with it: Gain power, … change the world."

That understanding is precisely why books have so often been targeted throughout history.

While book censorship stretches back centuries, book bans throughout U.S. history have a distinctly racist and homophobic narrative. Long before school boards debated *The Bluest Eye* or *The Hate U Give*, some lawmakers banned something even more fundamental: The ability of Black Americans to read at all.

LITERACY AS A THREAT

The earliest book bans in the U.S. began with laws designed to keep enslaved people from ever opening a book in the first place.

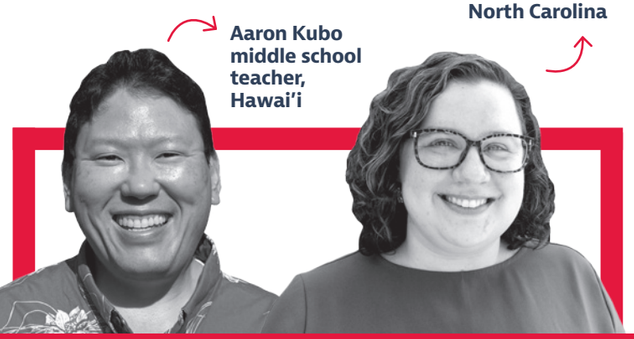
North Carolina history teacher Tracey Barrett points to anti-literacy laws enacted across the South during the 1800s as one of the country's earliest examples of government-sponsored censorship.

Enslavers recognized literacy as "such a powerful tool of resistance," Barrett says.

Reading and writing gave enslaved people greater opportunities to organize, communicate, and pursue freedom. In response, many Southern states made teaching an enslaved person to read or write a crime, sometimes punishable by severe fines, imprisonment, or even death, she explains.

Aaron Kubo middle school teacher, Hawai'i

Tracey Barrett, high school teacher, North Carolina



WHAT GETS CHALLENGED?

Book bans, Barrett explains, often seek to reinforce dominant narratives by limiting access to perspectives that challenge them. Today, those bans are centered on books that lift up Black, LGBTQ+, and Indigenous voices.

"It's intent is to stop some ideas, or set of ideas, from moving through the mainstream, because those ideas are seen as a threat to the power structure or the status quo."

Throughout U.S. history, that pattern has repeated itself.

After the Civil War, schools and libraries that served predominantly Black student populations became symbols of freedom during Reconstruction. That progress, however, sparked fierce resistance, and many of the gains made during Reconstruction were rolled back.

When Jim Crow laws were on the books, from the late-1800s through the mid-1900s, access to quality education remained deeply unequal.

In the mid-20th century, the Red Scare fueled efforts to remove from classrooms any books and ideas associated with communism. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, books featuring Black narratives frequently drew criticism.

MORE THAN A BOOK

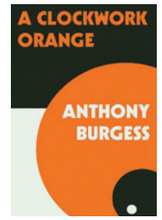
School librarian Chiquita Toure, of Ohio, believes many people misunderstand what a book ban actually looks like.

"Banning is the last action," Toure says, explaining that before that comes self-censorship, restrictions, and challenges. Librarians deciding not to purchase certain titles. Books left off displays. Parents filing formal objections.

BOOK BANS BY THE NUMBERS

The latest numbers from PEN America offer a snapshot of today's book-banning efforts. From the books challenged most often to the states leading the nation in bans, these figures show the scope of the recent surge in school censorship.

THE FIVE MOST FREQUENTLY BANNED BOOKS IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS (2024 – 2025 SCHOOL YEAR) WERE:



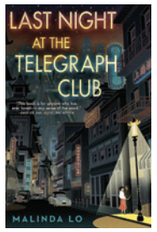
1 *A Clockwork Orange* 23 BANS



2 *Breathless* 20 BANS



3 *Sold* 20 BANS



4 *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* 19 BANS



5 *A Court of Mist and Fury* 18 BANS

MOST FREQUENTLY CHALLENGED BOOKS ABOUT RACE AND GENDER:

Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe
All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

STATES REPORTING THE MOST BOOK BANS (2024 – 2025 SCHOOL YEAR)

FLORIDA	TEXAS	TENNESSEE
2,304	1,781	1,622

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): CHENEY KAKU; MARILEE WOODWARD/ASHEVILLE CITY SCHOOLS.

WHY BOOKS ARE TARGETED

FAST FACTS

NEARLY
7,000
INSTANCES OF BOOK BANS WERE DOCUMENTED IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS DURING THE 2024 – 2025 SCHOOL YEAR.

22,810
BOOK BANS HAVE BEEN RECORDED IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS SINCE PEN AMERICA BEGAN TRACKING THEM, IN JULY 2021.

"Those early steps matter because they create an environment where fewer ideas reach students," she says, calling it "a form of anti-intellectualism."

She adds: "To believe what you truly believe in, you should really be introduced to that which you do not believe in. You have to have a reasonable amount of information to make informed decisions."

As a librarian in Columbus, she has watched challenges rise dramatically since 2020, often following national debates.

She, too, has noticed a pattern: "Most of the people who push against books … haven't read the books in their entirety," she says. Instead, many object after seeing an excerpt or hearing about it secondhand, she adds.

Her school district, however, requires challengers to read an entire book before filing a formal complaint and to have a child enrolled in the district. These types of policies, she says, are designed to ensure objections come from informed community members rather than outside political activists.

WHY SCHOOLS?

If the objective is controlling ideas, schools become an obvious target.

"Schools are places where ideas spread," Barrett says. "Trying to control which books students read is therefore a really unsurprising place for repressive forces to begin."

Educators hope schools are also where curiosity grows. In Kubo's classroom, history lessons give students an opportunity to question, analyze, and discuss.



Chiquita Toure, school librarian, Ohio

For example, he usually begins the school year with a relatively easy read: *The Lorax*. Students first discuss why anyone would object to a seemingly harmless Dr. Seuss story before gradually working toward more difficult conversations about slavery, racism, power, and oppression.

From there, his students watch portions of the 1977 television adaptation of *Roots*, analyze historical documentation, examine political cartoons, and compare those lessons with current events.

This, he says, "teaches them how to think."

He repeatedly asks them questions: "Why? Who benefits? Who loses? Who wrote this? What evidence supports that claim?"

"They make these smaller connections to build bigger connections," Kubo says.

THE FEAR BEHIND THE PAGES

Across generations, efforts to restrict books have often been driven by a desire to control which stories are told and which voices are heard.

Barrett worries less about any single banned book than the atmosphere those campaigns create. "It's more about creating a climate of fear and repression and censorship that causes teachers to second-guess what they assign and discuss in class," she says.

Toure is concerned about what happens when students are denied opportunities to wrestle with perspectives unlike their own.

Libraries, she says, help young people "develop a sense of identity for themselves, understand lives beyond their own ZIP code, and become critical thinkers capable of making informed decisions," she says.

Kubo worries about something different.

He worries about what students lose when history is erased. He points to Native Hawaiians, whose language and culture were pushed aside as children were forced into English-only schools.

In his classroom, he asks students to think beyond what happened and consider why it happened—and who benefited. In the end, the lesson becomes bigger than Hawai'i and centers on who gets to tell America's story.

PHOTO: JEHAN PHOTOGRAPHY LLC

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NEA Student Debt Navigator

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH STUDENT LOANS?

If you have federal student loans—or are planning to take them out—you need to know about new changes by the Trump administration that may make you ineligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), or the erasure of your student loan balance after 120 qualifying monthly payments. The biggest change? The Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) plan has officially ended. Now, roughly 7 million people need to choose a new payment plan. If you don't, the administration will automatically put you in the standard payment plan, which does not qualify for PSLF.

NEA members have two ways to switch their plans, either through their **StudentAid.gov** account or through the NEA Student Debt Navigator, which is free for NEA members. The navigator can help you compare income-driven payment plans to the standard payment plan, and figure out what is best for your family based on your loan balance, family income, and other factors. With the elimination of SAVE, borrowers have four income-driven options. Is one of them best for you? Find out at **nea.org/StudentDebtNavigator**.

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

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

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

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

60TH ANNUAL NEA HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS AWARDS

CALL FOR 2027 NOMINATIONS

Know of an individual, organization, or affiliate that champions racial and social justice and civil rights within their community? Show your support and uplift their good work to the national stage by submitting a nomination for a 2027 Human and Civil Rights (HCR) Award. Honorees are recognized during the annual HCR Awards program, held in July, prior to NEA's Representative Assembly.

- **Identify and honor** exemplary individuals, organizations, and affiliates for their contributions to human and civil rights, and racial and social justice.
- **Celebrate** NEA's multicultural roots and commitment to justice.
- **Recognize** today's human and civil rights victories and chart the path forward.
- **Honor** the rich legacy of the merger between the American Teachers Association (ATA) and NEA, from whence the HCR Awards program began.

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

Identify your nominees now! It is never too early to begin profiling nominees and potential HCR Award winners! Find information on past winners and submit nominations for the 2027 HCR Awards at **nea.org/HCRAwards**.

Nomination forms and instructions will be available online until December 4, 2026. For more information, email **NEAHCRAwards@nea.org**.

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

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ED VOTES

Aloha e komo mai!

Or, welcome with love and respect, to a Hawaiian immersion school.

By Mary Ellen Flannery







Earlier this year, an *NEA Today* film crew traveled to Hawai'i and, on a sunny morning, heard and recorded the same joyful song that students at Ke Kula Kaiapuni 'o Ānuenue have sung to their teachers every day for 30 years.

Called by the sound of the *pū*, or conch, "they're asking for permission to enter, signaling they're ready to learn," explains Ānuenue teacher Gail Leilani Kamalani.

Across Hawai'i, about 2,600 students go to public *Kula Kaiapuni*, or immersion schools, like Ānuenue. Inside, *'Ōlelo Hawai'i*, or the native Hawaiian language, is all students hear until fifth grade, when English is introduced as an academic subject.

In part, the goal is to reclaim the language, which the U.S. government banned in schools after invading the Hawaiian Kingdom, in 1893. But educators like Kamalani also teach traditional cultural values, like "the land is the chief, the ruler," and about a Hawaiian person's responsibility to their family and community.

The results? Students in these schools are more likely to graduate and go to college than students who attend regular high schools. They're also happy, Kamalani says.

Look inside Ānuenue classrooms and traditional gardens—and hear from Ānuenue students and educators—in this new *NEA Today* video.

PHOTOS: ANDREW TAWES; ILLUSTRATION: SHUTTERSTOCK

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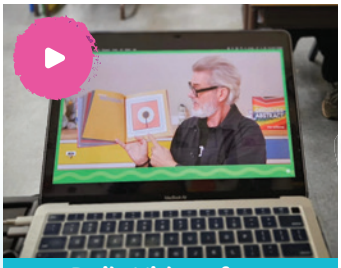
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