



Indiana local's political action pays off in school board elections

Former union head is now president of the town's school board

Members of the Anderson (Ind.) Federation of Teachers are hitting the pavement on behalf of four union-endorsed school board candidates, hoping to replicate the union's May 2004 election success.

That's when a majority of the union-backed candidates won seats on the Anderson Community Schools board, which led to the election of retired teacher Keith Millikan as school board president.

With Millikan, a past president of the Anderson local, at the helm, the long-running standoff between the board and the union effectively ended, and a contract agreement retroactive to January 2003 was reached.

The May 2004 election victory would not have happened without an aggressive political action program—and union member involvement in it, says the local's current president, Rick Muir.

On May 2 of this year the local hopes to increase its majority once again, using the same political action formula that brought it results in 2004.

Four of the seven board seats are up for election. Eleven candidates are running altogether, and two of the union-backed candidates—Philip Morgan

and Bill Riffe—are retired members of the local and active in the local's retiree chapter.

The local's political advocacy includes union-sponsored canvassing on behalf of its endorsed candidates, and personalized postcards from union members to friends, relatives and neighbors asking for their votes for the local's candidates.

"We will walk [neighborhoods] right

up to Election Day," says Muir, who also is president of the state federation, the Indiana Federation of Teachers.

Anderson members will be working the polls Election Day too, Muir adds, noting that school employee support for candidates for the school board sends a powerful message to voters.

"We were very successful in the last school board election," says Muir. The working relationship between the board and the 800-plus member union has markedly improved. "We still have a lot of needs here," Muir observes. "But we are working together for the first time in years."

Funding gap persists between rich and poor school districts

Latest report shows \$900-per-student shortfall nationally

Most states spend significantly less money to educate poor and minority students than on richer students, with a national funding gap of about \$900 per student, according to a new analysis from the Education Trust. In some states, the spending disparity between the highest- and lowest-poverty districts exceeds \$2,000.

The figures in the report do not take into consideration the widely used calculation that it costs up to 40 percent more to do a good job of educating low-income students, the report says. Once that adjustment is made, 38 states show funding gaps.

"In far too many states, we see once again that the children who need the most from our schools receive the least," says Ross Wiener, the Education Trust's policy director. "The fact that we are still talking about funding gaps shows a lack of political will to do what's right." The funding gaps have remained essentially

unchanged over the six years that the organization has been doing the report, which focuses on state and local but not federal funding.

The authors single out Illinois and New York as two states that have done an especially inadequate job of closing the funding gaps between their rich and poor districts. While the gap in those states is more than \$2,000 per student, the authors point out that even

a much smaller gap can add up to big inequalities. Colorado, for example, has a gap of \$101 between its highest-poverty and lowest-poverty district. In a low-income high school of 1,500 students, that means a shortfall of more than \$150,000.

On the other side of the spectrum, the report praises Massachusetts, Minnesota and New Jersey as three states in which funding for high-poverty districts exceeds that for the wealthiest districts by more than \$1,000 per student.

The report ends with four recommendations to make funding more equitable. It calls on states to: spend an adequate amount on education overall; shoulder a greater share of the education-funding burden; target their investments; and ensure that budgeting and resource allocation policies *within* school districts are fair.

The full report, "The Funding Gap 2005: Low-Income and Minority Students Shortchanged by Most States," is available at www2.edtrust.org.

AFT steps up efforts against '65 percent solution'

Misleading idea would squeeze vital support services for students

When something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. That's certainly the case with the so-called "65 percent solution," the latest silver-bullet-type reform for public education being pushed by conservatives around the country. The proposal asks states to require all of their school districts to direct at least 65 cents of every dollar they spend on education to classroom instruction. While appealing at first glance, the "solution" could end up squeezing vital services from schools and short-changing the students who need those services the most.

Currently, schools nationally spend about 61.5 percent of their budgets in the classroom, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (The 65 percent proposals incorporate the NCES definition.) It's important to note how NCES defines classroom instruction. Some expenses are obvious—teacher and instructional assistant salaries, instructional supplies, and activities such as music and arts. On the other side, some of the "outside the classroom" expenses are the very things that help children succeed in the classroom:

professional development for teachers and other staff, library and media services, counselors, nurses, social workers, food service and transportation.

So far, 65 percent solution proposals have been adopted in only four states: Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana and Texas. But its supporters are gearing up to push it through many more state legislatures, or to place initiatives on the ballot in a number of states this fall. The main group behind the 65 percent proposal calls itself First Class Education. Prominent backers, such as columnist George Will and anti-government activist Grover Norquist, have long records of also supporting policies such as private school vouchers and tax-cut initiatives that would drain resources from public schools. Recently, however, conservative support for the proposal has been splintering, with noted voucher supporter Jay Greene and the conservative *Washington Times* newspaper both expressing criticism.

The AFT executive council was alarmed enough about the rapid rise of the 65 percent solution movement that it passed a resolution at its meeting in February opposing the idea. AFT vice president Lorretta Johnson, who heads the union's paraprofessional and school-related personnel division, describes the dangers this way: "This misguided scheme to shift education

dollars around is a direct attack on the important support services provided to students—inside and outside of the classroom—by our members. It will put all children at risk by cutting into the services, like transportation, nutrition, security, libraries and health programs, that enhance student achievement." (The AFL-CIO passed a similar resolution at its February meeting.)

What's more, there is no evidence that setting classroom spending at the 65 percent level leads to higher achievement. School Matters, the nonpartisan school analysis unit of Standard & Poor's, recently examined district spending and student achievement in 34 states. The report concluded that "mandating a specific spending allocation is not likely to provide a 'silver bullet' solution to raising student achievement."

The better approach is an overall commitment to sufficient spending both in the classroom and also to support the range of services that help students achieve.

One response along those lines has come from the Texas Federation of Teachers and its "100 percent solution." The goal is to adequately fund professional development, after-school and extended-year programs, early childhood education, libraries, school nurses and alternative education programs. The plan can be found at www.tft.org.

DAMAGE BY THE NUMBERS

The Kansas City (Mo.) school district spends 54 percent of its budget on instruction, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics. If the district were to reconfigure its spending to meet the 65 percent level, that 11 percent shift in spending toward the classroom would mean a 24 percent drop in other categories. The AFT research department looked at the district budget to see what this might mean in different support service areas.

Here are just some of the areas that would be cut, listed in full-time staff:

- Maintenance—from 495 to 376
 - Attendance/placement—from 67 to 51
 - Guidance/counseling—from 119 to 90
 - Health/psychological services/speech—from 82 to 62
 - Curriculum development—from 43 to 33
 - Staff training—from 24 to 18
 - Educational media services—from 77 to 59
 - Community and adult services—from 88 to 67
 - Other support services—from 469 to 356.
- Combined with reductions in other areas, as well as building-level administration, it adds up to a cut of 424 positions and \$32 million. (Some services, such as transportation, are not listed because they already are contracted out by the Kansas City district.)

AFL-CIO, NEA launch partnerships for locals to affiliate

Agreement is historic step that builds solidarity in labor movement

The AFL-CIO and the National Education Association recently announced an agreement that allows NEA locals to affiliate with the labor federation through the AFL-CIO's central labor councils and state federations.

The AFL-CIO/NEA Labor Solidarity Partnership was unveiled Feb. 27 at the federation's executive council meeting in San Diego, Calif. AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, AFT president Edward J. McElroy and NEA president Reg Weaver were at the meeting and offered comments on the benefits of the new affiliation structure.

The partnership, crafted in consulta-

tion with the AFT, establishes a procedure for affiliation in which locals must apply through the NEA. Once approved, locals may participate in the AFL-CIO's central labor councils and state bodies.

The agreement is one of "several historic steps that bring fresh solidarity to the labor movement," said Sweeney. This includes issuing more than 850 "solidarity charters" to locals of international unions that last year disaffiliated with the AFL-CIO. It also includes chartering two new, previously independent unions as AFL-CIO affiliates: the 65,000-member United Transportation Union and the 10,000-member Farm Labor Organizing Committee.

Sweeney extended a special thanks to McElroy for his "active and creative role" in putting the Labor Solidarity Partnership together, noting that the AFT president "sensed that the time was right" for

bringing the NEA closer to labor. There are approximately 220,000 members in dual affiliates of the AFT and NEA.

NEA locals that win approval for affiliation from both the NEA and the national AFL-CIO will gain the regular

rights and responsibilities of affiliation. These include union jurisdictional protections, representation and voting rights of AFL-CIO affiliates.

The NEA is not affiliating with the AFL-CIO at the national level.

AFT convention set for Boston in July

Make plans now to attend the 2006 AFT biennial convention, to be held in Boston, July 20-23, 2006. The convention will feature the introduction of policy resolutions, action on constitutional amendments, and divisional meetings at which delegates from the five AFT divisions will have an opportunity to discuss issues of interest to their constituencies. Preconvention meetings include the AFT Communicators Network conference and the AFT Educational Research and Dissemination program conference. The deadline to submit resolutions to the national office is **June 8**. Check the AFT Web site, www.aft.org/convention, for more information.



Federal support needed to rebuild New Orleans and reopen schools

UTNO member tells lawmakers about shameful treatment

Until schools reopen and houses are rebuilt, residents will not want to return to New Orleans, teacher Gwendolyn Adams told Democratic representatives on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce at a late March hearing in New Orleans on the future of education there.

"Katrina destroyed so many lives and homes," said Adams, a 25-year veteran teacher and member of the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), "but we cannot allow post-Katrina policies to destroy the hope and opportunity that public schools represent." Adams and other educators and students who testified at the hearing urged the lawmakers to get more federal money to New Orleans to help rebuild and reopen

schools, buy new equipment, rehire staff and cover healthcare costs for laid-off employees.

The hearing was part of a tour of the area led by Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), the committee's ranking Democrat. The lawmakers visited schools in St. Bernard Parish, as well as Southern University in New Orleans. Adams told them that many critics of the New Orleans school system "have never stepped foot in our schools" and have favored "quick fixes over long-term reform and resources." While schools in neighboring parishes reopened quickly after Katrina, only five noncharter public schools are open in New Orleans. "There's no excuse why we're not reopening more schools in New Orleans," she said, adding that the school where she taught suffered only minor damage.

She also told the representatives about the "shameful" treatment of New Orleans school employees. In February, the vast majority of the school system's

7,500 teachers, paraprofessionals and other employees were laid off. Adams said she found out by word of mouth and never received an official termination letter. One of the biggest hardships has been the lack of health coverage, which most former employees can't afford now that they lack jobs.

"We cannot truly bring New Orleans back to life until we bring her schools back to life," Adams said. "My colleagues and I desperately want to help in this effort but cannot do so under the current circumstances."

In an op-ed piece in the March 6 edition of *USA Today*, UTNO president Brenda Mitchell called for immediately reopening more of New Orleans' public schools. "The New Orleans community

currently is spread throughout the nation, with hundreds, even thousands, of families holding off on returning to their beloved city until the essential elements of daily life are in place, including viable housing and a neighborhood school for their children," Mitchell wrote. "We strongly believe that the pulse of the city will return to a sense of normalcy when schools reopen and neighborhoods are re-populated with families."

UTNO and parent groups have been calling for the reopening of more public schools, she noted. "But we are not asking for more of the same. We need tested, successful programs, not an agenda that turns New Orleans schools into a laboratory for educational experiments on students."



"Please know how much we appreciate being part of such a wonderful and thoughtful union. It warms my heart to know that fellow members across the country have us in their thoughts. May we all learn from your example and continue to handle future disasters in such a giving manner."

—T. H. Slidell, LA

Your tax-deductible contribution to the AFT Disaster Relief Fund provides direct assistance to AFT members affected by the Gulf region's hurricanes.

The union has also created special donation categories for members: President's Solidarity Circle (\$500), Gold Solidarity Circle (\$250), Silver Solidarity Circle (\$100) and Bronze Solidarity Circle (\$52—the equivalent of \$1 per week for a year).

YOU CAN CONTRIBUTE BY RETURNING THE FORM AT RIGHT WITH A CHECK MADE OUT TO AFT DISASTER RELIEF FUND OR BY CREDIT CARD BY VISITING www.aft.org/katrina.

Your Help Is Still Needed!

Yes! I'd like to help my colleagues in the Gulf by

joining at the following level:

President's Solidarity Circle — \$500

Gold Solidarity Circle — \$250

Silver Solidarity Circle — \$100

Bronze Solidarity Circle — \$52

Other _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

ZIP _____ E-MAIL _____

LOCAL _____

SEND TO: AFT DISASTER RELIEF FUND, 555 NEW JERSEY AVE. N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20001

Union seeks to mobilize members and the public

The United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) has mounted "Refuse to Lose," a comprehensive campaign designed to educate, energize and mobilize the public and UTNO members. The campaign's message is that while many New Orleanians lost their homes, jobs and most of their possessions as a result of Hurricane Katrina, they refuse to lose their rights and their dignity. "We are giving voice to those in the community who feel they are being overlooked," says UTNO president Brenda Mitchell. "We are saying to the public: 'Join us in refusing to lose sight of the things that are really important—our right to vote, our voice, our input in how to run our city and rebuild our community.'"

AFT organizing agenda stresses growth and member activism

Organizing committee's plan envisions shift in resources and energy

The AFT has unveiled an organizing plan that envisions a fundamental shift of resources and energy in order to substantially expand the organizing capacity of the national union and its affiliates. Put together by an organizing committee consisting of state and local leaders as well as AFT staff, the plan also seeks to stimulate the development of a more active, involved membership.

"The long-term health of the AFT and its affiliates necessitates a much greater attention to organizing," says AFT secretary-treasurer Nat LaCour, who chairs the organizing committee. He believes the plan will enhance the "culture of organizing" called for in the AFT's 2000 "Futures II" report, and will help the AFT remain one of the fastest-growing unions in the labor movement.

At the heart of the systematic, strategic organizing plan is "a concerted, long-term vision to create a more active, involved membership that wants to participate in the union as part of a movement, not just an organization that provides services," LaCour says.

Essential to the success of the plan is "a real partnership" with state and local affiliates and increased training opportunities for organizers, says Phil Kugler, assistant to the AFT president for organization and field services.

This is the first time in decades that

the AFT has talked about rethinking its organizing strategies, Kugler says. "We have not looked to building organizing capacity in affiliates since the 1960s and 1970s" and the original fight for collective bargaining.

This revitalized focus on organizing, educating and mobilizing members is essential to countering an increasingly hostile environment that threatens the salaries, benefits and pensions of union and nonunion workers alike. A successful organizing plan is also expected to

reap benefits in the political arena and make the AFT and its affiliates an even more forceful and influential voice on behalf of members and the institutions in which they work.

The carefully structured program builds on proven strategies for increasing membership, such as the AFT's membership consolidation/internal organizing program, which targets the recruitment of employees the union represents but who have yet to become members. It also highlights the need to

organize early childhood educators, charter school teachers, and part-time and adjunct higher education faculty.

The plan recognizes the need for more training and the development of a new image and message to appeal to younger employees.

The AFT will be reaching out to its state and local affiliates, asking them to buy into the plan by making organizing a larger part of their agendas, LaCour says. "We know the national AFT cannot do this alone."

AFL-CIO healthcare campaign picking up steam

Maryland victory gives boost to labor's 'Fair Share' campaign

The AFL-CIO's campaign to push large corporations like Wal-Mart to pay for their employees' healthcare benefits received an enormous boost in January when Maryland legislators voted to override the veto of Fair Share Health Care legislation by Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich.

Maryland is the first state to hold companies such as Wal-Mart accountable for paying their fair share of workers' healthcare costs. A recent report by the AFL-CIO, "The Wal-Mart Tax," says that "by refusing to pay decent wages and provide affordable health insurance to its workers, Wal-Mart is directly contributing to the nation's Medicaid crisis."

Fair Share Health Care legislation,

which is being pursued by AFL-CIO activists and lawmakers in 33 states, will reduce the bill taxpayers pay to cover profitable corporations' employee expenses, ease the financial strain states face in growing Medicaid costs, and help level the playing field between companies that provide good jobs and benefits and those that don't.

"What the Maryland victory shows is that the tide is turning because working people are not just fed up—they are ready to get active to set our country in a different direction, one state at a time," says AFL-CIO president John Sweeney.

The Maryland bill requires private companies with more than 10,000 employees in the state to spend at least 8 percent of payroll on employee health benefits or make a contribution to the state's insurance program for the poor. Wal-Mart is the only known employer in Maryland that does not meet that requirement.

Legislation has been introduced in several states including Florida, Michigan, Washington and Wisconsin. An effort is also underway in Oregon, where the state AFL-CIO has filed a ballot initiative to put Fair Share Health Care on the November ballot.

"It's irresponsible and costly when nonunion businesses boost their profits by denying healthcare to their employees and then letting taxpayers pick up the slack," says Oregon AFL-CIO president Tom Chamberlain.

While Fair Share Health Care legislation will differ slightly in each state, in general the legislation will require large corporations to spend a certain percentage of their payroll to provide healthcare benefits for their employees or pay into a state Fair Share Health Care fund. The percentage level either would be set by the state legislature or based on the average percentage paid by large employers in the state.

AFT and Special Olympics: A winning team

Special Olympics is labor of love for volunteer from New York affiliate

Nancy Logan can tell plenty of stories about people who got hooked after their first experience volunteering with Special Olympics. “A lot of people come by to help out for an hour, and they end up staying for 10 years,” jokes Logan, a teacher and special education department chair at Nanuet (N.Y.) High School. Logan should know—the AFT member started volunteering with the program when she was in high school, and some 30 years later, she still loves it despite the vast amount of time she puts in.

The AFT is hoping to get more members to follow Logan’s example. As part of a new partnership with Special Olympics, the national union recently signed on to help sponsor the first USA National Games in Ames, Iowa, in July. At the games, the AFT will provide trans-

“I love sports and I love working with special needs kids,” says Nancy Logan, shown celebrating with Special Olympics participants.

portation for athletes, coaches, volunteers and family members as they move from their dorms and hotels to the Festival Village and event locations. The union also has endorsed the Special Olympics’ “SO Get Into It” service-learning curriculum for all grade levels, which consists of lesson plans, activities and videos promoting student and teacher awareness and understanding of—and involvement in—Special Olympics.

The aim of Special Olympics is to empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to become physically fit and productive through sports training and competition. It offers children and adults year-round training and compe-

tion in 26 Olympic-type sports.

Over the years, Logan has been involved with the program at every level—from local competitions to the World Games—as a coach, official, coordinator and any other job that needed to be filled. “I love sports and I love working with special needs kids,” she says. “So this seemed like a perfect match.”

As a special ed teacher, Logan says, she doesn’t always see big gains with her students in the classroom. School is something that often is hard for them, so they get frustrated and angry. Outside of

school, “they exhibit skills we never see in the classroom,” she says, noting that they are more confident and outgoing.

Regular education students also have a great experience when they volunteer with Special Olympics, she says.

“The students in the high school see the athletes in a different way,” Logan explains. “Many of them come back very impressed. It really is an eye-opener for them.” And the same enthusiasm holds true with other school staff: “I haven’t had anyone yet say it was a waste of time to volunteer.”

“It is impossible to provide the bare necessities of life on \$5.15 an hour.”

—College student and activist Alanna Timmerman, right.

Rally is a boost for the minimum wage

The AFT was visible and vocal at a Capitol Hill rally calling for an increase in the minimum wage. Led by Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), right, and former Sen. John Edwards, center, rally participants urged Congress to pass Kennedy’s Fair Minimum Wage Act, which would raise the minimum wage from the current \$5.15 an hour—where it has been for nine years—to \$7.25 over the course of two years. Howard University student Alanna Timmerman spoke about her work with the group Progressive Maryland to get that state’s minimum wage increased. She challenged any members of Congress who oppose a higher wage to try to “see how far \$5.15 can take you.” The AFT petition in support of the minimum wage legislation is at www.unionvoice.org/campaign/minimum_wage06.

Core Knowledge brings out the best in students

San Antonio, Texas, was the site of the annual conference of the Core Knowledge Foundation this February. The Foundation sponsors a nationwide network of schools (early childhood, elementary and middle) committed to teaching its hallmark pre-K through eighth-grade curriculum sequence. The sequence provides teachers with a guide for systematically exposing children from all neighborhoods and backgrounds to the broad core of knowledge that kids need to be good readers and well-educated adults. This year’s conference was attended by 2,200 people from 42 states and more than 500 schools, including AFT executive vice

AFT executive vice president Antonia Cortese with students at San Antonio’s Hawthorne Academy.

president Antonia Cortese and United Federation of Teachers president and AFT vice president Randi Weingarten. During her stay in San Antonio, Cortese visited Hawthorne Academy, a Core Knowledge school. The school, which has a 90 percent free-lunch population, has used Core Knowledge to significantly raise the number of students scoring at the proficient level on the Texas state test.



AFT PHOTO

Cleveland private school voucher program comes up short—again

Study finds no test-score advantage at voucher schools in Cleveland

A new report by the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, echoing earlier studies, finds Cleveland students in voucher schools often do worse than their counterparts in traditional schools.

“The Evidence on Education Vouchers: An Application to the Cleveland

Scholarship and Tutoring Program” reports that students at voucher schools show “very modest” gains in achievement. “Overall, we find no academic advantages for voucher users; in fact, users seem to perform slightly worse in math,” the report concludes. And, contrary to claims made by some groups, the 2006 study also found no academic advantage for subgroups such as black students in voucher schools.

The new report generally mirrors earlier findings by the Indiana Center for Evaluation at Indiana University, which

had been hired by the state to evaluate the Cleveland voucher program. The IU study found no difference academically between public school students and those attending voucher schools in Cleveland. Significantly, the state-sponsored study did show that voucher schools were attracting students from higher-income families—most of whom already attended nonpublic schools—and that students who ultimately left voucher schools and re-enrolled in public schools achieved at lower levels than any other group.

State lawmakers seem undeterred by the growing body of research showing that Cleveland voucher schools serve more advantaged students—and yet they perform no better, and often perform worse, than traditional schools. Ohio moved to expand its voucher program for the 2006-07 school year.

The new law makes vouchers of up to \$5,000 available for students in districts deemed to be in “academic emergency” for three consecutive years. Academic emergency is the state’s lowest designation. That change added 14,000 students to voucher eligibility.

But student and parent interest has been lukewarm at best: Ohio received only 8,000 voucher applications for 2006-07. And now, Ohio is considering relaxing the rules even more to gin up interest in vouchers.

A bill before the legislature as *American Teacher* went to press would expand eligibility to students in districts under “academic watch” (the state’s second lowest designation) for three consecutive years. That would increase the pool of potential applicants by 27,000, according to the Ohio Federation of Teachers.

Contract fears a strawman in school staffing concerns

New AFT report shatters ‘urban legend’ of unions and hard-to-staff schools

It’s often assumed that union contracts are to blame when high-poverty urban schools have trouble getting and keeping qualified educators. Teachers have seniority rights under union contracts, the thinking goes, and union-represented teachers use these rights to transfer to schools in affluent neighborhoods with easy-to-educate children.

“This assumption is, literally, an urban legend,” says AFT researcher F. Howard Nelson, author of a new paper examining the relationship of collective bargaining and teacher mobility. In high-poverty school districts with collective bargaining, the school transfer rate among teachers is 7.5 percent—the same as the national average for all teachers. In high-poverty schools where teachers do not have a union contract, the transfer rate is a much higher 11.3 percent.

“This is the exact opposite of what people assume,” Nelson says. “To find higher-than-average transfer rates among teachers in high-poverty schools, you actually have to look to the nonbargaining districts,” he points out. The conclusions presented in the new AFT report, “The Impact of Collective Bargaining on Teacher Mobility,” frequently turn conventional wisdom on its head when it comes to the relationship between union contracts and staffing issues in high-poverty urban districts.

“Intuition is important for educational research—but data trumps intuition every time,” says Nelson. The AFT report draws heavily from what Nelson calls the “gold standard” of data in this area: the latest federal Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the related 2000-01 Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS). The studies encompass a nationally representative sample of more than 50,000 public and private school teachers. Among the other findings in the report:

New teachers are evenly distributed between low-poverty schools (6.1 percent) and high-poverty schools (5.7 percent) in urban districts with collective bargaining. In states without collective bargaining, however, new teachers are placed in high-poverty schools at three times the rate of low-poverty schools (10.1 percent versus 3.3 percent).

About half of transfers from high-poverty schools with collective bargaining will go to a school in another district. About 60 percent of teachers in schools without collective bargaining will opt for a different district.

Most transfers are voluntary, with only 10 percent of transferred teachers reporting being laid off or involuntarily transferred. In high-poverty urban schools, teachers working under a union contract had lower rates of involuntary transfer (3.2 percent) compared with teachers working without a contract (11.7 percent).

“The data really shatters the myth that seniority-based layoffs are creating staff upheavals in districts with collective bargaining,” Nelson observes.

Festival features fun for English language learners

The event was dubbed “On Your Marks, Get Set ... Let’s Learn!” and it featured books and other resources for English language learners (ELL) and their parents, and professional development opportunities for school staff who work with ELL students. Organized by the AFT’s Austin, Texas, affiliate in cooperation with Colorín Colorado, the daylong festival included workshops on building literacy at home. “As education professionals we want the same thing for our students as their parents—a better future,” says Education Austin president and AFT vice president Louis Malfaro. “Making academic success a reality for every child doesn’t take magic, but it does take commitment, focus and a great deal of collaboration between parents and school employees.” Colorín Colorado is a Web site for parents and educators to help Latino English language learners build literacy skills. The site’s section for educators is a joint project of public broadcasting station WETA’s Reading Rockets program and the AFT.

Putting ideals into action

Nick LaRue's students join a challenge against hunting via the Web

It was killing, plain and simple. That was the feeling among students at Madison Middle School after Albuquerque teacher Nick LaRue briefed them on the emerging business of “cyberhunting.”

The practice started in Texas, where the owner of a for-profit game reserve came up with a plan to offer hunting over the Internet. People could log on to the Web, pay a fee, and use their computers to remotely control a gun trained on a feeding and water station set up on the reserve. A monitor allowed Web users to see any wildlife lured to the food and water; and a few keystrokes and clicks of the mouse were all it took to sight the gun, pull the trigger and put the animal down.

Virtually all of the students felt cyberhunting “was really offensive and immoral” when it came up for discussion in class last fall, remembers LaRue,

a member of the Albuquerque Federation of Teachers and veteran hunter who says the practice only masqueraded as sport. “The animals were robbed of their defenses. They couldn’t see or smell the person firing at them.”

Under the direction of LaRue, the students did more than steep themselves in righteous indignation. They put their convictions into action and mobilized with other students across New Mexico to help draft, lobby and ultimately win a new law that banned cyberhunting across the state.

Assisted by the Center for Wildlife Law at the University of New Mexico, the students helped draft legislation for the 2006 state legislative session. They worked in tandem with other New Mexico students, from the college to the elementary level, to get their proposal sponsored by state Sen. Michael Sanchez and placed on a short-list of priority bills for the current session by Gov. Bill Richardson.

The school project lasted more than 12 weeks. It involved more than 170 students at Madison and included activities

that touched on all aspects of lawmaking: developing briefing materials, reaching out to traditional game-reserve owners and other interested groups, and writing letters to their local representatives.

Their efforts set a new milestone for the Center for Wildlife Law. The group has worked with students for more than a decade on projects to teach how to write legislation benefiting wildlife. But the push for a cyberhunting ban marked

the first time one of their projects resulted in a new law.

It was a proud day for LaRue’s students when Gov. Richardson signed the bill into law—a day that reminded him what being a social studies teacher was all about. “I want my students to be active participants in the democratic process,” he explains. “It’s about implementing change—that means you have to write legislation and you have to pass it.”

State expands Milwaukee school voucher program

Expansion termed a ‘wake-up call’ for voucher opponents

Milwaukee’s private school voucher program could grow by as much as 50 percent under a bill signed into law in March.

The law would raise the cap on the number of students who could receive private school vouchers in Milwaukee from 15,000 to 22,500 next year. A majority of Democrats opposed the cap increase, which many lawmakers fear would lead to a drain on traditional public schools in the city.

A deal was reached after language was inserted into the bill that would require private schools participating in the voucher program to administer the Iowa Basics Test or a similar standardized test. Test results must be reported to the state and also to researchers at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., who

are conducting a longitudinal study on the effectiveness of the program. Additionally, the bill requires schools in the voucher program to obtain accreditation by an outside group.

Also included in the compromise was new funding for the state’s class-size reduction initiative.

Andy Gussert, president of AFT-Wisconsin, stresses that education groups across the state opposed the voucher expansion. Ultimately, “you had a powerful coalition, backed by big business and out-of state interests, who were able to generate enough pressure to get it through.”

The Milwaukee voucher expansion should “serve as a wake-up call to anyone who thinks the battle over vouchers has become a back-burner issue” in the nation, he adds. “AFT-Wisconsin will continue to work with the coalition of education groups to prevent further expansion of vouchers and to hold private schools accountable” for the public funding they receive.

NYSUT conference for healthcare workers

Borrowing a maxim from education, health writer Suzanne Gordon urged a roomful of healthcare professionals to advocate for “the three Rs for caregivers: respect, recognition and rewards.” “We’re asking [hospital] nurses to work without filling the tank,” said the author of several nursing advocacy books. “There’s not enough time to think or eat on the job and, with work demands, there’s not enough time for sleep afterward.” Gordon was the keynote speaker at the New York State United Teachers’ Professional Issues Forum on Health Care. “You are fortunate you belong to a union,” Gordon told attendees. “You have a voice in the workplace and in the political arena.” Above, school nurses Terry Nord, left, and Helen Coye look over conference materials.

St. Louis educators pack evolution seminar

Meeting offers teachers practical tools to address anti-evolution efforts

Hundreds of science teachers gathered in St. Louis in February to discuss the challenges they face as they try to teach evolution in the classroom.

The meeting, “Evolution on the Front Lines,” sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and backed by the St. Louis Teachers and School-Related Personnel Union, was held to empower science teachers and give them tools to respond when students, parents or local officials pressure them to avoid teaching evolution or to introduce the faith-based concepts of intelligent design or creationism in the classroom.

“Our teachers are being pressured to the point that they don’t teach evolution,” says Ray Cummings, a vice president of the St. Louis local.

“It’s important for the union to be proactive, reach out to teachers and respond to their issues and concerns,” which is why the union encouraged its members to attend the half-day meeting, says Cummings.

“To have a respectable organization bring teachers together and offer them some form of support means a lot to teachers. It sends a message to educators that they are not alone,” says Cummings, who is a former biology teacher for the St. Louis Public Schools.

Concern about “legislation and policies that undermine the teaching of evolution and deprive students of the education they need to be informed and productive citizens in an increasingly technological, global community,” prompted AAAS to include the meeting as part of its annual conference.

“Teachers are the ones on the frontlines. They are experiencing the pressure to compromise and dilute the science of evolution,” says Alan Leshner, the chief

AAAS leader Alan Leshner, at right, addresses nearly 400 educators who came to St. Louis to gather information and discuss the challenges they face in teaching evolution.

executive officer of AAAS and executive publisher of the journal *Science*. “We want them to know that the scientific community stands with them and wants to help anyway we can.”

“Evolution is a necessary part of the science curriculum; without it nothing else makes sense. It’s too important not to teach,” says Elizabeth Petersen, president of the Science Teachers of Missouri, who was in attendance.

“We want to honor where people are coming from yet be able to teach evolution from a scientific standpoint,” says

Petersen, a science teacher at Ladue Middle School in St. Louis.

The impressive show of support for evolution education by AAAS and the union was an encouraging sign to Petersen. “As teachers we’re the ones in the trenches and it’s good to know that there are people who are thinking on the same wavelength and dealing with the same issues.”

PHOTOS BY COLELAPHOTO.COM