



# PSRP Reporter

THE NATIONAL PUBLICATION OF AFT PARAPROFESSIONALS AND SCHOOL-RELATED PERSONNEL



## Defending public services

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## Your voice is essential to combat this crisis

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

THE ECONOMIC and political landscape for public education, and for the people who work in our public schools, is as dangerous as I have ever seen. In the guise of “reform,” “efficiency,” “shared sacrifice” and “belt tightening,” efforts are under way in a number of states to gut collective bargaining, weaken public employees’ pensions, and offload public schools and services onto the private sector. It could take years—if not generations—to recover from the deep and continuing cuts to public education. And many so-called reforms gaining traction will eliminate educators’ voices and move us away from the goal of ensuring that all children have access to the excellent education they need to succeed in life.

The AFT and our affiliates, members and allies are working at the national, state and local levels in an unprecedented manner to combat these threats—and to offer better solutions in their place. We are meeting these fights head-on. We will not give up, nor will we hunker down. But we can’t win without the involvement of members like you.

The AFT is helping our state federations develop comprehensive plans to defend vital public services—and the professionals who deliver them—from these no-holds-barred attacks. Our potential to turn this around flows from political action, effective communication, promoting ideas for constructive change, building community partnerships, and mobilizing educators who know the realities of the classroom.

One example of this comes from the Illinois Federation of Teachers, which is implementing a plan that incorporates all these elements. Several harmful proposals were working their way through the state Legislature over the December holidays and into the final hours of the legislative session.

**“We will not give up, nor will we hunker down. But we can’t win without the involvement of members like you.”**

Lawmakers were looking for ways to close the state’s \$13 billion budget gap, and some were using the shortfall as cover to push through legislative proposals that would gut collective bargaining for educators in Chicago and—by linking tenure and layoff decisions to students’ performance—essentially reduce to a student test score number all personnel decisions affecting teachers.

IFT members have been the muscle and heart of the union’s campaign—from the 14,000 members who joined a telephone town hall about the proposed legislation to the many who have lobbied state legislators. The IFT also offered proposals to increase student achievement, enhance teacher effectiveness and hold accountable all those who share responsibility for school success—including administrators and school board members. The IFT continues to work with key allies as the state Legislature considers

additional cuts and legislation affecting public services.

The union’s active engagement—not just in opposing harmful cuts and policies, but in advancing policy solutions—helped score key victories. Legislators approved crucial increases in personal and corporate income tax rates and rejected—at least for now—proposals to overhaul teacher tenure and to place other limits on our voice and protections.

The goals we are fighting for across the country—support for excellent public schools for all children, rights and respect for their educators, and retirement security after one’s working years—are also good for the public.

That means that you—and members like you—have a crucial role to play. It means we must make working with parents and other community partners a permanent way of operating. And it means we must find ways to work with school district partners to find solutions to the problems we confront.

We will never give up, and we will not sit on the sidelines. I have no doubt of the righteousness of our principles and of our fight.

Unfortunately, many politicians facing tough issues would rather stoke fear than hope, by blaming those still in the middle class and creating a race to the bottom rather than creating jobs and rebuilding the middle class. We need you, more than ever, to work in your communities, with parents and other allies, and through your union to help turn back these dangerous attacks and help move our country in the right direction.



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# Defending public services

FROM THREATENED LAYOFFS of more than 10,000 school employees in New York to a flat-out denial of workers' rights in Wisconsin, AFT members are fending off blows from elected officials and fringe groups.

These people are not shy about using widespread economic anxiety and concerns about public funding as lubricant for their well-oiled attacks.

The AFT and our affiliates are fighting back. And we are doing it with something labor's opponents can't match: the determined, authentic voices of 1.5 million professionals who will never roll over when it comes to keeping vital institutions strong, standing up for fairness and protecting kids. In this article, you'll find examples of this work—much of it done in coalition with community allies—and the ways your colleagues

have mobilized around finding solutions to the fiscal crisis many states are facing.

## Wisconsin

### A fight for basic freedoms

Hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites, plus friends from all over the nation, converged on Madison in February for a series of rallies and sit-ins against the governor's attempt to strip workers of half a century of rights and protections.

The flashpoint was a plan, hatched by Gov. Scott Walker and slipped into his budget pro-

posal, to deny employees the right to bargain over anything other than wages, an obvious attempt to bust the union. His plan also would increase the amount public employees contribute to their pensions and hike state employee health insurance contributions.

But as the protests mounted, it became clear that the point of the governor's scheme was not monetary concessions, because union leaders, including AFT-Wisconsin president Bryan Kennedy and AFT president Randi Weingarten, stated plainly that union members are willing to make mon-

*Continued on page 4*

Union members and their allies protest Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's attack on collective bargaining.



BRENT NICASTRO

Continued from page 3

etary concessions in light of Wisconsin's tight budget. No, the point was about power. The workers of Wisconsin decided that America is still a democracy and that the people's voices needed to be heard.

Grass-roots opposition to the governor's plan spread far and wide. AFT-affiliated nurses across Wisconsin poured into buses to join in the second week of the protest, along with AFT members from New York, Vermont and other states. In fact, Americans in general strongly opposed taking away collective bargaining power as a way to ease financial woes, according to a *USA Today*/Gallup poll, which found that 61 percent of the public would oppose a law in their state similar to the plan in Wisconsin. Only 33 percent favored such a law.

Even President Obama weighed in. "Some of what I've heard coming out of Wisconsin ... seems like more of an assault on unions," he said. "Public employees, they're our neighbors, they're our friends. These are folks who are teachers and they're firefighters and they're social workers and they're police officers. They make a lot of sacrifices and make a big contribution. And I think it's important not to vilify them or to suggest that somehow all these budget problems are due to public employees."

More than 100 AFT solidarity rallies sprang up across the nation in support of the marchers in Madison. Said AFT-Wisconsin's Kennedy: "Thanks to all of my union brothers and sisters from around the country. Your outpouring of support has been tremendous."

## Florida

### Broad attacks, broader response

Florida was a standout performer in *Education Week's* latest Quality Counts survey, which named the Sunshine State as the fifth best school system in the nation, up from 31st just five years ago. Unfortunately, that progress often gets short shrift in the state Capitol these days. Many proposals under consideration don't just ignore opportunities to build on these gains; they threaten to send the state careening toward extremism in the public sector. Public education advocates beat back one plan advanced by Gov. Rick Scott, dubbed "vouchers on steroids." However, voucher bills were in play at press time in Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other states.

The challenges are broad, and so is the response. Public school educators recently launched the Kids Future Florida coalition, a grass-roots effort to rally the public around reform that works for students.

"We cannot stand idly by and allow public education in Florida to be gutted," says Leon W. Russell, legislative committee chair of the Florida NAACP.

And Florida unions are working internally, building member involvement. Social media help leverage the effort, along with the new coalition's website ([www.kidsfuturefla.org](http://www.kidsfuturefla.org)).

In these battles, "ignorance is not bliss—you have to stay informed," says Felicia Baker, a fourth-grade teacher in Ocoee, Fla. She was one of several school employees who turned

out for a recent town hall event. "It never helps to sit and complain from the couch—no one hears you there."

## Illinois

### Velocity and ferocity

Educators across Illinois can tell you that many legislative attacks they face are not home-brewed. They can come quickly, and they can come from half a continent away.

Case in point: In 2010, an Oregon-based PAC that goes by the innocuous name Stand for Children managed to generate a record-breaking \$2.8 million at its Illinois affiliate. The West Coast PAC moved quickly to put that war chest to work in Illinois—contributing big in the midterms and pressuring Illinois lawmakers to enact an outrageous bill masquerading as "school reform," a plan designed to ice educators out of all major school decisions.

How extreme was it? One part of the bill stipulated that Illinois school boards essentially could negotiate with themselves: After a fact-finding period, any board simply could choose to accept its own proposal by a two-thirds vote, eliminating the need to listen to the union's bargaining proposals at all. And the bill's backers wanted lawmakers to wrap up the legislation quickly, over a few days, before educators had time to catch on.

Lawmakers did pull back, and the plan failed. What its organizers hadn't factored in, apparently, were teachers like Michelle Brodsky—one of more than 15,000 educators



JIM WEST



AFT LOCAL 2398



JODY HORTON

Background photo: Educators, parents and others rally against proposed cuts in Florida. Far left: Michigan federation member Beth Sabo is "concerned about the loss of services to our students." Middle: Deb Ausman, left, and Kathy Goodman, PSRPs from Eau Claire, march on Madison, Wis. Above: Education Austin co-president Rae Nwosu joins the battle in Texas.

mobilized overnight by the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) to stop this legislative steamroller. The word went out, beginning with a union-organized electronic town hall meeting that drew more than 14,000 citizens.

"I dug through about 40 pages of the plan, and it was just bad news," Brodsky says. "It was like someone had landed from Mars."

Soon, Brodsky was forwarding the plan to colleagues, voicing her opposition through online petitions and e-mails. Because of the pressure, the plan was tabled. The episode, says IFT president Dan Montgomery, drives home an important message: "There is no right we have that we didn't have to fight to get—and to retain."

## Michigan

### A time for solidarity

Michigan, a right-to-work state? Impossible? Despite its long and rich history of labor strength and unity, Michigan is being targeted by groups trying to weaken organized labor.

In 2008, Michigan unions and their allies kept a right-to-work initiative off the ballot. Now, conservative state lawmakers and some business groups are pushing both a state ballot initiative and legislation. Proponents of the proposal, which would restrict the ability of Michigan unions to sign up members or charge fees to nonmembers who benefit from the union-negotiated contract, are bent on blaming unions and collective bargaining for the state's inability to attract business.

"This is just more of the same old politics. Strong unions must exist to protect workers critical to our communities—teachers, nurses, firefighters and others," says AFT Michigan president and AFT vice president David Hecker.

But the solidarity that typifies organized labor is at its best when facing a stiff challenge. That's certainly true as the state's AFL-CIO unions, joined by Michigan's NEA affiliate and the Change to Win unions, are taking on the fight. And labor is not alone. It has the support of community and human services groups concerned about the well-being of Michigan children and families, as well as employers, faith leaders and civil rights organizations. But, of course, the real strength of unions is an informed and mobilized membership.

Lamphere Federation of Teachers member Beth Sabo has been her local's political coordinator for the past two years. Members are concerned about "the loss of services to our students," says Sabo, a teacher in Madison Heights. "We have a large population of ELL

students as well as special education students, and we don't want to see funding for those and other programs cut."

AFT Michigan has established an ad hoc committee to create proposals related to these issues, and has released a comprehensive reform plan to let everyone know that there are sound, research-based answers to the problems facing education.

## New York

### Alternatives to job cuts

The New York State United Teachers is mobilizing to make the case that public education is essential to accelerate the state's economic recovery. That means tackling a potential double whammy: Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposal for a damaging tax cap and his budget, which would cut school funding by 7.3 percent and public higher education by 10 percent.

The property tax cap, if combined with proposed cuts in state education funding, would result in thousands of layoffs and jeopardize student services.

"You can't drastically reduce state support and at the same time limit a local school district's ability to meet its education obligations, and not expect catastrophic results," says NYSUT president and AFT vice president Richard Iannuzzi.

New York state's public schools already have lost 10,000 positions in earlier rounds of cuts. And in public higher education, where NYSUT represents faculty and staff at SUNY, CUNY and their community colleges, enrollment is surging and higher ed is being touted as the engine to economic recovery.

"There is so much at risk," says Juliet Benaquisto, president of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers. "We need every voice."

NYSUT and its local unions have made it clear they are committed to finding solutions that won't diminish services. To that end, NYSUT supports the shared sacrifice of a so-called millionaire's tax that could go a long way to addressing New York's red ink.

The union is making its case through extraordinary days of statewide activism. And the union has ramped up its commitment to broad-based coalitions.

The union's advocacy includes a massive postcard distribution that will offer NYSUT members a chance to tell legislators what their students need to succeed. Parent groups are joining in with a complementary postcard campaign, and NYSUT is providing retiree members with customized postcards that let

them weigh in on what their grandchildren must have to continue progressing in school.

## Texas

### Reasonable class sizes

It's the rainy season in Texas, at least when it comes to state education funding, which conservative lawmakers aim to slash by an average of \$1,000 per pupil. But Texas AFT members are calling on the Legislature to save manageable class sizes by tapping the state's \$10 billion rainy day fund.

Two-year budget plans just introduced in the state House and Senate are coming up \$9.6 billion short of already inadequate funding, which could result in layoffs of up to one-fifth of the public school employees in Texas. Among other cuts, the Senate's draft budget would kill two-year funding streams totaling more than \$1 billion for prekindergarten, at-risk student programs, and teacher training to improve high school completion. Another provision, this one in both budget bills, would wipe out a highly successful effort to help paraprofessionals become teachers. Since 1997, the state has granted college scholarships to more than 46,000 classroom paraprofessionals of modest means seeking to earn their degrees and become fully certified as teachers.

Yet, the Texas governor and conservative legislators say they won't touch the rainy day fund. That makes no sense, says Texas AFT, because it's raining now.

"The worst thing a state can do in an economic downturn is to weaken basic public services," says Texas AFT president and AFT vice president Linda Bridges.

Texas AFT members are coalescing around the state's class-size law, which keeps in check the student-teacher ratio in grades K-4. To impress upon elected officials the importance of using state and local rainy day funds, AFT members are pulling out their umbrellas, wearing stickers and making signs that say "It's Raining Now!" By the time legislators begin voting on budget measures in March, union members will be fully mobilized and on the move.

## Add your voice

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, workers are fighting to preserve public services and collective bargaining rights. To get state-by-state updates and find out how you can help, visit the AFT's Making a Difference website, [www.aft.org/difference](http://www.aft.org/difference).

# Trouble *stalks the* stacks

School libraries fight a cold blast of budget cuts

## COMPARED WITH STUDENTS

in a lot of places, the kids at Eastwood Elementary School in Roseburg,

Ore., have it good, and that's largely because Judy Kulluson, a longtime member of the Oregon School Employees Association, is an associate librarian there.

"Our kids come in during recess," she says. "They don't have to read, and they don't have to be quiet. This library is kind of messy and

about new books sooner, and their librarian has a pretty good feel for what they like. Kulluson also works with a teacher to supply the right audio books and intensive reading instruction for students who are struggling, and directly with these students on borrowing and taking care of books—efforts that, in Kulluson's words, have been "wildly successful."

That's not to say everything is perfect in the school library at Eastwood.

Right now, a budget proposal threatens to cut back the hours of Kulluson and her col-

leagues by 30 percent. That would mean less time preparing texts for teachers, less time to teach information literacy (see box on facing page), less time doing computer maintenance, and fewer library hours every day.

When she was hired in 1990, Kulluson's district in western Oregon paid for two years of night courses in library science. "That is definitely not happening anymore," she says, adding that her budget for books and materials today is less than it was in 1992-93.

On top of that, her duties grow every year. Associate librarians have been placed in charge of textbook distribution, and some lead reading groups. Technology has become important. And with custodians being laid off, Kulluson is doing more cleaning. "They're asking a lot of us," she says, "and we're delivering because we love our jobs."

Only a few hundred certified librarians remain in Oregon's 1,300 schools. "So now the cuts are hitting the paraprofessionals to the point where libraries are disappearing," Kulluson says. "It is a sad state of affairs."

She fears something that's already common elsewhere: becoming an itinerant librarian. Traveling from school to school, she believes, harms children. "You can't know the kids, and that would break my heart," she says. "They're not interchangeable. You have to know your little clients. You have to be able to size up a kid and hand him exactly the right thing."

Kulluson is not alone in this assessment. AFT member Kimber Whalen, a media tech in Romulus, Mich., was laid off for two years, then brought back only to be stretched among three elementary schools last year and two schools this year. She sees how some children love to continue researching historical figures even after they've completed their assignments. Others prefer mystery stories or poetry. But stretched as she is, Whalen has no time for anything except checking out books and keeping the libraries in order.

Her libraries haven't received a funding allotment for four years. Whalen would love to order newer titles, like the *Wimpy Kid* series, or keep the doors open longer for students, many of whom have never visited a public library. "Missing library is just as bad to them as missing gym," she says.

Sara Stevenson, a librarian at O. Henry

"Library workers are notoriously behind-the-scenes people, but in times like these, it pays to be visible."

JUDY KULLUSON

Oregon School Employees Association

comfortable. Kids can go behind my desk and get art supplies. They help each other. Some do research. This is their library; they have ownership. It's kind of like their home at school."

Some of these children eventually figure out that they can get perks from hanging around the library. For instance, they find out

leagues by 30 percent. That would mean less time preparing texts for teachers, less time to teach information literacy (see box on facing page), less time doing computer maintenance, and fewer library hours every day.

So the fight continues, just as it does all over the country. Consider these reports ripped from the headlines in February:

- In **New York** state, according to the *School Library Journal*, the Board of Regents is considering lifting a mandate to teach library and information skills in middle schools.

- Citizens in **Newark, N.J.**, were angry when their mayor allowed only five minutes for questions during a meeting about the impact that closing public libraries would have on schoolchildren, according to the *Star-Ledger*. Among their concerns: The city has not collected millions in arena rent owed by the New Jersey Devils hockey team, yet intends to cut \$2.5 million from the library system and shut it down for the entire month of August.

- And in **California**, many elementary school libraries reopened for limited hours only after parents ponied up the money themselves, reports the *Sacramento Bee*.

Indeed, funding cuts in California have blasted a hole in the collection at Centennial High School in Compton, says library clerk Ruth Balila. A member of the Compton Council of Clas-



JODY HORTON

Sara Stevenson of Austin, Texas, tells how library cuts hurt kids.



JERRY CLARKSON

Middle School in Austin, Texas, says that proposed education cuts there, from \$10 billion at the state level to more than \$100 million in her district, would hollow out the education of young children. "I can't think of a more perfect way to sabotage student success," she says.

But champions of education are fighting back. Stevenson showed up at 5:30 a.m. on a cold day in February to sign up to speak at an Austin school board meeting that evening. Hundreds of Education Austin members and others turned out in support. The testimony of Stevenson and others flooded the airwaves and the Internet, saving the jobs of 52 elementary school librarians and mitigating the damage to schoolchildren.

Proposed library cuts in Texas are even worse than they appear, according to the

*Austin Chronicle*, because they would choke off public schools' access to high-quality online databases. What's more, the deep cuts would leave Texas libraries in danger of losing roughly \$8 million in federal matching funds. The Texas Library Association says this would be a "total decimation of the statewide library program."

Judy Kulluson says she can't speak for others but knows what she has seen, based on a decade of union activism: "I have to say: Parents are not happy when they hear that libraries are going to be cut. Library workers are notoriously behind-the-scenes people, but in times like these, it pays to be visible."

—ANNETTE LICITRA

**Judy Kulluson: "Parents are not happy when they hear that libraries are going to be cut."**

## Next for libraries: 'information literacy'

**ONE ESSENTIAL LIBRARY JOB** today is showing students how to find information—and making sure it isn't junk. Information literacy, also called information fluency, means knowing how to tell if something you turn up on the Web is legitimate. Library workers say it's a misguided notion that technology replaces the need for libraries. In fact, children need early exposure to both books and technology.

Chrystani Heinrich, a school library aide clerk and member of the Compton (Calif.) Council of Classified Employees, says staffers must know where to find information—"and not just dredging through Google or Wikipedia. We have to go to the next level and find credible sources."

Anne Kemp, a library clerk in Portland, Ore., says books are best but it's smart to use various media. If teachers want materials on, say, "healthcare heroes," they sign up for a cart of books, a collection of bona fide websites and some computers for a class visit. But now her state plans to hack \$12 million from the district budget. Kemp isn't sitting still for that. She and the Oregon School Employees Association will be in touch with state legislators to make the case for school libraries. Call it one for the books.



KAREN SACHAR

## What will we lose if we lose our school libraries?

"I developed a passion for literacy in my school library. I remember looking forward to those library visits all week long, relishing the time I would have to peruse the shelves, gazing at the illustrations in picture books or looking for that next volume in whatever series I happened to be reading at the moment. In the library, I learned to research my ideas, investigate my questions and follow my dreams. How can we ask our children to embrace the joy of learning if we take away the one place where such independent exploration is possible?"

**ANGELA MITCHELL**  
Medford, Ore.

"To lose our libraries is to lose our futures! What replacements do we have that encourage reading for fun? Reading is something that we do every single day of our lives. To take away the libraries is taking away a major component of learning."

**TRACY PULIDO**  
Kansas City, Mo.

"Our democracy relies on citizenship and the ability to access and evaluate information. School libraries are the first place that young citizens learn how to inform and enlighten themselves, to get other points of view. In a time of polarized news sources and invasive corporate influence in education funding, this is vitally important."

**LYNN ADAMS**  
Trempealeau, Wis.

"School libraries are essential for teaching higher-order skills used for research."

**JANICE MARTINEZ**  
Gallup, N.M.

"We will lose the wonder of the child's mind. And history that can only be found in books."

**DAWN KUNZI**  
Hawthorne, Nev.

**Have you seen or experienced bullying on the job by a boss or co-worker?**

(You don't have to use your real name.)

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# Graduation coaches go to bat for at-risk kids

## Alaska members’ testimony saves innovative program

IMAGINE THAT YOU DREAMED of ways to reach troubled children among the 50,000 students in Alaska’s largest school district—that you decided to coach them into finishing high school. Now imagine that you found ways to build on that dream.

That’s what the AFT-affiliated Anchorage Council of Education (ACE) did in helping implement a 2008 “graduation coach” project, which won an AFT Innovation Fund grant two years later. The collaborative effort of the union, school district and community teaches paraprofessionals and school-related personnel how to identify students at risk of dropping out and then help them make it to graduation.

The eight staff coaches are part tutor, part social worker and part community liaison. They receive training and support, and are a big part of the district’s efforts to improve the graduation rate in Anchorage, which has risen for two years in a row.

As if that weren’t enough, the union is working with the University of Alaska to develop a course of study leading to a certificate program for graduation support professionals, which would be the first of its kind in the nation.

Now imagine how the graduation coaches were humming along this winter when suddenly the district announced a \$12 million budget shortfall and said every graduation coach, along with many secretaries and other staff, would be laid off.

At first, the coaches felt defeated; they’d been on the chopping block last year, too. But after the first budget hearing, when several principals spoke highly of them, they began gathering momentum. Several ACE

members held a meeting and decided they were not going down without a fight, saying “our silence is our acceptance.”

They began planning their testimony for the next hearing, and by February, they were ready. ACE members Patricia Hanley, Avis Fukuoka, Christal Smaw and Eric Spade, along with two of the local’s



Eric Spade, left, and Christal Smaw testify in Anchorage.

officers, described their work as graduation coaches—for instance, working in a MASH unit (missing assignment study hall) where teachers or counselors refer students to catch up on schoolwork during lunch.

It was pretty dramatic how impressed school board members were with the coaches, says project co-director Corinne McVee. “They were listening with rapt attention.”

The coaches also pointed out that if the district eliminated their program, ACE would be losing its grant from the AFT Innovation Fund. After a long debate, the board decided to dip into the budget reserve and keep every graduation coach.

“In the end, it was the members who saved themselves,” McVee says. “The four of them totally stole the show.”

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