



# PSRP Reporter

THE NATIONAL PUBLICATION OF AFT PARAPROFESSIONALS AND SCHOOL-RELATED PERSONNEL



School staff unite to help families cope with economic stress

# A Fighting Chance

PAULINE WILLIAMS, a high school psychologist, knows firsthand the fallout from the bad economy. Williams works in Waukegan, Ill., just north of Chicago, where the last time she looked, well over half of her school district's children, and even more children and families in surrounding communities, were economically disadvantaged.

*Continued on page 6*

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+ Your **AFT +** Member Benefits Are Inside  
INSERT

Ready or not, flu may be coming back  
PAGE 3

**STOP for the BUS!**  
PAGE 5



# Healthcare reform: A moral and economic imperative

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

IF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM for ensuring access to healthcare was a patient, it would be very sick indeed. Forty-seven million people are without coverage, and many millions more have inadequate coverage. Costs are spiraling out of control. Increasingly, even those who have health insurance find themselves paying more for less coverage and fearing that things will get far worse.

Addressing America's healthcare crisis is a moral imperative. It is simply unconscionable that, in a country that considers itself to be civilized, so many among us are deprived of a basic human necessity.

Unions are developing **support** for **comprehensive** healthcare reform that addresses access, costs, financing, delivery and **quality**.

It is also an economic imperative. The cost of healthcare now causes a bankruptcy in America every 30 seconds. Businesses that offer healthcare often find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. And healthcare entitlement costs are eating up such a large share of government spending that they put a stranglehold on other, equally worthy, investments.

But there is reason to believe a breakthrough is possible. Most people agree things have gotten so bad that we have no choice but to drastically revamp our healthcare system. President Obama and key congressional leaders have made healthcare reform a top priority. And groups that sparred during the last major effort to change our healthcare system have found common ground on some important issues, including the realization that doing nothing is not an option.

The AFT is working with the AFL-CIO to do all we can to avoid the mistakes of the past and, this time, actually achieve secure, high-quality healthcare for all. Working with progressive organizations, other allies and, crucially, employers, the AFL-CIO is developing support for comprehensive healthcare reform that addresses access, costs, financing, delivery and quality.

President Obama convened a healthcare summit in March that brought together many of the constituencies needed to make healthcare reform a reality. AFT vice president Ann Twomey, president of the Health Profession-

als and Allied Employees, represented the AFT at the summit. The president made clear that healthcare reform is among his most urgent priorities.

The White House summit participants wrestled with—and found some common ground on—many of the toughest issues in healthcare reform. Not surprisingly, there also was disagreement on the details. No one would pretend that reforming our healthcare system will be easy.

Twomey had an opportunity to speak with President Obama about the need for safe staffing standards and the inclusion of healthcare workers in the process of defining healthcare reform. She outlined a number of considerations that should be part of any healthcare reform proposal:

■ **A public plan option.** This would allow people to purchase health insurance from a

public provider, in direct competition with private health insurance. It especially would help those who don't have employer-provided health insurance or are ineligible for programs such as Medicare and Medicaid.

■ **Retain employer-provided insurance and favorable tax treatment for these plans.** Our unions negotiated these plans, often in lieu of salary increases. These plans cover more than 160 million Americans and are the bedrock of our healthcare system.

■ **Accountability.** Hospitals must follow responsible business as well as safety practices. They should be held accountable for the public funds they receive. And they must provide services needed by communities, not just services they deem profitable.

■ **Quality.** Preventable medical errors result in an estimated \$37 billion annually in unnecessary costs. The key to reducing such errors is safe staffing levels. One study shows that nurses intercept 86 percent of medical errors. Other studies have established that when nurse staffing goes down, patient deaths go up. Nurse-to-patient staffing requirements must be part of healthcare reform.

■ **Research and technology.** A commitment to medical research and technology has the potential to greatly improve quality and efficiency of health services, and to lower costs.

President Obama and Democratic congressional leaders want to have a healthcare reform plan in place soon. Despite the hopeful signs that a transformation of America's healthcare system is within reach, many powerful forces remain aligned against the reforms we seek.

Activism from union members like you is critical. Rest assured that the AFT will continue to push for true reform and that your support will be essential to secure victory.



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# AFT urges putting health first in case of flu outbreak

## Members advised to get both regular and H1N1 flu shots this fall

THE AFT HAS JOINED other leading education and health organizations in working on a coordinated response in the likely event of an H1N1 (swine flu) resurgence this fall.

Our union is insisting that health considerations rank ahead of education concerns if there is a flu outbreak. Educators have had plenty of experience in helping students make up missed schoolwork, says Richard Iannuzzi, president of the New York State United Teachers and an AFT vice president, the union's point person on gearing up for a pandemic.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan agrees that health comes first, and in August convened representatives from the AFT and the NEA, school chiefs, nurses, counselors and nutritionists for an overview by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As of August, the CDC had counted about 44,000 cases in the United States and its territories.

The regular flu season usually starts sometime from mid-October to November, but H1N1 never really abated this summer, so it may intensify earlier than usual, say experts on infectious diseases, including Bill Kojola, an industrial hygienist for the AFL-CIO.

"We can't squander this opportunity to prepare, because the question is when, not if, the pandemic will hit," Kojola says. "We are still getting H1N1 cases. It hasn't disappeared. And it could be a much nastier beast in the fall. Hopefully, we will be lucky."

An H1N1 vaccine is in production and may be ready as early as mid-October. H1N1 vaccine is expected to be administered in two doses, three weeks apart. To be on the safe side, the AFT is recommending that our members be vaccinated against both the regular, seasonal flu and H1N1 because the vaccines each target only their specific strains of flu.

In the meantime, the U.S. Education Department has released guidance for K-12 schools describing policies and procedures regarding any H1N1 outbreak. Guidance for early childhood and higher education was expected at press time.

The AFT planned to release pandemic flu resource materials in late August. The CDC has posted reporting forms for school closures and dismissals, and encourages any school staff member to report a school closure and not worry about duplication. The CDC also put

together a toolkit for educators and parents. Our union is calling on governments to:

- Have state and local plans in place, including resources for emergency availability of equipment and supplies, such as thermometers, gloves and respirators.
- Adjust reporting requirements for education programs so that staff can concentrate on H1N1.
- Convey information clearly and without fear, so that all the people involved, especially parents, understand the actual health conditions in their communities.

### FLU CENTRAL

ASIDE FROM YOUR state health department's Web site on H1N1 vaccinations and procedures, here are three essential sources of information online.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/dismissal\\_form](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/schools/dismissal_form)
- U.S. Education Department: [www.flu.gov/plan/school/schoolguidance.html](http://www.flu.gov/plan/school/schoolguidance.html)
- CDC toolkit for educators and families: [www.flu.gov/plan/school/toolkit.html](http://www.flu.gov/plan/school/toolkit.html)

## Taking a stand for good, green jobs

### AFT joins national labor-environmental alliance

BECAUSE OUR MEMBERS are teaching America's next generation of workers, the AFT has joined the Blue Green Alliance, a coalition of labor unions and environmental groups with big plans to expand our prosperity and leave the planet in better shape.

With the addition of the AFT's more than 1.4 million members in July, the alliance now unites 8 million people in pursuit of good jobs, a clean environment and a green economy.

Launched in 2006 by the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club, the alliance counts among its ranks the Communications Workers of America, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Utility Workers Union of America. All of them have a hand in developing greener technologies. For our part, the AFT is not only pushing for better building conditions through our Building Minds, Mind-ing Buildings campaign but also for greener career and technical education.

The alliance is pressing for new laws, like the American Clean Energy and Security Act, that will accelerate the use of clean energy, protect workers' rights and reduce the prevalence of toxic chemicals. Its mission is in sync with the AFT's mission in three main ways:

- Passing clean energy and climate-change laws that will reduce global warming and move America toward energy independence. A direct result will be the retrofitting of buildings, including schools and colleges where our members work, that will be powered by new fuels according to a renewable energy standard. Even more revolutionary will be making these buildings part of a "smart grid" transmission system that harvests energy from

individual buildings and returns it to the grid. Another benefit of clean energy legislation will be next-generation biofuels for school buses.

- Passing the Employee Free Choice Act so that workers can retool the economy on family-sustaining wages. Part of the alliance's plank on workers' rights and the environment is that union workers are better trained in health and safety matters, which makes them natural advocates for green jobs.
- Promoting green chemistry, which has huge potential for secondary and post-secondary science programs. Green chemistry will reduce toxic products by inventing purer alternatives.

Blue Green Alliance co-chair Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, says he's thrilled to welcome the AFT into the coalition. His fellow co-chair and Steelworkers president Leo Gerard adds: "We can, and we will, create the good jobs we need to rebuild the middle class."



# Labor secretary: Educate your lawmakers about the labor movement

Study shows anti-union behavior has intensified among employers in the private sector

PLEDGING TO WORK WITH the AFT on workers' rights, U.S. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis had one request when she addressed more than 2,500 AFT members in July. She urged them, as people who know the value of union representation, to tell their elected officials in Congress why passing the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) is so important.

"You're the best salespersons to do that with those who don't know what the labor movement is all about," Solis said to the group gathered in Washington, D.C., for the AFT's Quality Educational Standards in Teaching (QuEST) conference.

Solis said she and President Obama are strongly behind the legislation, which could expand collective bargaining rights to more workers in the private sector.

For those who question the need for EFCA, a study by Cornell University professor Kate Bronfenbrenner provides a sobering argument. Her research shows that



SOLIS

employers engage in punitive campaigns of intimidation—and their tactics are getting worse. In *No Holds Barred: The Intensification of Employer Opposition to Organizing*, she analyzes employer behavior in union representation elections and finds that it is

standard practice for workers in the private sector to be subjected to harassment, surveillance and retaliation for union activity.

Private sector representation campaigns differ markedly from those in the public sector. Survey data from the public sector describe an atmosphere in which workers may organize relatively free from intimidation and retaliation.

Though most members of the AFT work in the public sector, the Employee Free Choice Act is an AFT priority.

"America's economic well-being is directly tied to that of its workforce," says AFT president Randi Weingarten. "Strong unions, like investments in crucial programs and increased access to healthcare, are central to the future of the country."

EFCA has been introduced in both houses of Congress. Contact your elected officials to enlist their support. Visit [www.aft.org/efcacall](http://www.aft.org/efcacall) or [www.aft.org/efcaletter](http://www.aft.org/efcaletter).

## POSTSCRIPT

More on a story that appeared in the July/August edition of *PSRP Reporter*:

WHEN SHE FIRED OFF a letter to U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan this summer, Jackee Long hoped he would respond to her request that paraprofessionals and school-related personnel be included in Duncan's "listening tour" across America.

At the education secretary's first stop in West Virginia, he'd only spoken with teachers and principals. Since then, Duncan has included school support staff in his visits.

There's more. Long, who is president of the AFT-affiliated West Virginia School Service Personnel Association, met with Duncan one on one after a July 24 briefing on the Obama administration's \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund.

Long feels that had she not sent a letter to Washington and gotten a strong assist from the union, classified employees around the country may not have had their voices heard.

"That made my day," she says.



LONG

## Minimum wage notches up to \$7.25

Pay increase should help fuel economic recovery

MINIMUM WAGE WORKERS who went more than a decade without a raise finally got the last of a three-part increase in July.

The first step, in 2007, raised the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour (where it was stuck since 1997) to \$5.85. The second step raised the wage to \$6.55 last year, and the third increase, to \$7.25, took effect on July 24.

Former President Bush had blocked the Fair Minimum Wage Act with a veto but finally signed it after Congress folded it into a larger bill. The AFL-CIO's campaign to raise the minimum wage had kept the issue alive and pushed it over the top.

The higher wages are now a boon for cash-strapped workers who are pumping those dollars into the economy, says the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

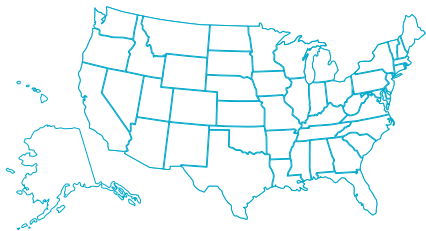
"This well-deserved increase will help workers better provide for their families," adds U.S. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis. "I am especially pleased that the change will benefit working women, who make up two-thirds of minimum wage workers."

Union members and our allies aren't resting, though. To counteract claims that decent wages force employers to cut jobs, the AFL-CIO's partner in the faith community, Let Justice Roll, has put together a fact sheet called "Raising the Minimum Wage in Hard Times," which shows that raising the base wage never increases unemployment, in good times or bad.

Back when the buying power of the minimum wage peaked in 1968, for example, the jobless rate dropped from 3.8 percent in 1967 to 3.6 percent in 1968 to 3.5 percent in 1969. The next time the unemployment rate came close to those levels was after the minimum wage raises of 1996 and 1997. The newest increase will goose the economic recovery, but we've still got a way to go.

Even after three raises, today's inflation-adjusted minimum wage still buys less than it did in 1956. That's a long-term drop in buying power and one reason we're in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression. Let Justice Roll is pushing for a new minimum wage of \$10.





**MO** The Kansas City Federation of Teachers and School-Related Personnel worked with another union and the school district to launch a citywide wellness program that reduced employees' healthcare premiums by 7.5 percent.

The program includes a health risk assessment, district-provided personal trainer, gym membership, health classes and a Lose to Cruise competition in which teams of employees strive to make health gains so they can win a cruise. In two years, the program has grown from 50 to 250 participants.

Wellness programs alone won't solve the nation's healthcare woes, but the Kansas City program worked for Phyllis Brown, a clerk in the special education division who joined last year's winning team with four of her colleagues, all support personnel: Regina Blackmon, Shirley Gardner, Charity Ritchie and Dolphinette Williams. Through diet, exercise and peer pressure, the team won a cruise to the Caribbean.

Brown had been diagnosed with a type of cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, when



Regina Blackmon, left, and Dolphinette Williams joined a team of Kansas City support personnel who won top prize and a cruise for improving their health.

Blackmon asked her to join the team. It was exactly what Brown needed. "Instead of staying home feeling sorry for myself," she says, "I could go to the gym every day. You know, you don't want to let down your teammates."

"We got really involved in this," adds Gardner, "not just in cutting down the cost of the health insurance, but in getting us healthier."

**NY** In early August, 67 workers at New York University were notified that their jobs would be eliminated. The Union of Clerical, Administrative and Technical Staff immediately sprang into action and began one-on-one meetings with affected members to make sure their contractual rights were being honored and they were getting correct information from the university (many weren't).

After redeployments, says local president Stephen Rechner, about half the original number of notified workers lost their jobs. The union has been helping employees transfer to other positions in the system if they want one; some members preferred to take a severance package.

"What we're trying to do is find out what each individual needs and wants, what's best for their situation," says Rechner, whose bargaining unit numbers about 1,600. Roughly 40 of the laid-off members worked as desk attendants in the university's residence halls.

"These layoffs may not be as draconian as in other schools and industries, but they are the first of this magnitude at NYU in 30 years, and if you're the person getting laid off, it's a catastrophe," Rechner says.

The university claimed it would be done with layoffs by September, but Rechner says it isn't filling vacancies and that employees' workloads are increasing, sometimes to the point where they can't complete their work. "If they say there's no money for overtime," he warns, "we will have to push back."

**VI** Schoolchildren on St. Croix in the Virgin Islands are the beneficiaries of an arbitration award ordering repairs to stop terrible flooding and mold in their schools.

The mid-summer arbitration agreement calls for significant improvements in the physical environment of the schools. It sets up a planning committee to identify needed equipment and facilities, plan building rehabilitation, and devise a budget. The com-

## STOP for the BUS!

ALTHOUGH SCHOOL BUSES are by far the safest vehicles on the road, AFT members who work in school transportation are constantly striving to make students' trips safer.

One of the best ways has been to draw the attention of motorists to the importance of driving carefully around school buses. With new dangers posed by the rise of texting while driving, the AFT's Stop for the Bus campaign is more important than ever.

For this year's National School Bus Safety Week Oct. 19-23, many AFT members again are reminding parents and the general public to:

- Look for flashing red lights and the extended stop arm.
- Stop for buses loading or unloading students.
- Wait until children have safely reached the curb or sidewalk.
- Know your state law on school bus safety.

Most states follow a uniform vehicle code on stopping for school buses. Find a table at [www.aft.org/psrp/stopforthebus.htm](http://www.aft.org/psrp/stopforthebus.htm) that shows whether this code matches the law in your state, along with other state information.



mittee was to meet by mid-September and submit a plan within six months.

Tyrone Molyneaux, president of the St. Croix Federation of Teachers, says the AFT affiliate is pleased with the decision and plans to pursue enforcement through the judicial system, if necessary.

In the face of frequent heavy rains and flooding, the union has waged a longtime battle to get roofs repaired, mold removed, dangerous wiring fixed and vermin exterminated. The union's efforts have been especially difficult in a school district that, in a report, referred to putting out buckets and mopping floors as "precautionary measures" against flooding.

The agreement also says teaching is to be suspended in schools with flooded classrooms. No classes may be held where malfunctioning air conditioners or lack of ventilation cause room temperatures to rise above 84 degrees, and in no case are classes to be held in a room over 89 degrees.

# A Fighting Chance

“Students are **seeking anyone** they’re able to speak with. ... You are well known in the school because they **see you every day.**”

— PAULINE WILLIAMS, Waukegan Psychologists Union

*Continued from page 1*

Driving this economic disaster is the rising rate of defaults on home mortgages. As of May, Waukegan’s foreclosure rate doubled, Williams says, and in that month alone, the banks took back 127 homes in the city.

## The damage

“Just imagine what that’s doing to our population,” says Williams, vice president of the Waukegan Psychologists Union, an AFT affiliate. She has seen a spike in student requests for mental health services. Drinking is up, as are teen pregnancy and homelessness. Since 2004, the city’s homeless coordinator has seen the number of students living out of cars and motels double.

“Students are seeking anyone they’re able to speak with,” she says. “This is a vicious circle because there is an increased need for services, and services are being cut.”

Rhode Island, too, is feeling the effects of a weak economy, with an unemployment rate of more than 12 percent. School nurse Alice Brady says even parents with jobs are afraid of losing them, and this anxiety is felt by children: “The economy is not letting anyone escape.” Basic healthcare for some children also is slipping, says Brady, a member of the AFT Healthcare school nurse subcommittee. At her elementary school, a few families don’t have the resources to cover required vision care for their children.

School nurse Alice Brady works with students and their families on finding healthcare resources.



CONSTANCE BROWN

Brady follows up with parents whose children failed the school vision screening to ask if they’ve made an appointment, and if not, she helps them line up Rhode Island Medicaid services or refers them to a community partner, the Lions Club, whose main service project is eye care. Several families took her up on the offer for Lions Club eye services.

In another sign of how healthcare costs are devouring the economy, Brady says children who suffer an injury come to her first, with instructions from the parents to call them, saying that unless it’s absolutely necessary, they can’t afford to take their child to the doctor.

Of course, the conditions Williams and Brady describe are not limited to their cities or parts of the country. The same tough circumstances are unfolding in California, Florida, Nevada, New York and across the country. These include:

- **Increased transiency**, along with growing need for basic necessities, including school supplies and winter coats. Crystal Chase, a member of the Jefferson Federation of Teachers near New Orleans, reports that a quarter of her students this past year never did bring in school supplies. She bought them herself.

- **The absence of parents** who usually show up to help but are “somewhat unavailable” right now, Williams says, because they’re struggling themselves.

- **Homelessness.** Debra Ausman, a member of the Chippewa Valley Technical College Staff and Clerical Federation in Eau Claire,

Wis., says people are sleeping in their cars at night in her college’s parking lot.

- **Lack of focus and motivation** as children’s basic needs go unmet. It’s harder to ask students to solve math problems, Williams notes, when their attitude is: “What’s the use? We’re not going to get a job anyway.”

- **Fewer electives and extra-curricular activities**, and more requests during field trips (when they haven’t been canceled) for



RUSS CURTIS


lunch stops that offer dollar menus. “Students are not getting what they need to be prepared for high school because they are missing out on electives, sports, etc., in small schools like mine that are unable to provide extracurricular activities,” says Kathleen Vogler, a member of the Cleveland Teachers Union.

Paraprofessional Jocelyn Foreman, like most support staff, has deep roots in her community.

## The response

Despite the pressures on their students, school staff are trying to help these children keep learning and thriving. At a recent AFT meeting, Williams, the school psychologist from Illinois, met with school support professionals, whom she noted are critical in helping students hold their lives together. “Very likely you are well known in the school because they see you every day,” Williams told AFT members, particularly paraprofessionals, bus drivers, security officers and school secretaries.

Ways to counteract the effects of the econ-

 The AFL-CIO’s Working America campaign offers resources for workers facing economic struggles. Go to [www.unemploymentlifeline.com](http://www.unemploymentlifeline.com).



omy on students include more extensive use of fee waivers, reduced-price school meals and food pantries. Staff also need training in reporting child abuse. Working with faith leaders and others in the community can help educators identify additional resources and services. Clergy help schools connect with local elected leaders and showcase what educators are doing to offset the effects of poverty.

“Every child you can pull up out of the bottom is a plus,” says George Williams, president of the AFT-affiliated Madison County (Fla.) Education Association. “We can be hopeful. We have to be hopeful. Any innovation, any idea, where it helps one, where it helps two, we have to continue that struggle.”

That’s exactly what happens at Alice Brady’s school, where she is making the transition from longtime school nurse to school counselor this fall.

Paraprofessionals and teachers often are the first to notice that something is awry with a child, Brady says. “As soon as the family is identified as having a need, we all—social workers, teachers, counselors, secretaries—we all rally around to support them.”

Likewise, paraprofessional Jocelyn Fore-

man was born and raised in Berkeley, Calif., has worked at John Muir Elementary School for three years and has been a parent at the school for 12 years. That gives her tremendous reach within the community.

It’s an advantage that paraprofessionals and other school support personnel are keenly aware of. “If you don’t know the culture, you don’t know how to properly refer children for services,” Foreman says. “It is the classified employees who know the community well. We are the go-to people.”

Foreman has a dozen stories about how the brutal economy, plus several rounds of budget cuts, have knocked the wind out of families and hobbled educators. Older elementary students

have a notion of what’s going on, while younger ones know only that some things they once had—a bedroom, regular meals—are gone.

Two brothers, for instance, were getting meals at home but coming to school unkempt. A pool of classified workers got together and took turns providing clothes, toiletries and other support to keep them steady.

“The school—that should be sanctuary,” Foreman says. After a pause, she adds, “That’s my job. I love my job.”

— ANNETTE LICITRA

## “The school— that should be sanctuary.”

— JOCELYN FOREMAN  
Berkeley (Calif.) Council  
of Classified Employees

## Help children cope in unsettling times

SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF can help students feel more in control over their lives during tough economic times by letting them know what’s going on, how outside events may affect them, and how to deal with their reactions.

First, assess what level of support children need. Many will *not* find the economic crisis stressful. For those who do, these suggestions may help.

- 1. Be reassuring.** Children, especially young ones, take their cues from you. Acknowledge that times are challenging. Avoid casting blame and take time to listen.
- 2. Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a schedule is reassuring and healthy. Encourage children and their families to get plenty of sleep, regular meals and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with school and extracurricular activities but don’t push if they seem overwhelmed.
- 3. Don’t dwell on worst-case scenarios.** There are no guarantees in life, but the strong likelihood is that you and your students will be OK. This is true even when families are struggling or facing a change like having to move.
- 4. Acknowledge students’ feelings.** Let them talk about their feelings and concerns, and encourage questions about current events. If you don’t have some of the answers, be truthful and say so. Being an empathetic listener is important. Let them know that others feel the same way and that it’s normal.
- 5. Stay optimistic.** Even if times get tougher, most people will be fine physically and adjust emotionally. Don’t speculate about bad things that might happen, which may frighten your students. Instead, stick to facts and hang onto something positive, like, “Yes, parts of our economy are struggling but our country has been through tough times before. We’ll be OK.”

SOURCE: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

## How can we help students cope with stress from the recession?

“As the school year begins, be aware of the number and cost of the supplies you want students to bring to class. Also, teach students about the recession. Show them the cycle of economic trends.”

LUCILLA CLARKE  
El Paso, Texas

“Consistency. The one thing that can stay familiar and constant is school. Obviously, as educators, we will have compassion for students in tough situations. For many students, school is their escape from hard home situations.”

CHRIS ARMBRUSTER  
West Mifflin, Pa.

“Give them the lowest possible rates on their college loans without penalizing them, and give them time to pay off the loans.”

NILDA GARZA  
Chicago

“We might begin helping our students cope with stress from the recession by actually offering college classes they need when they return to school, and not piling the responsibility of funding higher ed on their shoulders by raising tuition. Here in Washington state, many of the community colleges are responding to budget cuts by cutting back on course offerings, and tuition will increase 7 percent this school year and an additional 7 percent next school year. How can we seriously discuss helping students cope with stress from the recession when colleges are contributing to the problem?”

PHIL RAY JACK  
Green River, Wash.

“Support the fight to mandate school counselors in every level of education.”

CLAUDIA CAMPA  
Yonkers, N.Y.

## How can educators, unions and the community work together to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education?



**IT’S YOUR VOICE** We want to hear from you! Visit [www.aft.org/voices](http://www.aft.org/voices) to respond to this question and to others throughout the year.

## Making the leap

### Baltimore expands paraprofessional-to-teacher career ladder

DEBORAH LOULLOUDIS came slowly to the decision that she wanted to become a teacher. The mother of two volunteered at school, as so many paraprofessionals do, to be near her children. Eventually, she was invited to become a para and now works with preschoolers at Armistead Gardens Elementary School.

“I connected with the children,” says Louloudis, a member of the Baltimore Teachers Union. “They can be a handful but they bring a lot of joy.”

The high school graduate never would have considered becoming a teacher until her union hammered out a virtually all-expenses-paid teacher certification program. In one of the first such programs anywhere, the BTU is extending its career ladder to paras starting out with only a high school diploma.

The new phase of the paraprofessional-to-teacher program has three pieces: Participants now can start without any college credits; larger groups will stay together for mentoring; and they will emerge with a bachelor’s degree in special education.

“The real excitement about this is that it’s the first program I know of in the nation that starts with a high school diploma,” says AFT executive vice president Lorretta Johnson, who heads BTU’s paraprofessional chapter.

The union is organizing participants into two main groups, depending on their level of preparation. Paras with a high school diploma or a few college credits will enter Baltimore City Community College for an associate’s degree. Those graduates, along with participants who have completed more extensive college coursework, will continue to pursue their teaching degrees at nearby Coppin State University.

In exchange for a \$50 fee, good academic standing and a three-year commitment to teaching special education, the paraprofessionals will have all tuition, books and fees paid for. To complete the associate’s degree, they will need to pass Praxis I (the initial



KATHLEEN LANGE

teacher qualifying exam), and to complete the bachelor’s degree, they’ll need to pass Praxis II.

The new group starting at the community college numbers close to 25 this fall, says Gerri Bohanan, vice president of higher education for AFT-Maryland. About 10 paras are advancing to the four-year college, and about five from a previous version of the program are close to graduating.

Baltimore’s original para-to-teacher program began under Johnson’s leadership in the early 1970s and has produced many outstanding educators, including a Ph.D. and a vice principal. “We’ve always said that paraprofessionals would make good teachers,” Johnson says. “We’ve been doing this haphazardly for years, and now we have a beautiful contract with the school board that says exactly what will happen every step of the way.”

Melanie Drake, who’s been working about five years in the Baltimore schools, makes no bones about her reason for pursuing a college degree: She simply loves special education. “I have a passion for it,” she says, “so why not keep on going forward?”

At Baltimore City Community College, clockwise from top: Jada Norris, Deborah Louloudis and Melanie Drake.

The **time** is now!



The time to reform healthcare is now!

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