

Listen to the truth-tellers

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As the year draws to a close, I am so grateful to the educators, healthcare professionals and public employees we represent for the extraordinary work they do every day to make a difference in our lives. I've always encouraged others to thank them, but this year, I'm asking that we go further: Let's also *listen* to the teachers and nurses in our lives. They are truth-tellers who can reveal things we need to know about our country.

Let's listen to teachers about how they stretch themselves to fill the void left when schools lack counselors, nurses and librarians. And, as some politicians brag about "the best economy ever," educators can tell us about the other side of an inequitable America: the more than 1.3 million homeless students in our public schools, and the 40 percent of Americans who can't put together \$400 in an emergency.

Let's listen to teachers about childhood hunger, which makes it difficult to concentrate and learn. Educators know that, for children who experience food insecurity, school meals should be as standard a school supply as paper and pencils, and the inability to afford school lunch should never be used to shame a child. Educators are outraged that, two years after the GOP gave away \$2.3 trillion in tax cuts, mostly to the wealthiest Americans and corporations, the Trump administration is cutting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits for more than 700,000 people and free school meals for nearly 1 million children living in poverty.

Many people marveled at the unprecedented "Red for Ed" movement—and then moved on. We should listen closely to the message that sparked this activism: that budget and policy choices like austerity and syphoning money from public schools fail our students and make teaching an even more draining and financially untenable profession. Educators are telling us what children need to thrive. In Los Angeles, striking teachers won class size limits, more librarians and a full-time nurse in every school. And in Chicago, educators secured a pledge that the district will hire more special education teachers and ensure every public school has a nurse and a social worker.

These activist educators know how essential nurses, therapists and other healthcare professionals are. Let's listen to them, as well. They know that nearly half of America's children experience trauma, that the high cost of healthcare forces many to delay care until they are severely ill, and that many families can't afford the prescription drugs they need.

Let's listen to educators who are speaking up against privatization cloaked as "reform." In Houston, for example, the state's Republican leadership wants to take over the school district, wresting democratic control from parents and the community. Houston's public schools have close to an A rating from the state's accountability system, but state officials have pointed to a single struggling school in their

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subterfuge to charterize and privatize the district's public schools. Their ruse defies logic—when your house has a leaky faucet, you don't put your home up for sale; you fix the things that need repair. Let's listen to the educators, parents and community leaders who are fighting back and calling for the state to support public education, not sell it off.

Teachers have always had enormous responsibilities—to teach and nurture their students so they have the opportunity to live fulfilling lives; to help them develop judgment to be engaged citizens; and to make our classrooms and schools safe havens

for students, especially now, as students fear mass shootings, and hate and bigotry are on the rise.

Today, when many people believe we are in a war on truth, teachers are helping students to think independently and critically, to distinguish facts from falsehoods, and to make arguments in respectful ways. And as the very foundations of America are being undermined, our teachers are also called to be defenders of decency and guardians of democracy. That is why it is so crucial that teachers and all working people have voice at work, in our democracy and in our elections.

This weekend, the AFT and several other conveners hosted a forum on public education in Pittsburgh. Eight candidates for president shared their values and thoughtful ideas for realizing public education's role as a ladder of opportunity for all our children and as a foundation of our democracy. They understood that if you want to strengthen our country's future, you must care about our children and listen to their parents, advocates and educators.

It often feels like we are living in an Alice in Wonderland moment. As some people claim that up is down and down is up, teachers are working to set things straight. Let's listen to them, because they are educating America's young people, who all deserve bright futures and on whom our hopes and aspirations rest. Teachers want what children need, and that is good for all of us.



Weingarten, right, with educators at Cornerstone Academy for Social Action in the Bronx, N.Y.

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