Heroes on the frontlines of COVID-19

Randi Weingarten, President
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This has been a month like no other in modern American history. We are in a war against an invisible virus that has required most people to stay home to fight it. With each day of the coronavirus pandemic, Americans have grown increasingly grateful for things we used to take for granted, like grocery workers, without whom we could not meet our basic needs. Parents have a new appreciation for how complex and demanding teaching is, and for how teachers are helping their children continue learning, stay engaged and stay safe inside during this uneasy time. And then there are our healthcare heroes—the nurses, EMTs, doctors, orderlies, respiratory techs and other workers who put their health and lives at risk every time they report to the frontlines of this pandemic.

Many of these heroes are among the more than 672,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States and, as of Friday, the more than 32,000 souls who have died. This includes at least 50 current and 11 retired New York City school employees, and the three members of New York state’s AFT-affiliated Public Employees Federation who died on one day last week. The pandemic is taking an especially dangerous toll on our healthcare workers, many of whom are treating patients without adequate personal protective equipment or other safeguards. More than 5,400 healthcare workers in the United States have contracted COVID-19, and dozens have died. At least 80 nurses employed at one hospital in Ohio have tested positive for the coronavirus.

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I have been listening to the governor of my home state, Andrew Cuomo, who, like many other governors, is upholding his oath to protect the safety and health of those who work and live in his state. While physically distant, I have never been on my phone or Zoom screen so much, connecting with parents, teachers and friends, as mental health experts suggest we do, and with leaders and members of my union—nurses, state employees and educators among them. They’re worried about teachers and professors who made the stressful shift to remote instruction in a nanosecond; special education teachers struggling to meet their students’ individual learning needs from afar; bus drivers and food service workers scrambling to ensure families get “grab-and-go” meals; nurses working without the necessary PPE; and social workers, juvenile justice workers, and others who work in facilities like nursing homes and prisons, wondering if they and the people they care for are invisible to oth-

ers. But along with these worries, I hear their hope and ingenuity and joy.

From the moment the first school closures were contemplated, I got urgent calls and emails from AFT members and leaders trying to figure out ways to feed students who rely on school meals so they wouldn’t go hungry. The New York City federation of Teachers is packing grab-and-go meals for students to last several days at a time. Tia Harris, a veteran school bus driver in Grants, N.M., is working with 20 other school bus drivers to deliver 1,000 meals every day. Driving their normal routes, instead of picking up students, they drop off food. In Dallas, Yolanda Fisher and her colleagues go to work before dawn—preparing and packaging 700 breakfasts, 700 lunches and 700 dinners that they distribute to students. And in Lee County in Florida, school food service workers are preparing and distributing up to 25,000 free grab-and-go meals every day, available to any child 18 or younger.

Millions of students are now learning alongside the amazing work of their teachers. In just a few days, 75,000 public school teachers in New York City alone converted their homes into remote learning centers. For United Federation of Teachers member Erica Wilkins, a fifth-grade teacher at P.S. 95 in Brooklyn, this included using Google Translate to com-
municate with her students’ parents, who speak a wide range of languages—from Albanian to Arabic to Urdu. San Beth Rosenberg greets the students in her virtual AP U.S. history classes with an upbeat song each day, then they launch into high-level discus-
sions. But, Rosenberg says, “I will never be able to replicate the magic of being in a classroom from my laptop.”

School closures have exposed many inequities in our country, including the digital divide. In the nation’s capital, where up to 40 percent of students lack a computer or internet access, the Washington Teachers’ Union is partnering with local TV stations to air lessons aligned with the district’s learning standards for different grade groups. And the digital divide is not just an urban problem. Michele Bushby teaches high school biology in Saranac, N.Y., where the mountainous terrain sharply limits internet bandwidth. The district’s shift to online learning doesn’t work for students without internet, so Bushby spends hours each day calling students to provide alternate instruction, all while helping her second-grade daughter learn remotely.

The AFT and the National PTA convened a teleconference to boost interest in supporting our students and families during this time. The No. 1 issue among the 55,000 people on the call was coping with stress. Research shows that chronic stress may affect a child’s ability to regulate emotion, attention and problem solving and to learn and remember. But research also shows that the deciding factor for whether stress is tolerable or toxic is the presence of supportive relationships, like that of a caring parent or other adult. Experts in mental health, learning science and psychology offered suggestions for alleviating children’s anxiety with routines, relationships and resilience. (We have links to these resources in the “Learn More” box.)

Remote learning is not ideal. Teachers miss their kids, and many students have surprised themselves by wanting to go back to school. When we return, we will be able to address many of the learning-loss issues that have been raised. But for now, let’s try to figure out ways to help families while also trying to sum up the year— with ideas like capstone projects that show how much learning has already taken place—and helping our seniors graduate.

Many healthcare professionals are redeploying to where they are needed most. In Connecticut, some school nurses are now performing COVID-19 testing at drive-through testing centers. A longtime registered nurse with the New York State Department of Health volunteered to admin-
ister tests in New Rochelle, the first place in New York to see community spread of the virus, and is now administering tests in other areas with outbreaks. “Seeing all these nurses volunteering,” she said, “it struck me that when everyone else is running away, nurses are there.”

Their collective heroism leaves us with a debt of gratitude.

Many healthcare personnel at risk of contracting COVID-19 are isolating from their families in order to protect others. Are having family separations imposed on them, such as Trish Garcia, a registered nurse in Tacoma, Wash., who works 12-hour shifts, early mornings and late nights in state hospitals. “It’s tough,” she says. “I am not just an urban problem. Michele Bushey
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Experts note that the Trump administration’s failure to acquire and distribute tests for COVID-19 resulted in far more cases and fatalities in the United States than in countries that made the necessary preparations. State employees—scientists and technicians you may not have known exist—have rushed to fill the void. AFT members in Mon-
tana and New York have developed tests for COVID-19, and are working weekend shifts, early mornings and late nights in state labs to turn around tests quickly so healthcare providers can plan treatment and stop the spread of the virus.

This pandemic has upended all our lives, but it has also put many things into per-
spective: Science is important. Government is important. Everyday Americans—grocery workers at my neighborhood C-Town; teachers in car parades or making videos to show their students how much they are loved; the restaurants and small busi-
nesses trying to stay open and to keep their employees employed; nurses and ordered and intensive care doctors, like my kid-sister— they are the best of America and the glue holding us together. And when this crisis passes, we will properly mourn those we have loved and lost.

We all yearn to get back to normal and back to work. The way to restart the economy is, first and foremost, to expand testing and contact tracing, protect medical workers, and accelerate the development of a vaccine, to protect health and safety. It is not an either-or choice; public health and economic vitality go hand in hand. And we must “reopen America” better than we closed it.

This crisis has exposed the disastrous consequences of cuts to the nation’s public health infrastructure, the lack of paid sick leave for all workers, the prevalence of food insecurity, the gaping digital divide, and the uncountable number of Americans who are uninsured or underinsured. And now Americans have been set back even further because of the pandemic. We will need bold steps, through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and other government action, to repair the harm to people’s health, the economy and our democracy. Economic stimulus measures must include funds for states and localities struggling to maintain basic government functions. And they must be designed to create a recovery shared by all Americans, especially the most vulnerable.

In crises, there are always heroes and gress. I am eternally grateful to my infra-
dependent workers like Jose DeJesus. America’s health professionals are showing the compassion, competence and com-
mitment that are in short supply from the president, who claims absolute authority but shirks responsibility. He has even insulted healthcare workers, who are risking their lives to save others, by making unfounded insinuations that nurses are thieves.
MEET OUR HEROES

“Taking care of COVID-19 patients is exhausting, but the nurses aren’t calling out sick. We are here because of our oath and our calling. It’s frustrating and scary, but we take care of each other in the midst of this madness.”

—Jose DeLeus, registered nurse, Health Professionals and Allied Employees (New Jersey)

“The AFT and First Book’s very generous book donation benefited our community. Seeing the smiling faces of the parents and students getting these good quality books brightened my day. Even the parents were anxious to start reading them.”

—Kim Pendry, Title I math teacher and member of AFT-McDowell County (West Virginia)

“With so many of the stores being empty and parents who can’t afford to go out and stock up on food, if we didn’t do this, there are kids who would go hungry. I don’t want any child to go hungry while schools are closed.”

—Yolanda Fisher, food service manager, Alliance/AFT (Dallas)

As of April 8, industrial technology teacher and West Warwick Teachers’ Alliance (Rhode Island) member Michael Shunney, his students and a team of helpers using 3D printers have created, assembled and distributed 573 face shields that went to: nurses and doctors, EMTs and firefighters, police officers, visiting nurses and healthcare professionals, and West Warwick Public Schools employees serving breakfast and lunch for students at three district schools and two mobile sites.

TELLING OUR STORY

News stories all across the media show the AFT’s deep involvement in the public discourse on the coronavirus, but we also have our own news and personal stories from AFT members on www.VoicesFromTheFrontline.org.

LEARN MORE

American Federation of Teachers
aft.org/coronavirus

The AFT’s resources cover everything from face masks to free food for students. It also includes webinars about how to convert classes to remote learning, and opportunities to influence coronavirus policy in Congress.

Share My Lesson
sharemylesson.com/coronavirus/remote

The AFT’s Share My Lesson helps educators and parents access free resources, lesson plans and ideas on distance learning for all grades and content areas. It also has suggestions for reaching students with disabilities and English language learners, and for dealing with stress and mental health issues during this time.

AFT Academics
aftacademics.org/covid-19

Solidarity Academy webinars give higher education members information and provide a forum for discussion on issues affecting higher ed employees during the coronavirus pandemic. These include how to quickly convert classes to high-quality remote learning, how the coronavirus is affecting adjunct and contingent faculty, and how the pandemic is affecting international students.

Forgive My Student Debt
www.forgivemystudentdebt.org/covid-19

Forgive My Student Debt provides up-to-date information to manage student loan debt during the pandemic, including advice from the AFT and our partners about new federal provisions affecting federal student loans. AFT members can also sign up with Summer, the AFT’s trusted partner for student loan management.

First Book
firstbook.org/coronavirus

First Book is a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that all children in need have their own books. While schools are closed, it has focused on reducing inequities in learning opportunities by distributing 8 million books to children who don’t have reliable access to online learning.

Wide Open School
WideOpenSchool.org

Wide Open School is a free collection of online learning experiences and activities for kids, curated by the editors at Common Sense and organized by grade band and subject. Everything on Wide Open School centers on the schedule, which is programmed each “school” day for each grade band.

Colorín Colorado
ColorínColorado.org/coronavirus

It’s important to create bonds to support both students and their families throughout the pandemic, especially for students who are learning English. Colorín Colorado is co-produced by the PBS station WETA and the AFT, and it serves educators and families of English language learners in grades preK–12.

Project Parachute
www.eleos.health/parachute

Healthcare workers across the country face unprecedented challenges as they deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Project Parachute is a network of licensed therapists, in cooperation with Eleos Health, that is matching frontline healthcare professionals with licensed therapists to provide pro bono therapy.

Turnaround for Children
www.turnaroundusa.org/coronavirus

Even at a distance during the pandemic, we need to maintain connections to our family, friends, teachers and peers. This curated list has resources for any adult who has a trusting, supportive relationship with a child—and for young people themselves.

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/covid-19

The American Psychological Association’s website is continually updated for psychologists, healthcare workers and the public. Resources include telehealth policies in all 50 states; ways to manage COVID-19 concerns for people with obsessive-compulsive disorder; and more.

National PTA
www.pta.org/home/family-resources/coronavirus-information

The National PTA’s priority during this crisis is to help keep people safe and healthy while meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of all students, educators and families. It has compiled resources to support families and teachers who are navigating working, teaching and learning at home.