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Washington, DC

The Freedom to Teach

Consider what teachers have recently said about why they teach:

“I teach because I want to change the world, one child at a time, and to show them to have passion and wonder in their learning.”

“I teach so the next generation will question—*everything*. The classroom should be a place where we set children’s minds free.”

“I teach because our democracy cannot survive without citizens capable of critical analysis.”

Why I felt called to teach is best summed up by this poster I have moved from office to office since I taught in the 1990s: “Teachers inspire, encourage, empower, nurture, activate, motivate and change the world.”

Teaching is unlike any other profession in terms of mission, importance, complexity, impact and fulfillment. Teachers *get* the importance of their work. So do parents and the public. But teachers know that some people *don’t* get it—whether it’s the empty platitudes, or the just plain dissing. And this has taken a huge toll.

Teachers and others who work in public schools are leaving the profession¹ at the highest rate on record. There were 110,000 fewer teachers than were needed in the last school year², almost doubling the shortage of 2015. All 50 states started the last school year with teacher shortages.³

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/teachers-quit-jobs-at-highest-rate-on-record-11545993052?mod=e2fb>

² <https://www.epi.org/publication/u-s-schools-struggle-to-hire-and-retain-teachers-the-second-report-in-the-perfect-storm-in-the-teacher-labor-market-series/>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/08/28/teacher-shortages-affecting-every-state-as-2017-18-school-year-begins/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6ce045375d44

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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This is a crisis, yet policymakers have largely ignored it.

And it's getting worse. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs is plummeting—dropping 38 percent nationally between 2008 and 2015.⁴

More than 100,000 classrooms across the country have an instructor who is not credentialed.⁵ How many operating rooms do you think are staffed by people without the necessary qualifications? Or airplane cockpits? We should be strengthening teacher preparation programs, not weakening teacher licensure requirements, leaving new teachers less and less prepared. Why are we doing this to our kids?

Teaching has become so devalued that, for the first time in 50 years, a majority of parents say they don't want their children to become teachers.⁶

The challenge is not just attracting people to teaching. The United States must do a much better job of keeping teachers in the profession. Every year, nearly 300,000 leave the profession; two-thirds before retirement age.⁷ Attrition in teaching is higher than in nursing, law, engineering or architecture.⁸ Schools serving majorities of students of color and students living in poverty experience the highest teacher turnover rates.⁹ Losing so much expertise has an enormous negative impact on students' education. The financial consequences are also steep—more than \$2 billion annually¹⁰, and that's a conservative estimate.

It is a failure of leadership to discard so much experience and so much potential—and to lose so much money—to this endless churn.

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/08/28/teacher-shortages-affecting-every-state-as-2017-18-school-year-begins/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6ce045375d44

⁵ <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/uncertified-teachers-and-teacher-vacancies-state>

⁶ <http://pdkpoll.org/results>

⁷ https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/how-many-teachers-are-leaving.htm?view_full

⁸ Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force, University of Pennsylvania Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Ingersoll, Merrill et al – Updated October 2018

⁹ https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/108/

¹⁰ <https://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/path-to-equity/>

We are losing the teacher diversity battle as well. A new analysis by the Brookings Institution found America’s teaching workforce, which is overwhelmingly white, is growing less representative of those they teach, who are now a majority students of color.¹¹

These statistics reveal an alarming and growing crisis, and it’s well past time we took action.

This crisis has two major roots: deep disinvestment from public education and the deprofessionalization of teaching. America must confront both.

Disinvestment

The teacher uprisings of the last two years have laid bare the frustration over insufficient resources, deplorable facilities, and inadequate pay and benefits for educators. In what President Trump calls the “greatest economy ever,” 25 states still spend less on public education than they did a decade ago.¹² In some states, conditions are so bleak that teachers who previously wouldn’t have dreamed of going on strike feel they have no choice but to walk out to get what their students need.

Teachers rose up in Colorado when officials tried to justify a four-day school week as “good” for kids. And teachers walked out in Oklahoma, where DJs joked about a student being issued Blake Shelton’s 40-year-old textbook. Before last year’s statewide strike, teachers in West Virginia hadn’t had a raise in five years, and soaring health insurance costs gave them an effective pay *cut* every year.

In 38 states, teacher salaries are lower than before the Great Recession.¹³ Research from the Economic Policy Institute, which Sen. Kamala Harris has lifted up in her teacher pay proposal, shows that teachers are paid 24 percent less than other college

¹¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/03/07/the-diversity-gap-for-public-school-teachers-is-actually-growing-across-generations/>

¹² <https://www.aft.org/press-release/education-underfunding-tops-19-billion-over-decade-neglect>

¹³ <https://www.aft.org/press-release/education-underfunding-tops-19-billion-over-decade-neglect>

graduates.¹⁴ And the stories are all too common of teachers working two or three additional jobs, and even selling their blood plasma, just to get by.

In addition to the soaring cost of healthcare, there is the burden of student loans. The average student loan for a master's degree in education jumped 82 percent between 2002 and 2012, and the portion of students taking loans grew from 41 to 67 percent over that period. One of the few ways of mitigating this—the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program—has been completely sabotaged by the Trump administration. Teachers are being squeezed in both directions: lower income and higher expenses.

And then there are the conditions in which students learn and teachers teach. Public school facilities got a D+ from the American Society of Civil Engineers.¹⁵ That means thousands of schools are outdated, unsafe and unfit, and are literally making people sick.

What does that look like? Rodent infestations in too many schools to count. What does that smell like? Toxic mold throughout schools in Puerto Rico. What does that feel like? Freezing classrooms in Baltimore, when patching up old boilers didn't work anymore. Water has been shut off in Corinne's school and more than 100 others in Detroit because of dangerously high levels of lead and other contaminants. Don't tell these kids and their teachers that investment doesn't matter.

Think about the state of children's well-being. We know that poverty disproportionately affects children. We should be appalled by the fact that 40 percent of Americans don't have the cash to cover a \$400 emergency.¹⁶ How can officials close neighborhood schools when we should be making them centers of their communities—wrapping medical and mental health services around students; offering AP classes and art, music and other enriching activities that kids love and thrive in; and supporting families with training and other programs for parents? It's great we are cheering LeBron James'

¹⁴ <https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-gap-2018/>

¹⁵ <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/cat-item/schools/>

¹⁶ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/why-4-in-10-adults-cant-cover-a-400-emergency-expense-2018-05-22>

efforts to do this in Akron, Ohio¹⁷, but what about all the other schools and communities in need? Remember, a child in Philadelphia died after suffering an asthma attack in a school without a nurse on duty. And these life and death necessities were a central demand by Los Angeles teachers in their recent strike.

Inadequate funding for education is sometimes the result of weak economies. But more often, it is a deliberate choice—to cut funds for the public schools 90 percent of our students attend¹⁸—in order to finance tax cuts for corporations and the super-rich or to siphon off funds for privatization.

Everything I just described to you is a disgrace. Students know it's a disgrace. Parents know it's a disgrace. Administrators know it's a disgrace. Teachers know it's a disgrace.

And it is the root cause of the teacher uprisings. And it's at the heart of the AFT's Fund Our Future campaign, where we are fighting for adequate investment in public education—from school levies to full funding of Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Change is happening, like in New Mexico, which has just boosted funding for public schools, and in Illinois and Michigan, where their new governors have pledged to increase investments. But it is shocking that so many politicians do not seem to know it is a disgrace, or at least act like they don't know.

Deprofessionalization

The disinvestment in public education and the failure of many states to make teaching a financially viable career go hand in hand with another major cause of the crisis we face—the deprofessionalization of teaching.

Ask teachers why they leave the profession. It's not just underfunding. Teachers are frustrated and demoralized and really stressed. The lack of classroom autonomy and discretion supercharge that dissatisfaction. Google “teachers’ resignation letters”¹⁹ and

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/education/lebron-james-school-ohio.html>

¹⁸ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>

¹⁹ https://www.academia.edu/31530605/With_regret_The_genre_of_teachers_public_resignation_letters

you'll find anguished accounts of the many ways teachers have been stripped of their freedom to teach, leaving them feeling powerless and unable to teach their students in the ways they judge best.

In our online focus groups with teachers from across the country, they spoke about entering teaching excited, optimistic and determined to make a difference in their students' lives. And they spoke with equally deep emotion about the stress and disrespect they soon experienced. This deprofessionalization is killing the soul of teaching.

It's being micromanaged—told that the only decorations allowed in your classroom are the motivational posters provided by a textbook publisher.

It's worrying about the pacing calendar that requires teachers to follow a predetermined schedule for teaching each topic, even if students need more time to understand the content.

It's getting in trouble for allowing students to conduct a science experiment or continue a debate over two days, instead of one.

It's the systemic fixation on standardized testing that dictates virtually every decision about student promotion, graduation and school accountability, instead of authentic assessments of student learning, like research papers and project-based learning.

Teachers are treated as "test preparation managers," as one teacher put it, which "has hollowed out the richness of curriculum and diminished the quality of teaching and learning." Another teacher said, testing is "dehumanizing the education of humans."

Just as the fixation on testing makes teachers' hair stand on end, so does excessive paperwork—data collection, data entry and data reporting. One focus group participant summed it up this way: "Teachers are drowning in a sea of paperwork; just let us do our jobs."

But before one yearns to turn the clock back, there are no halcyon days of teacher professionalism to return to. A century ago, the principles of Taylorism used in factory work were applied to the classroom, with the teacher reduced to the role of unskilled

laborer. Decades later, in the age of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, prepackaged, corporate curricula were intended to standardize teaching to conform to standardized assessments. Scripted curricula, aka “teacher proofing,” took restricting teacher discretion to its extreme, not only denying teachers’ creativity and expertise, but assuming their incompetence.

So the fight for professionalism isn’t new—but it has always come from within the teaching ranks, and from our teachers unions.

More than 30 years ago, two powerful ideas that advance teacher professionalism came from the AFT. Al Shanker introduced the idea for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards,²⁰ because it is essential to hone and recognize accomplished practice. And, because teachers have always known that the freedom to teach goes hand in hand with credible teacher development, feedback and evaluation, the idea for improving practice through peer assistance and review originated in our ranks.

Nearly 20 years ago, the AFT’s Shanker Institute released a report on what professionals, like teachers, need to succeed. The findings are all too familiar, such as the fact that teachers love their work but are “concerned about conditions on their jobs that deny them the respect, the rewards, the resources ... and discretion in decision-making ... to do their best work.”

And for almost a decade, participants in the AFT’s Teacher Leaders Program have turned their ideas into practice and their advocacy into policy.

None of this has been enough. Nor was TURN (the Teacher Union Reform Network), or the AFT Task Force on Professionalism, or the breakthrough contracts our locals have negotiated, like those with the visionary administrators on the panel that follows this speech. Solving this crisis requires sustainable, systemic transformation—a culture change.

²⁰ Richard Kahlenberg, “Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race and Democracy.” Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 298-302.

What's worse is that, while we have been at this work for decades, it has collided with a period in American education of top-down control, test-driven decision-making, disinvestment and teachers being denied authority to make educational decisions. That's not the case in high-achieving countries like Finland, Singapore and Canada, where teachers are rightly considered "nation builders," and their pay, time for collaboration, and involvement in decision-making reflect that.

It's not rocket science to see that the United States has gone in the wrong direction and that we need to reverse course. Teachers need the freedom to teach. If we want our public schools to be all we hope, if we want to attract and retain a new generation of wonderful teachers, this cannot be solely a teacher issue or a teacher union issue. We must act, and act together.

So what do we do about it?

Remember the teachers I quoted earlier—who spoke so passionately about helping students think critically and love learning?

Solving this crisis requires treating those teachers as the professionals they are. So the question is not whether, but how, to elevate teachers' voice and judgment, and allow teachers to make learning rich and fulfilling for their students.

To change the culture so that the teaching profession is marked by trust, respect and the freedom to teach, there are aspects we can legislate and we can negotiate.

And that starts by focusing on three essential areas:

1. Developing a culture of collaboration;
2. Creating and maintaining proper teaching and learning conditions; and
3. Ensuring teachers have real voice and agency befitting their profession.

- I. Develop a Culture of Collaboration.

Developing a culture of collaboration doesn't happen magically. It requires trust, leadership and pioneers—all of which are in abundant measure in a district that has become an exemplar for school collaboration—the ABC Unified School District in Los Angeles County. ABC's labor-management partnership is grounded in a set of principles like “we will solve problems, not win arguments” and “we won't let each other fail.” They know if teachers and administrators help each other succeed, they help students succeed. This is the ethos guiding other places, as well, including Meriden, Conn., and New York City, with its new Bronx Plan.²¹

And the research confirms this. John McCarthy and Saul Rubinstein have researched collaboration in public schools for the past decade.²² They've studied 400 schools in 21 districts in six states. What have they learned?

- Formal labor-management partnerships at the district level lead to greater collaboration at the school level;
- Greater school-level collaboration improves student performance; and
- Collaboration reduces teacher turnover, particularly in high-poverty schools.

Teachers in countries that outperform the United States on international assessments have more time for collaboration and planning each day, and for visiting each other's classrooms. That's because these countries understand that preparing to teach is as important as actual instruction.

By contrast, half of the teachers in the United States reported in an extensive survey that they have never observed other teachers' classes. They spend more time teaching than educators in higher-performing countries and average an hour less per day for planning and collaboration.²³

²¹ <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/bronx-plan-has-bottom-approach-helping-schools>

²² https://www.cecweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Union_Management_Partnerships.pdf

²³ <https://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/TALIS-2013-country-note-US.pdf>

So here's an idea: Build more teacher time into school schedules in addition to individual prep periods—to observe colleagues' lessons, to look at student work, and to plan collaboratively.

What else does collaboration do? Collaboration fosters trust, and vice versa. And one of the largest scale long-term studies of school improvement showed that the most effective schools have high degrees of trust.²⁴ How do you do that? Sharing information, discussing issues and solving problems with teachers, which gives them voice and respect as integral parts of a learning organization. This is every bit as important as having a credible system of teacher development and evaluation. So here's another idea: Trust teachers. Develop policies—from the school board to the principal's office—WITH teachers, not TO teachers.

II. Create and Maintain Proper Teaching and Learning Conditions.

For teachers, creating and maintaining proper teaching and learning conditions starts with a simple question: What do I need to do my job, so that my students have what they need?

I could stand here and say that class size should be small enough so that teachers and students can form real relationships, so they can delve deeply into projects that interest students, and so students are actively engaged in their learning. But many classrooms don't even have enough chairs and desks for every student, and teachers often have classes so large that they can't engage with every child every day, or can't thoughtfully review and grade their students' work without having to stay up until 3 a.m.

I could tell you that every classroom should have a state-of-the-art interactive whiteboard—and they should. But at the very least, every student and teacher deserves computers that work, along with decent internet. While we're at it, how about copy machines? With paper!

²⁴ Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement (Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, 2002)
Pub: The American Sociological Association's Rose Series in Sociology

I could tell you every school should have the necessary wraparound services and enrichment opportunities for students, so that we are meeting every student's needs. But too often, resources are so limited that we are grateful for a part-time school nurse, overloaded counselors, and cast-off athletic gear and musical instruments.

So here's another idea: Ask teachers what they need to do their jobs so their students succeed. Let's take the answers teachers provide and use them as the basis of an audit of teaching and learning conditions, and then integrate the results into assessments of the district. Ask principals and parents and students as well. Then let's act on those audit results—through legislation, lobbying, collective bargaining and, if necessary, school finance lawsuits.

This would be the start of a long-term, sustainable commitment to the necessary teaching and learning conditions for every child in every public school, regardless of demography or geography.

III. Ensure teachers have real voice and agency befitting their profession.

People like to say they want the “best and brightest” to become teachers. But when teachers start working, they find that, all too often, they don't get to make consequential decisions. They're essentially told to check their ideas, imagination and initiative at the schoolhouse door.

A teacher in one focus group lamented the lockstep regimen at her school—that every class in the same grade must be on the same lesson plan, on the same day, regardless of student need. I hear this constantly. The further away from the classroom, the more authority someone seems to have over teachers' work. That makes no sense.

Do we really want teachers to have to close the classroom door and hope no one “catches” them doing what they think is best for their students? We should be unleashing teachers' talents, not stifling them. Educators need the benefit of the doubt—the freedom to teach.

The classroom teacher is the only person who has knowledge of the **students** she is teaching, the **content** she is teaching, and the **context** in which she is teaching. *What* gets taught is determined by district guidelines and curriculum. But *how* it gets taught is best determined by teachers using their professional expertise and judgment. Teachers meet students where they are, and teachers should have the freedom to find ways to get them to where they need to go.

Scholars Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine spent six years studying American high schools.²⁵ They found that powerful learning was happening most often in electives, clubs and extracurricular activities. I found this with my own students, as well, as we prepared for the “We the People” debate competition. We’d spend hours after school—working in teams, deciding their best arguments, practicing and polishing. We developed deep relationships with each other and a meaningful understanding of the Constitution. Why do we free teachers to run with their ideas after 3 p.m. but rein them in during the school day?

Researcher Richard Ingersoll and his colleagues found that greater teacher leadership and influence in school decision-making significantly improve student achievement in both math and English language arts.²⁶ Yet, despite such evidence, they also found that, in most schools, teachers report having little involvement in school decision-making.

Why? It comes down to who controls the decisions affecting teaching and learning. Here’s a telling example: Thousands of teachers rely on crowdfunding sites like Donors Choose to obtain educational games, classroom libraries and basic supplies. But some, like the Metro Nashville (Tenn.) Public Schools,²⁷ are forbidding teachers from using Donors Choose, because district officials are upset that they don’t control what the donations are spent on.

Too often, top-down control trumps all else. That hurts students. And it demoralizes teachers.

²⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/opinion/sunday/fix-high-school-education.html>

²⁶ https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/ingersoll_sirinides_dougherty

²⁷ https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2019/03/donors_choose_district_ban.html

The assumption should be that teachers, like other professionals, know what they are doing. Teachers should be able to be creative, take risks and let students run with an idea. When teachers are asked—or told—to do something, they should have the latitude to ask two fundamental questions: What is the purpose of what I am being told to do? And how does this contribute to teaching and learning?

Here's the last idea I'll offer today: Respect teachers by giving them the latitude to raise concerns and act in the best interests of their students without fear of retaliation, as the New York City's United Federation of Teachers negotiated in its latest contract.

Conclusion

The ideals and ideas I have outlined are not quixotic fantasies. They are pragmatic strategies that create the sustainable teaching and learning culture that enables the freedom to teach. They are ways to empower teachers because, as Mayor Pete Buttigieg just said, you're not free in your own classroom if your ability to do your job is reduced to a test score.

These strategies are the reality in high-achieving countries. And they are enabled by the Every Student Succeeds Act, which Congress passed into law with bipartisan support in 2015.

Speaking of federal law, you might wonder why I haven't mentioned the secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, particularly because she invokes the word freedom at every turn. But what she calls freedom is just a rebranding of her agenda of defunding and destabilizing public education. For example, she makes the ludicrous claim that larger class sizes could be *good* for students as a pretext to slash funding. But even if we had a well-intentioned secretary of education who believed in public education and supported teachers, we would still have to do this work, school by school, and district by district.

Of course we must call out the austerity hawks, the privatizers, and those who disparage and devalue public education. But let's build on these two years of incredible educator activism. Let's bring these proposals I've outlined above to the bargaining table, to

school boards and to statehouses. And, if officials speak out of both sides of their mouths—saying teachers and teaching are important but acting as if they are anything but—let’s hold them accountable, not just for their hypocrisy, but for failing to address the real crisis. And, yes, let’s pay teachers appropriately for the tremendously important work they do.

Some say that you can’t negotiate teacher professionalism, that you can’t legislate respect for the teaching profession, that cultures forged over decades of deprofessionalization are too entrenched to change. Talk about being agents of the status quo. Of course change is possible. The participants in the panels following my remarks are living proof that, where there are willing partners, they are finding ways.

Teachers are drawn to this profession because of their love for children and their passion for teaching. Let’s reignite that passion, not extinguish it. So, to America’s teachers, my heroes who “inspire, encourage, empower, nurture, activate, motivate and change the world,” I say keep fighting. And keep caring. You are making a difference not only in your classrooms but in reclaiming our profession. And today the AFT commits everything we’ve got—the resources and influence of our 1.7 million members—to combat this disinvestment, deprofessionalization and disrespect by fighting to fund our future and to secure the freedom to teach.