



A Union of Professionals

A SAFE AND WELCOMING SCHOOL YEAR FOR ALL

AFT President Randi Weingarten
Remarks to the AFT TEACH Conference

July 6, 2021

Welcome to TEACH. How I wish we were together, in the same room, not the same Zoom.

But like virtually everything else these last 16 months, we've figured out how to overcome obstacles and uncertainty. We "MacGyvered" it, like you have been doing, every single day, since March 2020.

How many times this past school year did you think, "I can't keep doing this?" Yet you did. Like David Finkle, a ninth-grade English teacher in DeLand, Fla., who taught in person and remote simultaneously. David was stuck at his computer in the corner of his classroom so students learning remotely could see him on his computer's camera—making him wish "there were two of him." And Rosamund Looney, a first-grade teacher in Jefferson Parish, La., is her school's Teacher of the Year, yet she says she feels "like a mediocre version of my teaching self." Rosamund, if you are watching, I'm sure your students and their families are so grateful to you. Maxie Hollingsworth, an elementary school math specialist in Houston, rotated from classroom to classroom working with children, and then meticulously sanitized desks, pencils and math manipulatives—as she lived with the constant fear that she would bring the coronavirus home to her daughter who has asthma.

At what point last school year did you feel end-of-the-year tired? Winter break? Halloween? *Labor Day*?

But you dug deep and you got your students through it. I love how a student summed it up at a moving-up ceremony on Long Island last week: "We did it!" Yes, we did. YOU did, in so many incredible ways. Kyle Stern, a math teacher in West Suburban, Ill., wrote to every student while they were learning remotely—reminding them that teachers are there for them even when they're not there in person. Jane Judson, an art teacher at Humanities and Arts High School in Queens, had students list words they associated with their isolation during the pandemic and then create an image to express one of those words. Several won awards for their artwork. Kate Sundeen teaches chemistry in Philadelphia and coaches a speech and debate team. Kate and her students were trying to enter a national debate competition, but many students had glitchy or no internet connections. It took Kate three weeks to piece together their online submission—and she hit "send" one minute before the midnight deadline.

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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Educators have been first responders to students' needs—their technological, academic and emotional needs. At a recent roundtable in the Bronx, high school students talked about how their teachers have been a “lifeline” during this difficult time.

That has been so important, but it's also what Harry Potter called a “heroic responsibility.” And heroic responsibilities can take their toll.

The Rand Corp. worked with the AFT and the National Education Association to survey public school teachers. Seventy-eight percent of teachers reported experiencing frequent job-related stress—almost twice as many as most other working adults during the pandemic. And teachers were nearly three times as likely to experience symptoms of depression as the general adult population.

Teachers cited the stress of simultaneous teaching; the difficulty of maintaining contact with students and families, supporting students' social-emotional health and keeping them engaged; as well as teachers' concerns about their own or loved ones' health. Sound familiar?

It is crucial for the people who take care of others to take care of themselves. That's why the AFT introduced a free trauma counseling benefit for our members. And this TEACH conference devotes a whole strand to educator well-being, with sessions on self-compassion and social-emotional learning routines.

And don't forget Share My Lesson, the AFT's free, award-winning platform for education resources, which evolved to meet teachers' needs during the pandemic and is available 24/7.

There are countless other ways the AFT is there for you. Take student debt. We are fighting to cancel \$50,000 of student debt, to fix Public Service Loan Forgiveness and, in the short run, to keep the moratorium on student debt payments. We're fighting back against predatory student loan servicers. And the AFT's member benefit called Summer helps borrowers get into student debt plans that can save them money—saving some members hundreds of dollars a month.

We have fought, and keep fighting, for the resources and the safe and welcoming school environments you and your students deserve. President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan has hugely helped in that regard. This year we are also expanding our collective bargaining work because, as President Biden said this week, educators deserve a raise, not just praise. And, by the way, the first lady, Dr. Jill Biden, is joining us tomorrow at a school we will visit together in Washington, D.C.

Educators have just been through the second-most challenging year of your professional lives. What's the most challenging year? The one that starts this fall. Your students will return with enormous needs. There still won't be enough school counselors, psychologists or nurses. Far too many schools still need ventilation system overhauls and other infrastructure improvements. And while there's not enough political will to lower class sizes, there will be enormous pressure to make up for lost time.

We must find ways to support each other. Teachers supporting teachers, unions and school officials supporting school staff, and all of us supporting students and families.

It won't be easy, and some people will try to make it harder, like those who have disparaged educators, scapegoated our unions, and blamed us for things outside our control like school closures caused by a pandemic.

On “Fox & Friends,” Pete Hegseth mocked our safety concerns, saying that we’re “rigging it so [teachers] don’t have to go to work.” As if teaching remotely isn’t incredibly hard work.

I’ve been the target of a lot of these right-wing disinformation campaigns. That comes with the territory. And I’ve been tweeted at by parents who were angry and frustrated by the effects of the pandemic on their children. I reached out to some of these parents. Their frustration and fear are real—both those who wanted schools open in person all this year, as well as parents who are still worried about whether their kids will be safe in school. It’s the attacks from the Trump and DeVos crowd that offend me. They failed to develop a coherent strategy to help people through the pandemic, yet they attacked us as we were trying to create the safe conditions and trust to reopen schools.

Let’s set the record straight. The AFT put out our plan to safely reopen schools in April 2020, a month after the first school closures. We developed our plan with health and education experts, and with input from our members. And as we learned more about COVID-19, our plan evolved with the science.

Even before COVID-19, we knew that kids learn best in person, and that remote, hybrid and simultaneous instruction are not adequate substitutes. Our public schools are centers of the community. It’s not just where kids learn academics; it’s where they build relationships. Many children, who otherwise might go hungry, eat breakfast and lunch at school. And parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work.

Unions have always worked to keep our members and those we serve safe—whether in a school, a hospital or a meatpacking plant. It’s not an either/or—in-person schooling or keeping people safe. It’s both/and. Creating safe conditions in schools during a public health crisis is not an obstacle to reopening classrooms; it is the pathway to going back, staying back and creating trust throughout the school community.

Our members told us that repeatedly over the last 16 months. You knew how important it was for kids to be in school, and you wanted to be back in your classrooms with the right safety measures. That’s what 76 percent of our education members said in June 2020, and what 80 percent of you told us this February 2021. Now, with 9 out of 10 AFT members having been vaccinated, we can be even more confident about returning to school in person this fall.

I. Return: Safety Is the Way Back.

The vaccines have been game changers. And the more that people were back in school, with few outbreaks, the more that staff, students and parents trusted we could be fully back in schools safely.

I have seen that for myself. Since March, once I was fully vaccinated, I have visited our members throughout the United States—nurses and healthcare professionals who were on the frontlines of the pandemic in Alaska, Oregon and Washington. And I have been in many schools that successfully reopened for in-person learning with safeguards in place—from a bus depot in Rio Rancho, N.M., to a school powered by solar energy on Staten Island in New York. I saw the joy, excitement and relief that students and staff felt over being back.

Schools can reopen this fall in person, five days a week, with mitigation measures; ventilation upgrades; and social, emotional and academic supports for students.

That requires resources, and that's why every day since the start of the pandemic, the AFT has fought in Washington for federal funding for schools. And we've fought for the COVID-19 relief packages for families, for healthcare providers, to keep state and local governments and small businesses afloat—and to keep educators and other public employees from losing their jobs.

Thank you to all of you who are participating in our virtual lobby day today.

It's been a tale of two administrations: While Donald Trump tweeted at schools to reopen, he either wasn't interested in or wasn't up to fighting the virus. We were working to reopen schools in a climate of chaos, fear and misinformation.

Thankfully, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris changed course. The Biden administration has fought the pandemic with science, truth, transparency and, yes, money through the American Rescue Plan. There have been bumps, of course—this is a once-in-a-century pandemic. But look what happened: By the end of this school year, nearly all K-12 schools were open for in-person teaching and learning. Virtually every school system is planning for full reopening this fall, and many are offering summer programs for academic recovery and fun.

There are still risks. The Delta variant is causing alarming increases in infections in the parts of the United States and the world with low vaccination rates. It's more transmissible than the other COVID-19 variants, putting unvaccinated people at greater risk of infection, including children who are too young to receive the vaccine. That's why the World Health Organization has once again recommended masks.

As the science and circumstances evolve, the AFT has sought updated guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We have asked: Will layered mitigation strategies in schools continue to include 3-foot physical distancing, surveillance testing, occupancy limits and adequate ventilation? Will the guidance continue to require mask-wearing in school settings for children under 12? Will the CDC recommend protocols for masking, so teachers are not called on to be “mask police”?

We need this science-grounded guidance to clear up ambiguities and to reflect the realities of school environments.

COVID-19 relief funds have been life-changing. Ask any parent who has received the child tax credit. It's helped schools big-time. Last month, I visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Campus in New York City with United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew. Throughout my years at the UFT, we fought unsuccessfully to get the ventilation system at MLK fixed. Now, with funding from the CARES Act and help from outside experts the UFT brought in, the city has fixed it, and students and staff at MLK can finally breathe healthy air. As an asthmatic, I felt it immediately. Thank you, Michael, for your efforts.

The people closest to our public schools know what they need, and they must have a say in how these funds are used.

In Philadelphia, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers members testified before the city council recently about priorities for allocating American Rescue Plan funding, emphasizing investments in facilities, mental health support and supplies.

Last week, Pittsburgh Public Schools announced a stakeholder advisory committee that will help the district decide how to spend about \$100 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds, including

parents, representatives from the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, the administrators' association, and stakeholder groups.

These examples show it's possible to create safe and welcoming environments in schools this fall.

Yet some families still have reservations.

People whose loved ones have gotten sick or died from COVID-19 may have heightened fears about sending their children to school. Families may be skeptical that safety precautions will be in place.

If the bathrooms at their child's school lacked soap before the pandemic or the ventilation was poor, it's an even greater concern now. Their children may be too young or unable to be vaccinated. We know that many parents are uncertain about the safety of vaccines. Others think they'll have to pay for the vaccine (even though it is free), or they lack transportation to vaccination sites or can't miss work.

Some concerns have nothing to do with COVID-19. Parents whose children have been bullied; experienced racism, antisemitism or anti-Asian bigotry; or have not been well-served academically, may see remote learning as a refuge.

These are all barriers we have to overcome to ensure a safe and welcoming "back to school" for all.

And that's exactly what the AFT and many members like you are working to do.

CAMPAIGN—Back to School for All

Back-to-school time is always a time of hope, excitement and a little trepidation—and it will be even more so this year. Every year, from local unions to yours truly, the AFT does a back-to-school campaign. This year, the AFT is ramping up those efforts, dedicating \$5 million to a Back to School for All campaign, with members reaching out to families and communities about being back.

Thus far, the AFT has made 40 grants to state and local unions totaling more than \$2.5 million, covering 1,400 AFT local unions in 22 states. And more grant requests are rolling in.

We know that, first and foremost, we must work together to make schools safe and welcoming: Safe from toxic air, mold and contaminants like lead and asbestos. Safe from the spread of the coronavirus. Safe from discrimination, bigotry, bullying and violence. And safe for every child to feel that they are welcome for who they are. The same should be true for their families and for school staff. Every school should be a place where parents want to send their children, where educators want to work and where our kids thrive.

Starting next week, the AFT will operate "office hours" and clinics—designated times when affiliates and others can call in to discuss ideas and get technical support. And Share My Lesson will be a clearinghouse for best practices. But the most meaningful part of this campaign is how members, staff and volunteers are connecting with families to rebuild relationships and trust grounded in our shared goal of helping all our children thrive.

There are several statewide Back to School for All campaigns already—in California, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York. And members in AFT locals, big and small, are getting involved. In Willmar, Minn.; Cincinnati; St. Louis; and Pittsburgh, members are going door to door, visiting

students' homes to talk about the health and safety and education programs in place, to encourage families to send their children back for in-person learning.

In New York City, the UFT is reaching out to families—through UFT parent liaisons, partnerships with community and religious organizations, and advertising—to build families' trust and confidence about their children returning to school. Thanks to educators' advocacy, New York City's latest budget will enable schools to hire more teachers—including music and art professionals and academic interventionists; to hire additional social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals; and to expand community schools.

The Chicago Teachers Union's summer organizing campaign is centered on increasing vaccination rates, promoting social-emotional school resources, and lobbying for more American Rescue Plan money to be devoted to communities highly affected by the pandemic.

In Texas, Education Austin's family engagement plans include having 1,500 one-on-one family conversations to gather feedback on challenges and ensure a safe return to school.

Members of the Cleveland Teachers Union are contacting families of students who had limited or no attendance last school year. They're phone-banking and knocking on doors, distributing First Book materials at community events, and working with the district to make sure kids and families have what they need to return to school full time in the fall.

Same in Martinsville, Ind., where the union is working with the district to reach out to families of the 800 students who were "lost" during the pandemic.

In Houston, a 12-member community canvassing team will target the city's poorest ZIP codes where student absences have been the highest. The Houston Federation of Teachers and the Houston Education Support Personnel aim to encourage families not only to return to their neighborhood public schools, but to join the fight for community schools and against school privatization.

In Massachusetts, AFT locals in Chelsea, Lawrence, Lynn, Springfield, Boston, Lowell and New Bedford will offer outdoor Back-to-School Fairs with snacks, books through our partnership with First Book, and mobile vaccine clinics. They'll also go door to door to let the community know that schools are safe and ready for students to return this fall.

With every door knock and every conversation, we are trying not only to bring students back to school, but to heal the fractures in our communities.

I've been involved in a lot of campaigns. I have never seen an effort to connect schools with families and communities on this scale. Our members rock. And if you're interested in being part of a Back to School for All campaign, go to aft.org/renaissance.

II. The Freedom to Thrive.

We know it's not just about returning to school; we need the supports to help students recover—socially, emotionally and academically. This is also an opportunity to reimagine teaching and learning to focus on what sparks students' passion, nurtures critical thinking and brings learning to life.

There was an epidemic of anxiety and depression among young people even before the stress and isolation caused by COVID-19. Many more students will return to school this year with even greater needs.

Our affiliates have been fighting for long-term commitments to get more of the nurses, counselors, psychologists, speech and language professionals and other professionals we know our students need. And I am grateful to President Biden for securing the funding to do this.

But some school officials say they won't invest in these essential personnel, not because kids don't need them—they do—but because the funding could go away. It's time to stop being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Let's use this money as a down payment to give our kids what they need. And keep fighting for long-term investments like fully funding Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

And let's expand community schools, embed them everywhere. Community schools enable equity by connecting families to services right in the school. From homework help and after-school care, to medical and mental health services, and housing and legal assistance. We saw just how essential community schools are when COVID-19 hit. Services, structures and relationships were in place from day one, and they helped lessen the fallout of the pandemic.

At Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, a community school in the Bronx, the family engagement coordinator, social workers and other staff worked with community partners to address barriers to remote learning and to provide virtual services like tutoring, college coaching sessions and mental health services. They helped families access food and housing assistance.

Many families with students at Harlem Park Elementary and Middle School in Baltimore, another community school, were on the edge of crisis before the pandemic. Harlem Park utilized its "family tree," a network of mental health organizations, social workers and other experts, to help families in crisis so parents have lots of support. A school monitor who is also a DJ put on a virtual dance party every week to break the grind and loneliness of learning from home. And every morning, Harlem Park staff met on Zoom to do breathing exercises and check in with each other.

Community schools not only help meet students' and families' basic needs, they have positive effects on attendance, grade advancement and graduation, and reducing disciplinary incidents. In addition to New York City and Baltimore, AFT affiliates have worked with school districts to expand community schools, from Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Houston, to Brooklyn Center, St. Paul, Deer River and Duluth, Minn.; and Massena, Rome and Saranac Lake, N.Y. Last month, the Los Angeles Unified Board of Education voted to increase the number of community schools in the district to 70 over the next three years. Thank you, United Teachers Los Angeles. Many more students and families could benefit from this wraparound support, and that's why the AFT is calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025. And we are using our Innovation Fund this year, as we have in the past, to help seed more.

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There is a lot of concern about "learning loss" and even warnings about a "lost generation" because of COVID-19. There have been widespread disruptions to learning during remote instruction, and equity gaps have grown even wider. This is especially true for students with special needs.

But this deficit mindset disregards what students have learned this year. It assumes there won't be any efforts to help students recover or that those efforts will be insufficient. And it ignores all that educators like you have done—working past the point of exhaustion the last 16 months.

I'm concerned that these fears could lead some officials to double down on standardized testing.

What we should be doubling down on right now is lowering class size and providing the other conditions and tools educators need to meet the academic needs of our students. Let's start by letting teachers administer curriculum-linked diagnostic assessments. This will help teachers customize supports to accelerate learning.

We need to take a cue from the countries that outpace us and rethink our accountability systems. The purpose of large-scale standardized testing is to measure how systems are working writ large. It's not for measuring individual kids, schools or teachers. Standardized testing doesn't help kids learn, and it doesn't help teachers teach. We need to measure what matters.

So we are calling on Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to form a task force to rethink how we address both assessment and accountability.

I am a huge fan of project-based learning. Where it's done well, assessing knowledge is a seamless part of the learning process itself, often through performance-based tasks. I'm pretty confident teachers would do more of that—if they had the authority, the tools, and the time that currently is eaten up by standardized testing.

Career and technical education is an example of project-based instruction. Ninety-five percent of students concentrating in CTE programs graduate from high school, about 10 percentage points higher than the national average. And survey [data](#) show that CTE students are more satisfied with their educational experience than students not involved in CTE.

Students have surprised themselves by yearning to be back in school this year. Let's stoke their excitement about learning with interesting projects and learning that feels important and worthwhile, so that kids wake up every day eager to be in school. Our wonderful secretary-treasurer, Fedrick Ingram—a high school band director and a talented musician in his own right, will talk in our closing session about how music and the arts can connect students to school.

As much as we want to feel “normal” again, we can do better than the old “normal” of narrow test-based accountability systems, vast inequality and chronic underfunding. We have a rare opportunity to reimagine public schooling in America and to pursue bold initiatives that will help all our kids thrive.

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The foundation for all of this is the first of the “three R's”—reading.

Reading is at the root of so much that we want for children. It's the key to unleash their curiosity, to dig deep into their interests, and to learn critical content like science, arts, history and literature.

More than 20 years ago, the AFT zeroed in on the need for educators—whatever their subject or level—to know more about research-based literacy. We shared the research, trained thousands of teachers, and a little publication called *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science* by the amazing Louisa Moats became a staple of reading programs across the country.

Today we know even more about how the science of reading works and how much it matters. Before the pandemic, under-resourced schools were struggling to provide high-quality reading instruction and needed academic supports. Students who have already been marginalized must have the academic knowledge and skills needed for strong literacy.

So we are redoubling the AFT’s commitment to help our members improve their instruction in literacy. Our incomparable executive vice president, Evelyn DeJesus, will lead this campaign. We’ll be rolling it out over the next several months, starting with an online hub of updated resources, a series of back-to-school webinars, and a survey that will let you tell us what you need to support struggling readers, including books through our partnership with First Book.

And, by the way, Louisa updated her great work; we published it in *American Educator*, and there are two roundtables at TEACH on this.

And speaking of First Book, next month is the 10th anniversary of the AFT-First Book partnership, which began with a book distribution in Charleston, W.Va. In the decade since, more than 500 AFT locals have been involved, and together we have distributed more than 7.3 million books to children who might otherwise not have books of their own. And Title I teachers can always get a discount on the First Book website. To commemorate, we’ll be back in Charleston, where we’ll have a big book distribution event and set up care closets in three schools with personal care items, school supplies and other necessities. And we are providing Reimagining Public Education grants of \$5,000 each to use for books and other resources from First Book to support students and educators in the coming school year.

Civics, democracy and truth

I am a social studies teacher, a lawyer and a believer in democracy, so please allow me a point of personal privilege to dwell on civics before I end.

I don’t mean dry, didactic lessons on topics such as how a bill becomes a law. Young people learn how to be citizens in a democracy by actually engaging in the work of citizenship—examining an issue that is important in their own lives, studying what different parts of government and civil society can do to address it, and advocating for policies to make change.

The AFT’s new Educating for Democratic Citizenship program aims to put powerful civics education tools directly into teachers’ hands. We have selected 20 teacher fellows from three school districts—ABC Unified in Los Angeles County; Dearborn, Mich.; and New York City—to participate in this program. These accomplished fellows will work in cohorts to produce materials for civics education centered around inquiry learning and action civics, which will go into an online library with materials available through Share My Lesson. Civics content will be created by and for teachers from elementary to high school. Stay tuned.

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More than ever, young people need skills to be better consumers of information. A new national study by researchers at Stanford University shows an alarming inability by high school students to detect fake news, suggesting a need to better prepare students for a world filled with a continual flow of disinformation.

In one of the study’s tasks, students viewed an anonymously produced video that circulated on Facebook in 2016 claiming to show ballot stuffing during Democratic primary elections. Researchers asked students to use the internet to determine whether the video provided strong evidence of voter fraud. Just three of the study’s more than 3,000 participants—less than one-tenth of 1 percent—were able to find the true source of the video, which actually showed footage of voter fraud in Russia.

Being able to discern fact from fiction is crucial to being an informed citizen. And civic responsibility is essential right now. We are witnesses to widespread attacks on the right to vote and the most serious threats to our democracy in our lifetimes. I have watched with alarm as these threats have proliferated and reached the highest levels of government.

I can see the dome of the United States Capitol from the window of my office. Exactly six months ago—on Jan. 6—I was in my office as insurrectionists stormed the Capitol with the intention of stopping the legitimate certification of the presidential election—and some with the intention of harming and even killing elected officials.

The seat of our democracy was attacked by violent insurgents. Capitol Police officers were assaulted and overrun. This was not tourism, as one congressman described it. This was terrorism. The truth must not be obstructed; it must come out.

That's why it was deeply disappointing that not enough Republican senators would join Democrats so the country could establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack. We are asking everyone who wants American democracy to endure: Don't thwart this process; let's discover the truth.

Which brings me to another attempt to suppress the truth—the new culture campaign some lawmakers (and Fox News) are using to distort history, limit learning and stoke fears about our public schools.

Let's be clear: critical race theory is not taught in elementary schools or high schools. It's a method of examination taught in law school and college that helps analyze whether systemic racism exists—and, in particular, whether it has an effect on law and public policy. But culture warriors are labeling any discussion of race, racism or discrimination as CRT to try to make it toxic. They are bullying teachers and trying to stop us from teaching students accurate history.

This harms students. These culture warriors want to deprive students of a robust understanding of our common history. This will put students at a disadvantage in life by knocking a big hole in their understanding of our country and the world.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder likens it to the “memory laws” of Soviet and other repressive regimes. Authoritarians take actions designed to manipulate interpretation of the past, assert a mandatory view of events and forbid discussions of accurate historical facts.

But you, the professionals in the classroom, the people who use your expertise to help our students succeed—you know better. We teach history, not hate.

Because no matter our color, background or ZIP code, we want our kids to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what's right. We want to raise young people who can understand facts, study the truth, examine diverse perspectives and draw their own conclusions—in other words, who can think critically.

Teaching America's history requires considering all the facts available to us—including those that are uncomfortable—like the history of enslavement and discrimination toward people of color and people perceived as different. Years ago, our country unified against Holocaust deniers; we must unite again to address racism and its long-term effects.

By the way, students who were recently polled agree. Eighty-two percent of college students overall say public schools should teach “that patterns of racism are ingrained in law and other institutions,” including almost half of college Republicans.

These laws restricting what we teach impinge on educators' professional obligations—our obligation to teach honest history, as well as to teach current events, like the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. And it impinges on our obligation to teach in accordance with the standards that each state adopts, which, of course, is a requirement for teacher licensure.

Many of the same lawmakers who are so hell-bent on assessments based on state standards are now passing contradictory legislation that forbids teachers from teaching some of those standards. A new Texas law, for example, states that teachers may not teach the concept that “slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States.” Huh? How do we then teach the Civil War, the the *Dred Scott* decision, the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, or June-teenth?

Mark my words: Our union will defend any member who gets in trouble for teaching honest history. We have a legal defense fund ready to go. And we are preparing for litigation as we speak. Teaching the truth is not radical or wrong. Distorting history and threatening educators for teaching the truth is what is truly radical and wrong.

Conclusion

Today, tragically, the United States is dangerously divided. But our divides are not unbridgeable. People can disagree and still see each other's humanity. We all lose when we demonize and otherize our neighbors. We win when we put hope over fear—when we seek the well-being not just of ourselves and the people we love, but of everyone in this country that we love. Remember the Pledge of Allegiance, that ends with “liberty and justice for all.”

When your students walk through the door of your classroom this fall, they will bring with them the scars of a long struggle we wish they hadn't had to endure. You'll help them recover, and to feel safe and welcome. Your students will also bring with them their dreams and their potential. You'll get back to what brought you to this hope-filled profession—to teach the future caretakers of our environment, the sparks who ignite our innovations, the tenders of our global relationships, the healers of our sick, the creators of our arts and the teachers who will follow us.

You are your students' lifeline—you make it possible to connect what they know and what they can do. The past 16 months have been incredibly difficult. I hope you know that what you have done and what you will do are vitally important. We are in this together. Colleague to colleague, AFT member to AFT member, together we can do so much that would be impossible on our own.

Thank you. I hope you enjoy the incredibly rich offerings of this year's TEACH.