



A Union of Professionals

AFT PSRP

Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel

School and College
Support Staff Deserve

RESPECT

CONCEPTUALIZE,
COMMUNICATE,
CONNECT...

A stylized illustration of a hand with fingers wrapped around a blue arrow pointing to the right. The hand is composed of several overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in shades of blue, yellow, and light blue. The arrow is a solid blue shape with a white outline.

and do
something
about it!



A Union of Professionals

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

OUR MISSION

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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To our school and college support staff:

Thank you for going above and beyond every single day. We see you, we value you, and we know our schools and colleges simply would not run without you.

As we've said time and time again—you fix it, cook it, clean it, drive it, type it, file it and plant it—and you do it all while supporting your students. You are mentors, friends, confidants and, quite literally, the backbone of our institutions. And you do it all with incredible grace.

For all that, and more, you deserve a voice on the job, dignity and respect—be that in the form of family-sustaining wages, decent hours, quality benefits that help you plan for retirement and access good healthcare, or safe and welcoming working conditions.

That's at the heart of this union: ensuring that everyone has access to an opportunity to thrive and accomplishing together what is impossible to do alone.

We hope you see yourself and your union family in these pages, doing the important work of advocating for yourselves and telling your stories.

You deserve that recognition, respect and dignity, today and every day. The AFT will always have your back.

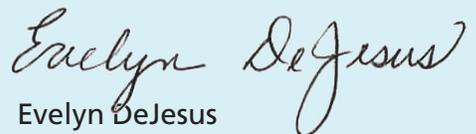
In solidarity,



Randi Weingarten
President



Fedrick C. Ingram
Secretary-Treasurer



Evelyn DeJesus
Executive Vice President



PSRP

supportive food service worker
 empowering **PARAPROFESSIONAL**
 united for our students
CUSTODIAN proud
 vital **super hero**
MAKING OUR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGS RUN
 secretary **FRIEND**
 powerful **mentor**
bus driver MAINTENANCE WORKER
 caring jack-of-all-trades knowledgeable
team

Introduction

School and college support staff are the backbone of our institutions. Whether you are the bus driver waking before the sun rises to get ready for your route, the clerical staff working behind the scenes ensuring everything runs smoothly, the paraprofessional sitting beside a student encouraging them, the maintenance person fixing a leaky faucet or the food service worker driving away hunger with a healthy meal and a smile, the dedication, support and professionalism school and college support staff show every day keep our students learning and our institutions running.

Yet too often school and college support staff don't get the respect at work that we deserve.

Imagine a world where school and college support staff:

- Earn a living wage.
- Receive professional development tailored to their job and professional needs.
- Have a respected voice in the workplace.
- Are given the tools, time and resources to do their job well and support their students.
- Enjoy first-class healthcare, pensions, educational opportunities and paid time off.

We shouldn't have to imagine this world. Working together as unionists, we can build a workplace that treats us with the professional respect we all deserve.

This toolkit is designed to help you:

- 1. CONCEPTUALIZE** what respect means to your members.
- 2. COMMUNICATE** those stories to a broad audience.
- 3. CONNECT** those stories in a way that makes our work lives better.

Included in the appendix, you will find tools like the action planning and storytelling worksheets that will help you conceptualize respect with your members, communicate with a broad audience and connect lived experiences in a way that makes everyone feel more respected at work.

PSRPs Make the Difference!



“I am a paraprofessional. I assist, support and work with students to help them reach their goals. I not only assist them with their academics, I also provide social and emotional support. I am often the person closest to the students. I care deeply for all my students and provide them a safe and nurturing environment so they can be successful. My passion in life has always been to work with students with special needs. Being a paraprofessional is more than a job for me. It’s a vocation. ”

**—Jill Zangao,
New Bedford, Mass.**

“I am a maintenance worker. You can think of me as a jack-of-all-trades; I keep school infrastructure running. On any given day, I might be repairing a lock, oiling a door hinge, maintaining equipment, sharpening tools or mowing the field. I am always running behind the scenes to make sure our buildings are secure and comfortable. While my primary focus may be the equipment and hardware of the school, I also have conversations with students in the hallways and mentor those who may want to pursue a career in the skilled trades. I know the students in our schools, and I always keep my eyes out for students who may be struggling with something at school or at home. I want all students to feel comfortable at school. Everyone in maintenance here is all about the kiddos. ”

**—Patrick Burns,
Ashland (Ore.) School District**



“As a custodian, I take pride in keeping our school clean and sanitized. I was very proud of my role this past year in keeping our students and staff as safe as possible by making sure all surfaces were thoroughly cleaned. ”

**—Raul Gallegos,
San Diego Community
College District**

“As secretaries and clerks, we are the moms, dads, doctors, nurses, lawyers, referees, psychologists, accountants, judges, cooks (most of us keep snacks around just in case), and the list goes on and on. The bottom line: We are the jacks-of-all-trades in our schools. ”

**—Rhonda Jones,
East St. Louis, Ill.**

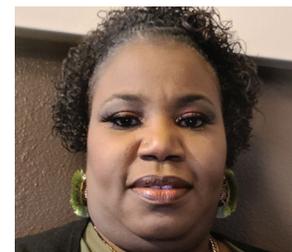


“I am a bus driver. My aide and I are usually the first school employees a student sees in the morning and the last ones they see at the end of the day. I work with an awesome aide on my bus, and I am so proud of everything that we do for our county and for our jobs—and that we work as a team. I work hard to be on time, know emergency procedures, monitor students and keep my eyes on the road, all while doing my best to be the best role model I can for our students. We see each student in a unique way because we’re privy to a viewpoint that not all school staff have—we see their neighborhoods and their friend groups, and we know that our students oftentimes need a bit more TLC in their lives. ”

**—Tena McElwain,
Monongalia, W. Va.**

“As a food service worker, I make sure hundreds of students are fed. Too many children come to school hungry, and hungry students can’t focus on all the things they need to learn. I do this work because feeding those who are hungry is just part of being a good human being. I want all kids to have healthy, balanced food when their minds and bodies are growing. We are building community at our school, and community takes care of each other; community feeds those who are hungry. I am proud of the work I do as part of our school community. ”

**—Yolanda Fisher,
Dallas**



CONCEPTUALIZE

Conceptualize what respect means to your members.

Everything we do as a union starts with a vision and a goal:

- How do we envision ourselves at work?
- What does it look like when we are treated with respect on the job?
- Would our workplaces need to change for us to feel respected? What would need to change?
- What could we do collectively to make our vision of a respectful workplace a reality?

Once we know the answer to these questions, we can begin building a plan that will get us to the workplace we deserve. Our plan should include concrete objectives and check-ins along the way to evaluate our progress. But before we begin building our plan, we need to determine what respect looks like to our members. Understanding what respect looks like will inform and direct all our work moving forward.

One of the best ways to determine what respect means to someone is to ask them. A well-crafted survey can tell you a lot about what your members think and whether they feel respected or disrespected at work.

Surveying your members with open-ended questions helps bring out powerful stories about what respect looks like to them. You can also use this to engage worksite leaders. Have the worksite leaders ask questions in person or over the phone. A back-and-forth dialogue allows for a deeper understanding of what respect looks like than if you only use a paper survey. Asking these questions in a one-on-one conversation allows you to build a connection with your members, and this helps to create a stronger union in the process.

Here are some examples of questions that can help you learn what respect looks and feels like to your members:

- What does respect in the workplace look like to you?
- What makes you feel appreciated at work?
- What could the employer do to show you respect?
- Do you feel respected by your colleagues and supervisor?
- Have you ever felt disrespected at work? What could have been done differently to make you feel respected instead?
- Would you be willing to participate in a public campaign for more respect and dignity at work?
- What sort of activities or actions would you be willing to take in order to feel more respected at work?

You can use the planning framework found in the appendix as a guide or reach out to the PSRP Department (psrp@aft.org) for help in building your plan and action steps.

There are many ways to ask your members what respect means to them. If you don't want to survey members, perhaps you begin a conversation at a membership meeting. Or maybe you decide to do an arts and crafts project and get people to draw what respect looks like to them. Get creative! The key to this is to get people to conceptualize and imagine what respect looks like to them!

Once you have conceptualized what respect looks like, it's time to build our plan and engage our members in actions that will help us win a respectful workplace.



COMMUNICATE

Let's think through how we communicate with our members and the public about how we should be treated at work and what workplace respect looks like.

In this section, you will find:

1. How to turn a concept—like respect—into something more tangible and concrete.
2. Examples of various communication tools to help lift up that message.

Storytelling is the best way to share our members' experiences with our colleagues and the larger community. Through storytelling, we can demonstrate what respect means and how our workplaces should look and feel when everyone receives the respect and dignity they deserve.

Storytelling is personal and should come from the lived experiences of our members.

What common threads did you learn when you surveyed and/or talked with your membership? How do those responses tell a story about your members, your local and what you are fighting for as a union?

This is your message, your story—the reason you are embarking on a respect campaign.

We are fighting for respect in our workplaces because _____.
Our members care about their work and deserve _____.

Storytelling is about letting everyone know what your members do on a daily basis and all the ways that they help students and the community!

Once we have a bank of personal stories, we should think about the most impactful way to share them.

Create simple visuals! Use pictures to make each narrative personal. Each school support staff member impacts the lives of students. Put a face to the story so that the audience is able to make a more personal connection with school support staff.

How can you share stories?

- Celebrate a school or college support staff member of the month with a staff party.
- Create a PSRP calendar highlighting one member each month and the values they bring to the district/college.

- Create a union bulletin board that highlights members and the work they do.
- Create a flyer or newsletter that tells stories about what you do; give it out at school board meetings or share it in as many places as you can.
- Post stories on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.

The goal is to share these stories with as many people as possible. This can help us advocate for the changes your members identified in the first step of your campaign.

AFT PSRP
A Union of Professionals
AFT PSRP
Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel

It's Not Just a Job, It's OUR Story

AFT paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) work hard to make sure our students receive a high-quality education every day all around the country. Most days, we go above and beyond to support our students and our schools.

What do you wish other people knew about you and the work you do?

Please also provide the following:
Name: _____ Job title: _____
School or worksite: _____
Local union: _____
Non-work email: _____ Phone number: _____

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This worksheet is a useful tool for helping your members tell their own personal respect and dignity narrative. You should use this tool to build a bank of stories to use throughout your campaign.

Things to consider as you develop your messaging strategy:

1. Who is the target audience for a particular message?

- Teachers or other school staff
- Parents
- Administrators
- Community groups
- School board members

2. What format does your target audience engage with the most?

- Flyers
- Bulletin boards
- Newsletters
- Social media
- Board meetings/staff meeting messages
- T-shirts or buttons
- Newspaper articles or op-eds
- Decorated doors/desks/worksites

3. How will you engage your members in the campaign to win respect and dignity at work?

- Find members to write articles for newsletters and blogs, etc.
- Share their stories on social media.
- Distribute buttons or T-shirts for members to wear.
- Go to school board meetings and speak publicly.
- Plan events like a rally for respect or a “walk-in” event where school and college staff share personal stories with the public.
- Speak with other school or college support staff to encourage them to join the campaign and share personal stories.
- Other: There are so many other ways to engage members. Be creative!

4. How can you engage the broader community—not just your members—in this respect campaign? Have you considered expanding the spokespeople to include community allies? School allies? Parents?

5. Where can respect at work lead you? *There is a planning worksheet in the appendix.*

Visualize where you want to go.

- How will you know that you have reached your goal?
- What will define this communications campaign as successful?
- What do you want your members to walk away with from this campaign?
- What do you want your schools and community to think about differently?
- When do you want to begin a respect campaign and begin building power?





Post about your story on social media.

AFT PSRP Division
@PSRP_AFT

Elementary school custodian just got his college degree — and was the fifth-grade commencement speaker. wapo.st/3puwqnD "Dedicate yourself to something you love, and follow your heart." at 39, Tylan Bailey is following his dream of becoming a physical education teacher.



AFT PSRP Division
@PSRP_AFT

The story of Mr. Butler giving the literal shoes off his feet so a student could walk in his graduation shows how important the relationships are between students and #PSRP members. wapo.st/3i8eUUJ Congratulations Daverius on your graduation!



AFT PSRP Division
@PSRP_AFT

Our members were a lifeline to families during months of social distancing. Meet the #PSRPProud members who "saved the school year" during the pandemic bit.ly/3jULidL Via @TIME #PSRPStrong



AFT PSRP Division
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The #PSRPStrong members of @AFTUnion are the backbone of our schools. Check out this blog written by @whittle_jeff on how #PSRPProud members are serving their community and students. sharemylesson.com/blog/paraprofe...#1u



AFT PSRP Division
@PSRP_AFT

How do we get back to campus after a year and a half of a pandemic that still threatens our well-being? bit.ly/3svT54p What happens when students are afraid to return? How do faculty and staff keep everyone safe? Our members are thinking on all of these and making plans!



aft.org
Faculty, staff rise to meet a tough back-to-school season

AFT - American Federation of Teachers
April 7 · 🌐

We're not exaggerating when we say that our support staff members keep our schools running. Thank you to the paraprofessionals, the cafeteria workers, the bus drivers, the custodial staff, the clerks, the teacher aids, and so many other members that help our children thrive. Today, we celebrate you and your hard work!



AFT - American Federation of Teachers
May 7 · 🌐

School lunch heroes are making sure every student regardless of geography or demography has the food they need to thrive. To honor our school nutrition workers on #SchoolLunchHeroDay, let's make those meals permanent- no kids should ever go hungry at school.

Write to your lawmaker and tell them: Make universal school meals permanent. <https://actionnetwork.org/.../universal-school-meals-for.../>



AFT - American Federation of Teachers
February 22 · 🌐

Throughout the pandemic, school bus drivers have been delivering WiFi, lesson materials, food, and hope to students and families alike. As part of #PSW21, let's celebrate our school bus drivers today! #PublicSchoolProud #PSRPProud #ThankSupportStaff



AFT - American Federation of Teachers
November 17, 2020 · 🌐

They clean it. They cook it. They fix it. They drive it. They paint it. They type it. They schedule it. They plant it. They file it. No matter what, our school support staffers are there for students, and this pandemic has been no different.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our school support staff has gone above and beyond to make sure students had their classwork, connectivity, and healthy meals even when they weren't in the classroom. That's why today and every day, we #ThankSupportStaff for their dedication and their hard work. #SRPRecognitionDay





Using my paraprofessional voice

AFT Follow Mar 19 · 7 min read



By Cerssandra McPherson

I've never had a problem with public speaking. Looking back to grade school, my teachers always said I talked too much. But my sixth-grade teacher, I was her favorite student. She brought this play to class, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." I got to play the apprentice.

In church at Easter, I was always the one who wanted the longest speech. I don't say that public speaking comes naturally to me because I'm always nervous as all get-out. But I love it. I'm one of those people who can make a speech using only an index card with a few lines on it, and it is partly a gift. But speaking in front of people — like we do as AFT national trainers — I get excited, I do.

My career as a paraprofessional began the same way it does for a lot of... elementary school, and I would



Worthy Wage Day is not about wages. It's about worth.



AFT Follow May 1, 2019 · 4 min read ★

By Amy DuBois

I was game to try anything. That was my mindset going into a job training program 24 years ago. It was preschool that caught my attention, so I volunteered there for a short time before they hired me. Being around those children made my heart very happy.

There is no amount of money that could possibly make a difference in the way that I do my job. I love being with these children and their

Share your story in an op-ed, newsletter or a blog.

Not "just" a paraprofessional

By Karen Arthmann

I am not "just a" paraprofessional. I am not "just a" youth assistant, like some of the students like to toss out there when put in the awkward position of being held accountable for their actions and possibly disciplined by their administrators.

I am their teacher, their mom, their protector, their nurturer, their taskmaster. I am a professional. I am a paraprofessional.

I take my job seriously, but not myself. I use humor to diffuse

potentially ugly situations, and the students respond to it most of the time. I go to work every day to meet the many challenges of a large and diverse community, and I take care of my students and the staff of my building. There are many of you out there just like me. I see you every day. I hear your stories and I see your dedication, and I am so proud to be one of you. None of us is a "just a..."

We are all professionals. We all

work hard without looking for kudos, which are all too often not forthcoming. We work long hours for too little pay and increasingly diminishing benefits. We do it uncomplainingly and with energy and enthusiasm for our jobs and our students. Don't ever let anyone get away with calling you "just" an anything. We are school-related professionals, and we are proud of it. Don't ever forget who we are and what we do. I don't.

CONNECT

How do we connect our respect campaign to building union power?

Earlier, you defined: **We are fighting for respect in our workplaces because _____.** **Our members care about their work and deserve _____.** This can help you connect this campaign back to how and why the union is fighting for respect on the job.

We are fighting for respect in our workplaces because:

- **I am tired of being overlooked.** —Victoria S.
- **I'd like to be able to buy new shoes for my own kids.** —Juan G.
- **I want to keep doing this work that I love.**—LaToia W.
- **If I don't do it, no one else will, and then who will look out for our students?** —Tony L.
- **We deserve it. Period.** —Susan H

Our members care about their work and deserve:

- **I deserve a job that pays more than a poverty wage.** —Charles H.
- **I deserve to be given professional development opportunities just like teachers.** —LoriBeth A.
- **I deserve to be given personal protective equipment so I don't get sick.** —Montie W.
- **I deserve to have healthcare that I can afford.** —Shawn M.
- **I deserve to have access to a school computer to check my work email.** —Lisa R.

As you develop a plan to connect this campaign to building union power, be mindful of both short-term and long-term goals. A short-term goal could be as simple as making a school or college support staff feel seen, heard or appreciated. A longer-term goal could be building up to an increase in pay.

As members of the union, we are here to support each other. When we stand together, we can shine a light on how we make the difference in our schools and communities. As we showcase all the ways we make our schools great, we can also show the public how our work has been consistently overlooked and undervalued. We deserve to be treated with respect, a living wage, affordable healthcare, appropriate professional development, a safe working environment and a retirement that allows us to age with dignity.

The sky is the limit. Imagine. Dream. **CONCEPTUALIZE** what a respect campaign could look like. Make a plan for the best way to spread our message, and then **COMMUNICATE** the stories of how school and college support staff go above and beyond and how we deserve to be respected at work. Together, we can **CONNECT** these stories in a way that builds union power. As a union, we are stronger together. Together, we can advocate for a better workplace, a workplace where members feel respected and have the dignity on the job that they deserve.

The AFT's PSRP Department is here to support you. Don't hesitate to reach out so we can help you plan your local's respect campaign. Email us at psrp@aft.org or call 202-434-4696.

Appendix A: Action Planning Worksheet

What do you want to change by beginning a respect campaign? _____

How do you hope to change it? _____

What is your timeline? _____

Do you have a short-term goal (e.g., making someone smile, celebrating PSRP Day, surveying membership)?

Do you have a long-term goal (e.g., increasing wages, getting more full-time workers, getting paid for professional development, feeling seen at school board meetings)?

What two actions will help you accomplish your short-term goal?

- 1.
- 2.

What two actions will help you accomplish your long-term goal?

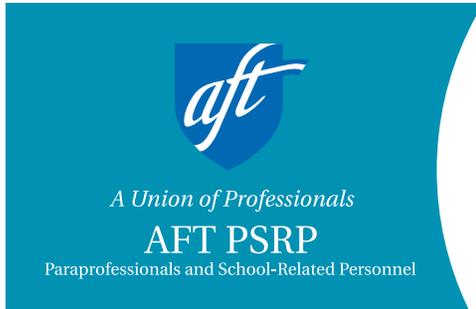
- 1.
- 2.

What communication tools do you think will be most useful (e.g., flyers, bulletin boards, social media)?

Earlier, we asked the following questions. Here is some space to think through the details regarding your answers. Visualize where you want to go.

- How will you know that you have reached your goal?
- What will define this communications campaign as successful?
- What do you want your members to walk away with from this campaign?
- What do you want your schools and community to think about differently?
- When do you want to begin a respect campaign and begin building power?

Appendix B: Your Story Worksheet



**It's Not Just a Job,
It's OUR Story**



AFT paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) work hard to make sure our students receive a high-quality education every day all around the country. Most days, **we go above and beyond to support our students and our schools.**

We want to share your stories and amplify all the ways that you make your communities better. It is important that everyone who cares about our schools and students knows about the many contributions you make. **Your story is powerful and galvanizing.** Take a few minutes to tell your story and share the ways that you make a difference every day in big and small ways. Answer any or all of these questions!

What are one or two tasks, activities or duties you perform at work that go above and beyond what is expected of you (e.g., innovative interaction with parents, volunteering in nontraditional ways, improving your work environment, supporting your colleagues, maintaining student safety, etc.)?

Describe a situation where you know you made a difference in your school.

Describe how your work has made a positive difference in the lives of students and/or the community.

What makes you feel the most fulfilled or satisfied about your work?

What do you wish other people knew about you and the work you do?

Please also provide the following:

Name: _____ Job title: _____

School or worksite: _____

Local union: _____

Non-work email: _____ Phone number: _____



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American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
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