



A Union of Professionals

A background image of a man with a beard, wearing a striped shirt, looking towards the left. He is in a meeting room with a whiteboard in the background. The whiteboard has various diagrams and sticky notes on it. The lighting is warm and slightly blurred.

Making Connections,

Building Capacity

How AFT Supports
Our Members and
Our Profession Through
Educational Issues



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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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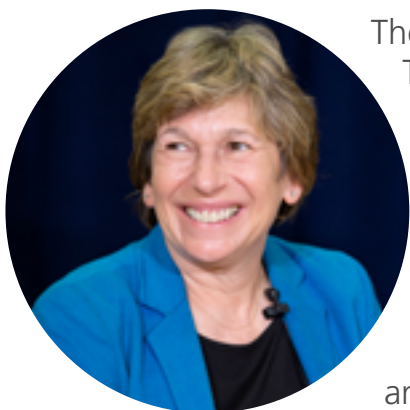
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Introduction

Randi Weingarten, AFT President



The American Federation of Teachers fights for a better life for all and for the next generation to do even better. We fight for good jobs and the right to a union; for high-quality and well-resourced healthcare, public services, and public schools and colleges; to counter discrimination and division; and to protect the right to vote, the integrity of elections, and our imperiled democracy. And we do it to protect our beloved institutions, including our public schools, as we endeavor to make them places where educators want to work, parents want to send their kids, and students can truly thrive.

Our fight for the next generation begins with our educator and school staff members working tirelessly to prepare our children and young people for bright futures in college, career and life. At the AFT, it's our job to help those teachers, specialized instructional support professionals, school staff, and early childhood members access the tools and resources they need to advocate for themselves, their profession and the people they serve. In other words, in Educational Issues, we help teachers become better teachers.

Developed in response to member needs, our portfolio is both broad and deep—spanning professional learning and member engagement; policy,

advocacy and technical assistance; school improvement and development; and resources and dissemination—and supported by a team with the knowledge and commitment to make a difference from the national level to the classroom.

It is our hope that, after reading this report and learning more about the myriad ways we support our members, you'll be inspired to get involved. Whether you decide to renew a membership, check out our online resources, sign up for a webinar, attend a conference, or partner to support our work, we hope you'll stand with us as we fight for what we know our students and public schools need and deserve.

Together, we can turn a unifying aspiration—a better life for our children, our communities and ourselves—into action.

Our Mission

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, health-care 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.



For more than 100 years, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), an affiliate of the AFL-CIO, has championed our members, starting with teachers. Today, the AFT represents 1.7 million members in more than 3,000 local affiliates nationwide, including preK-12 teachers, paraprofessionals and other school related personnel; higher education, public service employees; and nurses and other healthcare professionals.

Teachers want a professional organization that helps them do their jobs better. By providing our local union affiliates and individual members with programs that meet their needs, the AFT strives to fill that role. We connect educators and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) in the preK-12 field with best practices through research-based professional learning; policy analysis; classroom resources; consultation; school improvement initiatives; labor-management strategies; technical assistance; events that bring together members, leaders, advocates and experts; and more. Our work supports our members' efforts to strengthen the schools where they work—and it builds the union as a leading voice on issues affecting the profession.

If that sounds like a lot, that's because it is.

The body of work is extensive, because the AFT is committed to doing whatever it takes to help our members do their jobs better; build their profession; and advocate for themselves, their peers, and the people they serve. Our team connects the latest research to its practical classroom applications, enabling educators to implement best practices. We also respond to ad hoc requests for support in response to member needs at the local and state levels.

This report highlights some of the work AFT does on behalf of our members, specifically preK-12 educators and specialized instructional support personnel, through AFT's Educational Issues Department. This report is divided into four broad segments:

- Professional learning and member engagement;
- School improvement and development;
- Policy, advocacy and technical assistance; and
- Resources

Our members are passionate, dedicated professionals who are committed to giving every student an outstanding public education, often despite significant constraints and challenges. Their work inspires us at the AFT each day, and fills us with optimism. We are honored to support our members as they strive to nurture and educate our country's future citizens.

Educational Issues: Recent Highlights

- Trained more than 1,000 members as trainers in AFT's Professional Learning Program, thus expanding our reach to thousands of additional members.
- Converted and delivered 15 critical professional development courses in an online format.
- Welcomed a record number of 70,000 registrations for our Share My Lesson virtual conference in 2021.
- Supported members from 36 local affiliates across 18 states through the 2021 Summer Educator Academy.
- Served a record high 2.4 million visitors to Colorín Colorado in 2020.
- Provided resources in 16 languages through Colorín Colorado.
- Reviewed reopening plans, provided technical assistance and collective bargaining, research, and policy support to countless affiliates on a wide range of issues.
- Hosted and presented in hundreds of member-focused webinars, conference platforms and virtual convenings
- Worked with nearly 70 affiliates on community schools development, impacting nearly 900 schools nationwide.
- Wrote and contributed to reports to share the experiences, learning, needs, and advice of our members and their union on matters ranging from simultaneous teaching to safe school reopening.
- Attracted philanthropic support from some of the highest profile foundations in the field of preK-12 education.
- Met pandemic-related needs of 35 affiliates through the AFT Innovation Fund's grantmaking, totaling more than \$1 million in just 12 months, with more grants yet to be awarded.

How Does the AFT Engage Members and Support Their Ongoing Professional Learning?

AFT Professional Learning Program for Educators

The AFT has long recognized the need for educators to have access to high-quality professional learning that is ongoing, job-embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative. Our peer-led, evidence-based **Professional Learning Program** is AFT's major effort to improve student achievement by making a difference in practitioners' performance and professional growth.

The AFT supports local affiliates through AFT staff experts and our national cadre of trainers, who deliver professional development locally. AFT staff also help our local affiliates collaborate with their districts and partner with their educators to design professional development programs that are relevant, timely and responsive to their current needs. We offer more than 50 courses that range from weeklong intensive, graduate-level courses to short, focused, just-in-time training modules. Each course and module in the program:

- Is rooted in evidence-based educational, cognitive and social science research;
- Is guided by experts in the field and designed by front-line educators who know firsthand what goes on in classrooms and schools every day;
- Provides educators with the necessary tools and resources to make complex decisions and select the most effective strategies for meeting each student's academic, social and behavioral needs; and
- Connects excellent teaching practice with broader educational policy issues and campaigns.



"I like the diversity of trainers, the focus on students and research as the foundation of this learning. The course provides opportunities to reflect on our practices and strategies aligned with our beliefs and culture. The length and time commitment was perfect with meaningful coursework in the evenings."

—Donald Thompson,
Washington Teachers' Union,
Foundations of Effective Teaching

A Snapshot of Professional Learning Topics

Our professional development courses and modules address the most pressing needs of teachers and SISPs through a continuous process of growth and improvement of practice. Through AFT's Professional Learning Program, we seek to empower individual educators and groups of educators to make complex decisions; to identify and solve problems;



and to connect theory, practice and student outcomes. In the following section, we will highlight just a few examples of the ways our courses engage with key issues and topic areas using a research-based framework.

Identity development

A child's life doesn't stop at the school door; children may bring a variety of stressors or challenges from home that may affect the brain's ability to learn. Based on extensive research from the science of learning and development, AFT's identity development modules recognize the ways in which students and teachers alike bring their identities into the classroom and encourage educators to embrace student identities, celebrate diversity, and give educators strategies to support positive change.

"This has been an opportunity for me to learn more, stretch myself, and identify ways that my work intersects with others who are passionate about supporting students. It has been both helpful and rewarding getting to know how to affirm students based on their identities. I didn't know what that meant at first, but I've solidified my own understanding and I now have resources and strategies to take back to teachers for students. I am grateful for the personal and professional growth, and I now have this new network of peers. This opportunity has meant a lot to me and has allowed me to better support educators and the students I serve."

—Audra McPhillips,
West Warwick Teachers Alliance

Strategies for Student Success (SSS)

SSS modules offer just-in-time training in three-hour blocks focused on teaching a single concept with direct alignment to a teacher evaluation rubric. These actionable strategies can be put into action right away, across any content area; teachers can start using what they learn the very next day.

Here are some examples:

- Activating Learning in All Disciplines
- Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
- Differentiating Instruction
- Making Parents and Guardians Partners in Educating Students
- Student Engagement
- Teach Them to Think

[Take a look at our full catalog of SSS modules.](#)

"This is one of the few trainings that I have attended that I feel I can actually apply and have not wasted any time."

—Anonymous, Strategies for Student Success





What Is “Professional Learning”?

While the terms “professional development” and “professional learning” are often used synonymously, they are different. Professional development typically consists of generalized workshops, lectures or seminars. In contrast, professional learning is continuous improvement that occurs daily in schools, focusing on educators’ everyday work, strengthening their capacity, and increasing student results. It engages educators as active learners in a process that continues over time.¹

To view the wide range of research-based, teacher-developed, customizable professional learning courses the AFT offers, [check out our full professional learning catalog](#).

1. Killion, Joellen. “Terms Carry Meaning.” Kentucky Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://education.ky.gov/teachers/PD/Documents/Terms%20Carry%20Meaning-%20PL%20vs%20PD.docx> Accessed Oct. 5, 2021.

“It is SO AWESOME that our district supports that as well as our union supporting these AFT classes and courses. I can’t wait to teach this course to other educators in my district!”

—Kevin J.,
Mounds View Education Association,
Thinking Math 3-5

Trauma/bereavement/grief

AFT members consistently indicate that supporting students' mental health—including the needs of grieving students—is a top area in which they need additional support, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. To meet this need, the AFT offers training and resources in a variety of formats. For example, our “10 Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Heal” course was revamped for remote delivery in 2020. Specifically, AFT’s Grief-Sensitive Educator project, based on one of the skills in the course, connects educators—members and nonmembers—to training and resources available to support bereaved students. Nearly 1,000 educators from 151 affiliates, in 40 states and territories, as well as eight other countries received Grief-Sensitive Educator training in 2021.

“I was really impressed with this course. The amount of information squeezed into a few weeks is admirable. It was all useful research and concrete teaching strategies, and I appreciate not just your hard knowledge and efficient delivery, but the fact that you clearly value your own and my time. I wish all teachers had to take this course!”

—Jaime Rich, Education Austin,
10 Trauma-Informed Strategies to
Help Students Heal

“My entire building is a school for students with severe emotional impairments, so this training is key for our whole staff.”

—Jennifer Zager, Macomb
Intermediate Federation of Teachers,
10 Trauma-Informed Strategies
to Help Students Heal

English language learners

To support the growing percentage of students in our country who are English language learners (ELLs), the AFT has developed a robust collection of professional learning courses to support educators who work with this population, including resources for teachers, tutors and other school personnel.

According to the [Council of Great City Schools](#), 1 in 10 students today is an ELL, a percentage that is expected to grow to one in four by 2025. Yet because most of the educators who work with this population are neither bilingual nor certified to teach English as a second language, and most have not developed enough expertise through their college teacher preparation program to work with English language learners, AFT’s professional learning and development resources on ELLs are targeted to mainstream and general ed educators. Our professional development offerings include ELL 101, a 45-plus hour course focused on foundational principles of second language acquisition and essential knowledge of ELLs that all teachers must have to work effectively with this population of students.

“This is blowing my mind. I should do a Control-Alt-Delete on everything I thought I knew on this.”
—Betsy Sotomayor, Volusia United
Educators, Literacy and ELLs

“I've never seen this
information presented like
this. This is a game-changer.”

—Areli Schermerhorn,
Syracuse Teachers Association,
Literacy and ELLs



Looking to the Future: Professional Learning Courses

Not only does the AFT regularly update professional learning courses to reflect state-of-the-art research and best practices, but our team is always working to bring new professional learning experiences to our members using the same research-based approach. It's one of the ways we respond to our members' needs. Here are some of the new courses we're working on:

- Racial Literacy: A Framework for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)
- Civics Education and Engagement
- Reclaiming Assessment
- Thinking Like a Scientist



“These opportunities strengthen
my view of my union as supportive
of the needs of its members!”


—Kelly Hodson,
Anderson Federation of Teachers,
Transforming Your Teacher Identity

AFT-Sponsored Events

AFT-sponsored events are intensive versions of the kind of work we do year in, and year out. They encapsulate our key values: They are high quality, largely teacher-created, focused on issues relevant to teachers and students, and collaborative in nature.

We convene our constituencies in many ways throughout the year, from single conferences such as 2021's SISP Summit to regular events such as those outlined below.

TEACH Conference



**More than 1,500 participants
attend TEACH each biennium.**

The AFT's biennial TEACH (Together Educating America's Children) conference brings the public education community together to learn about current research and policy initiatives, highlight innovative work in education, hear from inspiring speakers and see technology demonstrations.

"TEACH has been an amazing opportunity to reflect on my teaching practices and how to help my students be active members of society. I can't wait to see my students in the fall and try some of the activities and routines I've learned."

—Sam Harmon,
Cincinnati Federation of Teachers

"I loved the variety of sessions. TEACH gave me renewed energy to jump-start this school year with great tools, motivation and materials!"

—Tricia Bush, Jefferson
Federation of Teachers

"I really enjoyed every session that I attended. I greatly appreciated the speakers sharing their personal experiences and providing us with resources on so many levels. I also appreciate the fact that we can go back and watch sessions that we were not able to attend."

—Lisa Renee Hindel,
North Suburban Teachers Union

Summer Educator Academy

Each summer, the AFT sponsors this 10-day event, which offers a variety of research-based professional learning. The Summer Educator Academy is based on the train-the-trainer model of professional development, which develops AFT's national bench of trainers, promotes internal capacity building, and enables affiliates to better meet their school community's unique needs.

"The Strategies for Student Success training has been very informative, interactive, engaging, and well worth my time. I didn't know what to expect when I entered into the sessions. I thought it would be sit-and-gets. However, I was thoroughly surprised! We have participated in a number of discussions, learned about new technological tools that can be used within our classes, and listened to research-based information that will soon transform our classrooms. Every trainer was knowledgeable! Every trainer displayed professional yet inviting confidence and zeal that left me wanting to learn more each time. Thank you AFT for the opportunity to learn from experts and hone my craft in the process!"

—Dr. Casey Collins,
Washington Teachers' Union

"I can see AFT's teacher advocacy and having teachers take ownership evident throughout this course."

—Hannah Scouten, Baltimore Teachers Union

"It's nice to know that teachers have a space to learn, grow, and share their experiences and knowledge in this way. It's great to have AFT as a resource."

—Chikaodinaka Ugbor,
Washington Teachers' Union



Center for School Improvement Leadership Institute

The Center for School Improvement (CSI) Leadership Institute is designed to foster collaboration among district and school improvement teams, and across the traditional divides of “management” and “labor” with the goal of improving student achievement. In partnership with the United Federation of Teachers Teacher Center, together with other local and national partners, the CSI Leadership Institute focuses on data analysis, effective communication, professional development, and action planning and execution.

“This is my first AFT learning experience, and it was just eye-opening, a moment of awareness of how we are all connected. Teachers, administration, students, working together toward this one goal. To be able to speak with and interact with teachers from across New York state, the Eastern Seaboard, the country, and see how all the unions are sort of interconnected, was just an aha moment for me, to see just how connected I am to teachers throughout the country who are doing the work.”

—Jennifer Drinkwater-Rodriguez, Staten Island, N.Y.

“The most impressive part for me was being able to still come together in this virtual format. The designers of these sessions made it so that the distance did not seem so far, and it really intentionally felt like

time was built well around us being able to connect and create a community here.”

—Diana Mueller, San Francisco

Share My Lesson Virtual Conference

In 2021, Share My Lesson’s virtual conference garnered more than 70,000 registrations.

This three-day virtual conference offers a remarkable lineup of more than 40 professional learning webinars from more than 400 content partners, including AFT members. From culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom management to social emotional learning and instructional strategies, thousands of educators come together to collaborate, learn and be inspired through Share My Lesson’s virtual conference.

“The conference is an act of solidarity—teachers both learning from and with each other. As a presenter, I have had the opportunity to share my experiences; and as an attendee, I’ve been able to soak in the inspiration. Being a part of Share My Lesson influences not only me, but also the profession, as we grow. The impact of this experience ripples through our planning, our community, and ultimately our students, as they benefit from our collective knowledge.”

—Amber Chandler, president, Frontier Central Teachers Association

Shaping the Future of the Profession

The responsibility for the advancement of any true profession must rest primarily with the members of the profession. The programs below illustrate the ways in which the AFT works to advocate and support the needs of our members while strengthening the profession for educators and the people they serve.

Teacher Pathways

Nationwide, many schools and districts struggle to recruit and retain teachers. While the problem appears to be growing, there are a number of intervention points along the teacher career continuum that can help. One is access to a meaningful career pathway, such as the Professional Pathways for Teachers (PPfT) program in Austin, Texas. The AFT was a key design partner with the local union and the school district, helping solve their retention issue. The program redesigned the evaluation process and created three distinct career pathways, formalized with a micro-credential, enabling teachers to take on leadership roles while remaining in the classroom. Using this by-teachers, for-teachers program, the Austin Independent School District was able to turn its attrition problem around.

In response to the dramatic and widespread teacher and school staff shortages exacerbated by the pandemic, the AFT has convened a national taskforce. The AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force, comprised of more than 20 AFT state and local leaders, will hold virtual and in-person meetings along with listening sessions with rank-and-file-members across the country. The task force will release its findings and proposed solutions at the AFT's biennial convention in Boston in July 2022.



“Teachers are the experts; therefore, they must be in control of their profession and create the professional standards by which they are defined. PPfT does that at its core. Teachers have control of their profession and their trajectory within it. As issues of institutional inequity and racism have become part of a national conversation, PPfT has been able to evolve to reflect on itself and meet those challenges. Sustainability was a priority for our planning with Austin Independent School District and AFT. We are building the profession and the strength of our teaching ranks through long term commitment.”

—Ken Zarifis, president,
Education Austin

Teacher Diversity Programs

Recruiting and retaining teachers of color is an important step toward reducing disparities in education outcomes for students of color. The AFT has taken a comprehensive, forward-thinking approach that focuses on engaging young people and introducing them to the profession.

For example, the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers has a long-standing commitment to diversifying the teaching workforce. It has been working for decades to attract and prepare young men and women for careers in education. A teaching magnet program in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), supported by the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT), engages high school students interested in education. Students in the program take courses that prepare them for field experience during their senior year, and many students continue their teacher education through college and return to teach in the Pittsburgh school district. In fact, the Pittsburgh school board and PFT, developed a memorandum of understanding whereby students who have completed a degree, and meet the requirements for employment, will be offered employment with PPS. Many of the graduates from the teaching magnet program are current members of PFT.



"I have had the pleasure of coordinating and teaching the Brashear Teaching Magnet courses for the last 15 years. This program is so vital to sustaining our profession and community. I'm so proud of the continued collaboration between my union, school board, educators, higher ed partners and students, to make this program a success. As the Pittsburgh federation vice president of secondary schools, I have been honored to see many of the students return and become PFT members, when they begin teaching in Pittsburgh Public Schools."

—Hannah K. McCarthy, coordinator,
Brashear Teaching Magnet

Another example is the dual-enrollment program in Newark, N.J., called The Red Hawks Rising Teacher Academy, a "grow your own" model developed in partnership with the Newark Board of Education, Montclair State University, Newark Teachers Union and the AFT. This program invites high school students to explore teaching as a profession, to learn about educational justice issues in their community, and to enroll in college courses while still in high school. The explicit goal of the program is to recruit these students into a teacher education program and support them to return to the community and educate the next generation. Those students who proceed to MSU and complete their teaching certificate will be given preferential hiring by the board of education.

New Teacher Resources

Every school year, about 220,000 first-year teachers enter classrooms across the country. Challenges for early career teachers, including lack of support, mental and physical stress, and other poor working conditions lead over 40 percent of teachers to leave the profession within the first five years. This negatively impacts school finances, culture and, most important, students.



In response, AFT has launched an endeavor to learn from new teachers what they need to succeed and has allocated resources to better support those needs. The strategies come from a broad spectrum of national and international research on supports for new teachers, as well as our own local focus groups made up of teachers in their first five years. These strategies include:

- Connecting with new teachers, so we can learn what they want and need from their union;
- Collaborating with the AFT Organization and Field Services Department to offer ongoing strategies for member engagement and support;
- Supporting the development of local and state programs for new teachers;
- Exposing new teachers to the various AFT professional learning and networking opportunities; and
- Continuing research to ensure we are reaching as many members as possible.

After one focus group, a member said,

“I found my voice this weekend, and I feel like this is my union now.”

**—Stephanie Byrd,
Boston Teachers Union**

Despite the challenges that many new teachers face, most new teachers overwhelmingly feel called to the profession. One new teacher said,

**“It’s a great life, to be a teacher.”
—Educator, AFT Teacher Diversity Focus Group**

Teacher Leaders

In its most effective form, teacher leadership draws on teachers' skills beyond the four walls of an individual classroom with a top-down structure of authority. Examples of leadership include working with colleagues as a mentor or coach, working on a school level as a department chair or multi-classroom support, or working on a system level supporting building initiatives or broader policy work.

One of AFT's signature efforts is the Teacher Leaders Program, which is designed to provide a collaborative structure to elevate those skills into something that can have a transformative effect on students and schools. The program helps build teachers' capacity to facilitate discussions centered on the issues that impact the profession, both locally and nationally, as well as create fellowship and a learning community.

The yearlong program is designed to help teachers understand and engage in local action research to create avenues of change. The program identifies and brings together a group of AFT teacher members to learn how to take active leadership roles in their schools, unions and communities. Participants examine policy, conduct research, talk to policymakers, and engage in public speaking and advocacy efforts. At the end of the year, they participate in a showcase to share the research they've done and develop recommendations for local policymakers based on the data they've collected.

Here are just a few examples of the high-impact projects our teacher leaders have conceptualized, researched and implemented over the past few years:

Mona Al-Hayani, a teacher from Toledo, Ohio, and vice-president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers, used the action research and advocacy skills she developed in the program to address the problem of human trafficking. She recognized a need and became a school leader, developing a districtwide practitioner training focused on awareness and mitigation of human trafficking. This training will have long-lasting effects for her school and community.

Social studies teacher and Nashua Teachers Union member Gary Hoffman focused his research on the number of early dismissals and interruptions during classes at the end of the day compared with morning classes or those in the middle of the day. From the strength of his research, Hoffman was able to set up a meeting with the district's superintendent, assistant superintendent and his building's principal on the feasibility of a rotating schedule or other alternative solutions to the problem. Although the meeting was too late for immediate changes in the current school year, adminis-

trators were able to identify the problem of disruptions and significantly cut the number of announcements at the end of the day that interrupted class time.

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

Not all educators are classroom teachers. Specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) play vital roles as non-classroom educators, supporting students and helping them thrive. SISP include counselors, school nurses, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and many other specialized roles.

One important issue that our SISP members have been focused on is Medicaid. When Medicaid's "free care rule," was reinterpreted in 2014, it opened the door for schools to legally bill Medicaid for some of the health services they provide, thus creating a significant opportunity—and myriad challenges. In this environment, the role of SISP is more crucial than ever, and we will continue to convene and learn from them as AFT supports our locals in working with state Medicaid agencies to get more federally funded help services into public schools.

"Thank you for pushing us to think. These challenges are wonderful. I was privileged to work with such a great group of people and would love to continue this working relationship."

—Bonnetta Franklin,
Jefferson Federation of Teachers

"I am truly comforted knowing there are AFT staff working on the behalf of SISP, labor rights in general and child health/wellness. I love my union!"

—Sarah Niemi,
Detroit Federation of Teachers



Teacher Leaders: Making an Impact

- 1,500+ members have participated in the Teacher Leaders Program since its inception.
- 37 locals have participated in the Teacher Leaders Program over the last 10 years, representing all five of the AFT's regions.
- 26 locals participated in 2020-21.



“I felt reinvigorated by my research topic. I felt so grateful that this was an opportunity to spend time on what makes me excited about teaching. It helps keep my love of what I do fresh and not bogged down by assessments/school issues. It also felt great to be surrounded by colleagues who were as equally motivated to learn from each other and together about topics that affect our work.”

—Edith Corrales,
ABC Federation of Teachers
Transforming Your Teacher Identity

How Do the AFT's Learning Improvement and Development Efforts Help Teachers and Students Thrive?

Public schools fulfill a variety of multifaceted, and sometimes conflicting, mandates. At the core of AFT's learning improvement and development work is a fundamental commitment to justice and fairness that demands increased educational opportunities be available to all students, particularly those groups too often denied those opportunities historically, from preschool to high school and beyond. The AFT works to give our preK-12 members the time and resources they need to identify and address our students' needs, across the spectrum of public education—from cradle to career.

Early Childhood Education

The AFT has long endorsed the importance and value of education for our youngest children and currently represents roughly 90,000 early childhood educators in every early learning setting, from public schools, Head Start programs, and child care centers to family child care programs. The United States continues to lag behind many developed nations in both access to ECE and in the quality of education and care provided, in addition to how it values its early childhood education workforce. Extensive research has demonstrated the value and importance of investing in high-quality early childhood education, with well-prepared early childhood teachers and staff being the most significant quality factor in a young child's education. The AFT has always championed the needs of our youngest children and what our educators in ECE settings need to be successful. [Learn more here.](#)

Literacy—Reading Opens the World

Literacy is the cornerstone of education and essential to every discipline. That's why for more than 20 years, the AFT has worked to get information about the science of reading into teachers' hands. The union has now redoubled these efforts by launching a multiyear campaign called Reading Opens the World. This [initiative](#) focuses on:

- Giving teachers and school staff the tools and professional development that translates the science of reading into usable resources to help students read and read well;
- Giving parents and caregivers fun and research-based tips and tools to support literacy;
- Building on and forging new connections among families, communities, educators and schools to be partners in students' literacy; and
- Giving children and young people free books to read, love and keep.

As part of this campaign, we conducted a survey of AFT members to understand what they want and need to support student literacy as we launched a series of literacy webinars that translate the science of reading into actionable teaching practices that educators can quickly implement.

Having long offered extensive in-person professional development on how to teach reading, the AFT is now developing a more accessible 10-hour online course so any member can learn about the science of reading and high-leverage instructional practices for supporting literacy in young learners. Teachers know what students need, and they want to help. So, we're helping them get the tools they need to do that.

Community Schools Strategy

[This strategy](#) is a collaborative and effective vehicle for increasing educational equity, using the public schools to weave together community partners to provide the services and supports that students and their families need. Community schools purposefully partner with food banks, social service agencies, businesses, higher education institutions, health clinics and youth organizations, typically under the guidance of a site coordinator. By meeting those needs, community schools make it possible for educators to do what they do best, which is to teach, and for students to learn and reach their full potential.

AFT has consistently advocated for the community school strategy, in collaboration with other national partners, and has supported our local affiliates in designing and implementing them. We have supported dozens of locals in working with their school districts and communities, creating community schools, totaling nearly 900 schools.



One such school, Wolfe Street Academy, an elementary school in Baltimore, shows just how necessary community schools are for students and families alike. Over the years, Wolfe Street has developed strong partnerships with families and community partners, and those strong relationships really paid off during the pandemic. For example, when a few undocumented parents who worked in Baltimore restaurants were let go from their jobs, they turned to their Wolfe Street's community schools coordinator, Leah Beachley, for assistance. She helped them fill out applications for food benefits and look for other sources of economic relief to help pay bills. Some of these families (both documented and undocumented) had been reluctant to apply for food benefits due to recent immigration policy changes, but the need for that assistance became too great the longer they were without jobs. The school's local community group, the [Upper Fells Point Improvement Association](#), also collected donations to ensure that families could continue getting the weekly fresh produce they were receiving before the pandemic. What had been a school pickup for 25 families became a delivery to 100 families in the neighborhood, organized with the help of volunteers. None of this would have been possible without the community school.

Another powerful example of the importance of community schools comes from an educator from Massena High School in Massena, N.Y.:

“I had a student who had no housing. He had no transportation, little food or clothing. Different agencies that we found through community schools helped with emergency housing, clothing and food. Community schools even found him transportation home after school until 5 o'clock. With this help, we were able to continue this student's education and find him a program that worked.”

—Educator, Massena High School





Career and Technical Education— Career Pathways

Career and technical education (CTE) initiatives focus on preparing students for the working world. Nearly every public school—[98 percent of schools](#), in fact—has some kind of CTE program, and these programs represent a significant opportunity for innovation within public schools.

For example, AFT’s Career and Technical Education Committee is working with industry and other major partners, such as the Sierra Club and the Aspen Institute, that are engaged in climate change work on ways to integrate climate change into CTE curricula. The work will form the basis of lesson plans and curriculum development as well as education and industry partnerships on apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships.

Through our partnership with the AFL-CIO’s North America’s Building Trades Unions, we have increased our members’ awareness of apprenticeship opportunities, and pre-apprenticeship curricula, that prepare students for careers as electrical workers, plumbers, carpenters and HVAC installers. We have also briefed our members on apprenticeship opportunities in high-paying jobs offered by the Seafarers International Union.

The AFT continues to support CTE development in our locals, from partnering with New York’s Metropolitan Transit Authority and the AFL-CIO to working with the U.S. Department of Defense to extend CTE pathways in ways that open avenues to careers in the defense workforce. We’re also supporting locals as they work with nearby colleges and universities to strengthen connections between CTE training and higher education.

Further, in 2015 the AFT partnered with four local affiliates in [Miami](#), [Peoria](#), [Pittsburgh](#), and San Francisco to create a CTE initiative called the AFT Innovation Fund’s Promising Pathways. The fund invested over \$1 million in this multi-year initiative to expand CTE opportunities for students, including creating an internship program connected to CTE pathways, developing a first-responder academy, connecting high school cohorts to community college-based design technology, and implementing a middle school computer science-for-all curriculum.

CTE programs like these can motivate students while they are in school and give them both knowledge and flexible skills that will assist them in adapting to the jobs of the future.

How Does the AFT Strengthen the Education Profession Through Policy, Advocacy and Technical Assistance?

What is happening in education policy right now, and how does that translate to classroom practice? How can the AFT take what's happening in classrooms and use it to advocate for effective education policy? Our role is to take the voices and expertise of our members from classroom practice to policy at every level.

The AFT supports the policy context of the national union and our local affiliates in several ways:

- We serve as subject-matter experts on policy areas across public education—we know the issues, the stakeholders, and the implications for our members.
- We translate broad education policy trends as well as specific policies, synthesizing and simplifying them for our members through written policy briefs and other materials.
- When a policy shift or piece of legislation hits the news, we respond to requests with timely talking points, research context and other relevant information.
- We help local leaders connect the dots between policy and classroom implementation, and we collect information about how policies are being implemented at the local level.
- We support departments across the AFT with research-based policy positions, helping to ensure that AFT has a seat at the table alongside other key education policy stakeholders.

- We help to shape federal policy based on best practices developed in the field, and we support our affiliates at the local and state levels in their policy development efforts.

Because the teaching profession is always evolving, and the public education landscape is ever changing, we continually assess what the field's needs are and adjust to meet them. Using those insights, which are derived from our members, we respond with timely support that gives locals access to the resources and research-driven expertise they need. Here is a sampling of these areas:

Accountability, Standards, and Assessments

AFT helps to shape policy conversations about accountability, standards and assessments by providing a research-based pedagogical perspective that advocates for a broader approach to accountability and assessment that moves beyond high-stakes testing in favor of more comprehensive and accurate measures of teaching and learning. How does testing impact students? What does true accountability look like? What elements of teacher performance have the most impact on student outcomes? How can we bring in multiple success indicators, so that there are many ways for students to demonstrate what they can do and show what they have been learning? We are committed to keeping the voice of the AFT and our members at the forefront of current and emerging education policy at the national and local levels.

The AFT recognizes the value of teacher-led, formative and curriculum-linked assessment as an important mechanism for improving and differentiating instruction. However, standardized testing rarely contributes to that goal: It takes away significant instructional time without offering a valuable return. The AFT works with districts and state educational issues coordinators to break the grip of high-stakes testing in public school classrooms.

For example, in 2018, AFT and the Cleveland Teachers Union worked with Cleveland Public Schools to revamp assessments. Putting every assessment on the table, we evaluated and analyzed each by asking: Is it necessary? Is it duplicative? Who is using the assessment's results, and how? Findings showed that there were indeed duplicative assessments, and we worked to streamline the assessment process. As a result, first-grade teachers across Cleveland Public Schools got 23 hours of instructional time back in their school year.



“The support we received from AFT afforded us the opportunity to really push our district on its assessment program and demonstrate that our students were losing valuable learning time to unnecessary testing. This was a win not only for our members, but, more importantly, also for our students.”

—Shari Obrenski, president,
Cleveland Teachers Union



Collective Bargaining

The AFT helps locals build their collective bargaining capacity by providing expert technical support in areas such as salary, benefits and provisions that affect all aspects of teachers’ work, including evaluation and dismissal, planning time, school bell times, and professional development. We also support our locals as they negotiate, including school development initiatives such as community schools, additional student supports, and advanced teacher leadership.

Working in support of our Research and Strategic Initiatives Department, we make research-based recommendations that help local leadership improve their negotiation and contract strategy skills. Our strengths in education policy and education law give local leaders a broader context on which to base their decisions, resulting in positive outcomes for the educators on behalf of whom they are negotiating.

AFT Innovation Fund

The AFT Innovation Fund is a signature grant program designed to illustrate how educators’ experiences and perspectives can play a key role in improving public education. Through this grant-making program, the AFT celebrates our members’ amazing talent and creativity, and understands that their day-to-day experiences in the classroom and with their communities make them ideally suited to plan and implement new strategies and projects. Members’ voices and experiences must inform strategy and decision-making processes at the school and district levels.

The Innovation Fund supports new ideas designed to strengthen public education and improve outcomes for all. Program priorities align with AFT’s commitment to promote children’s well-being, support powerful learning, build teacher capacity, and foster cultures of collaboration.

Since 2009, the Innovation Fund has made over 80 investments totaling more than \$14.5 million. Between March 2020 and March 2021, the Innovation Fund made 35 mini-grant awards to support affiliate needs during the pandemic—that’s about 40 percent of the total number of grants awarded since the fund’s inception.

Learn more about our
pandemic grants [here](#)



Broad Advocacy Expertise

Our advocacy is based on a deep understanding of our members' challenges and is driven by member needs. AFT advocates on behalf of specific segments of our members, filling the gaps left by districts and policymakers. Here are just a few examples:

Special Education: The AFT provides professional learning opportunities and resources for special education teachers, instructional assistants, and paraprofessionals who are often left behind in discussions of public education.

Native American Education: The AFT represents most of the teachers in Bureau of Indian Education schools and is committed to engaging in policymaking activities at the federal, state and local levels.

Other Popular Areas for Educational Issues Policy Support Include: career and technical education; climate science; data privacy for teachers and students; early childhood education; international education; literacy; Medicaid in schools; racism, racial equity and cultural sensitivity in public education; science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); social and emotional learning; teacher diversity, teacher retention and recruitment; and trauma-informed practice.



What Resources Are Available to AFT Members?

Meeting our members' needs with tangible resources that enhance their work and add real value requires partnerships with researchers, funders, experts and a range of other organizations. By establishing these partnerships, we not only serve our members but also enhance their and AFT's contribution to the profession and the field of public education. These resources, therefore, are available to all.

Here are a few examples of the rich and varied menu of resources and opportunities we provide:

Colorín Colorado

A unique collaboration 17 years in the making, AFT partners with [WETA](#), the public broadcasting station in the nation's capital, to bring Colorín Colorado to educators across the country. [Colorín Colorado](#) is a free website that provides a carefully curated, research-based collection of resources, articles, videos and guides to support the professional learning of people who work with English language learners. It's available nationwide, and its use is not restricted. It is open to any educator working with English language learners.

What does Colorín Colorado mean?

In Spanish-speaking countries, children's stories and fairy tales often end with the phrase, "¡Y colorín colorado, este cuento se ha acabado!" There is no literal translation, but it's similar to, "and they lived happily ever after."

"Colorín Colorado saved my career!"

—Sherri O., teacher, Pajaro Valley Federation of Teachers

"Colorín Colorado has proven to be not only a valuable resource for my English learners' parents and teachers but a very valuable recruiting tool in my local. In my initial meeting with our new superintendent, we spoke at length about all the resources through Colorín Colorado and how we can collaborate to provide extensive support for our families. Our district is one of the most diverse districts in Texas, and the resources available for all English learners, not just our Latino families, were a great way for us to come together around common objects. I was so proud to be able to offer Colorín Colorado as part of our whole package that helps support our teachers, staff, parents and ultimately our students."

—Glenda Macal, president,
Fort Bend AFT





“Colorín Colorado is one of the best union-funded benefits AFT offers to members, parents, community members and advocates of ELLs. Working with professional learning at a state federation level and as an adjunct teacher of an undergraduate TESOL Methods class, I use Colorín Colorado’s plethora of materials to exemplify how to provide equity and access to rigorous content for our English learners as education is a tool for social justice.”

—Susan Lafond, NBCT,
assistant in educational services,
New York State United Teachers

In 2020-21, Colorín Colorado:

- Reached nearly 3 million users;
- Had 6.7 million page views;
- 1.6 million minutes viewed on YouTube; and
- 188,000 PDFs downloaded.

“Colorín Colorado is my go-to resource! While creating a professional development opportunity, I utilize it for research and videos. During PDs, I share the site with participants for resources to further learning. In my role as a learning guide for educators working toward their MLL certification, I recently used Colorín Colorado to showcase resources to engage families in multiple languages. Colorín Colorado is invaluable for educators, pre-service educators and families.”

—Melissa Labossiere, talent
development coordinator,
Pawtucket School District;
Pawtucket Federation of Teachers

AFT's Share My Lesson: Making an Impact

As of 2021:

- [Share My Lesson](#) has 1.9 million registered users and more than 400 content partners.
- The site offers 420,000 free resources, which have been downloaded 15 million times.
- Since the start of the pandemic, we've run 200 webinars with 289,459 registrations.
- Our school reopening community (formerly called our distance learning community) has had 34,401 downloads, 1,386 members, and more than 155,000 views.
- The project-based learning capstones created by AFT members have been downloaded 5,395 times and viewed 19,598 times.
- Each year, SML content created by AFT members makes up the top 10 resources of the year.
- In 2022, Share My Lesson was awarded a silver medal Anthem award in the Education, Art and Cultural and Community Engagement category.



“I love finding new content and ways to engage my students with information that is offered with Share My Lesson. I learn so much, and it is truly exciting for me!”

—Teacher, Broward Teachers Union



Share My Lesson

Share My Lesson is a free website that offers access to lesson plans, articles, printables, PowerPoint presentations, handouts, rubrics, assessments, teacher guides, and more. Educators find Share My Lesson's focus on timely content particularly powerful, including the curated collections of resources on current events—often available within hours of the news—and the "Today's News, Tomorrow's Lesson" feature. AFT member-created content consistently performs well on the site and is among the site's "top 10" year after year.

"Share My Lesson has helped me in the classroom by keeping my lessons fresh and interesting. If I'm bored, my students get bored. If my students are bored, they become discipline problems. Keeping interest for everyone helps classroom management and improves student success."

—Marian Ingram, Lewisville, Texas



Conclusion

The AFT champions public education. We are dedicated to advocating for our nation's public school educators—both inside and outside the classroom—and their students, especially those who are most vulnerable. We highlight the creativity and commitment inherent in the people who choose a life of service through public education. We believe that school decision-making should be the responsibility of communities, schools, educators and parents, and we know that collaboration is the key.

We invite you to join us in this essential work. Together, we will strive to make every public school a place where parents want to send their children, educators and staff want to work, and students prepare for bright futures.

Member support is the cornerstone of the AFT. We couldn't do it without you.

- If you're not already an AFT member, [join us today](#).
- If you are an AFT member, thank you for your support—and check out some of our programs, resources and learning opportunities.

In addition to member dues, philanthropic investment has always been crucial to AFT's ability to advance our mission. Philanthropic funding helps us build locals' capacity and create a range of tools that give our members more of what they need to serve their students, while also giving AFT the flexibility to innovate and find what really works to improve outcomes for all students.

To learn more about opportunities to support the AFT through philanthropic investment, contact Marla Ucelli-Kashyap, senior director, AFT Educational Issues Department: Edissues@aft.org.



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