A Union of Professionals

VOL. 47, NO. 2 | SUMMER 2023
aft.org/ae

AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

transforming education

We're fighting division and defunding to build on the promise and potential of public schools

Self-Care & Summer Learning

Share My Lesson has what educators need most this summer:

- PreK–16 lesson plans and activities
- Well-being tips, ideas and strategies for kids and adults
- Free, for-credit webinars

Start Here

sharemylesson.com/summeroflearning

aft | sharemy lesson

2 Million Members and Counting!

READING OPENS THE WORLD aft

The AFT Reading Opens the World initiative gives

- teachers and school staff the tools to translate the science of reading into usable resources to help students read and read well;
- parents and caregivers fun, research-based tips and tools to support literacy;
- opportunities for families, communities, educators and schools to be partners in students' literacy; and
- families, children and young people free books to read, love and keep.

Since December 2021, we've distributed 1.5 million FREE books and held more than 200 literacy events in 28 states and Puerto Rico at schools, community centers, faith-based organizations and union halls, with many more planned to keep spreading the joy of reading.

Be a part of Reading Opens the World!

Find out how YOU can help create a nation of joyful and confident readers at **aft.org/READ** by hosting an event, donating a book or downloading a resource today!

Who Has Freedom, and Who Doesn't, in Ron DeSantis's Florida?

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

ATTACKS ON PERSONAL and educational freedoms are increasing throughout the country, with Florida Governor and Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis leading the way. DeSantis talks about freedom, but in practice, he is repressive. It's freedom for those who agree with him—not for the vulnerable trans kid, the educator teaching honest history, or the business leader creating a welcoming space for all. DeSantis is:

- Passing hostile legislative measures against Disney because the company criticized DeSantis's "Don't Say Gay" law.
- Assaulting educators' freedom of association by denying their right to have union dues deducted from their paychecks, while preserving that right for unions that endorsed him.
- Preventing schools from teaching honest history and creating safe and welcoming spaces for gay and trans students.
- Waging an extremist takeover of state higher education, including banning diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in state colleges.
- Criminalizing educators for maintaining well-rounded classroom libraries and fueling book bans. One school board banned *And Tango Makes Three*, a children's book about penguins; another removed "The Hill We Climb," Amanda Gorman's poem for President Biden's inauguration.

This is dangerous for democracy. Your freedom of speech and association, your freedom to be who you are and to love who you love—these shouldn't be at risk because of a governor's vindictiveness.

Who *is* free in Florida? The National Rifle Association is doing well: in April, Florida passed a law allowing concealed carry without a permit. The anti-choice lobby is celebrating: in April, DeSantis signed a bill banning most abortions after six weeks of pregnancy—before many people know they're pregnant. Corporations and billionaires DeSantis likes, like insurance and real estate companies, are thriving. Homeowners' insurance will increase 40 percent on average in Florida this year, while DeSantis handed the industry a $2 billion bailout and a bill making it harder for homeowners to sue insurance companies for failing to pay legitimate claims. And Floridians face an affordable housing crisis. The governor's misnamed affordable housing bill prohibits local governments from adopting rent control and undoes a 2019 reform allowing expedited approvals for affordable housing on residential land.

Florida is 47th in the country for healthcare affordability and access—and 45th in public education funding. DeSantis's policies continue to cost Florida significant business investment and tourism dollars: Disney is jettisoning plans to build a nearly $1 billion corporate campus and the NAACP issued a travel warning against Florida.

Why does DeSantis's message resonate for some people in Florida and beyond?

DeSantis is preying on people's fears about the future and pandemic-driven uncertainty. Despite many promising signs in the economy—with the Biden administration having created more than 12 million jobs, including more than 800,000 in manufacturing, and unemployment at a 54-year low—a March 2023 CNN poll reported that 7 in 10 people believe our economy is in poor shape. Families feeling uncertain as we emerge from a pandemic is understandable—but it's unconscionable that leaders are capitalizing on it. Former President Trump even called on Republicans to default on the federal debt, a reckless and wildly irresponsible stance that would result in millions of jobs lost.

While DeSantis is tapping into that fear to stoke division, we are fighting back. Unions are bringing people together to fight for higher wages, greater opportunities, and a better life for all—and for democratic freedoms for all. And you—union activists and educators in public schools and colleges—are crucial in this fight. As you stand up for the right to read and learn, you are standing up for democracy. (For more on how we're fighting back, see my article on defending public schools on page 3.)

As you stand up for the right to read and learn, you are standing up for democracy.

Sixty-nine years ago, the AFT filed an amicus brief in the US Supreme Court in support of the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education*—the only union and education organization to do so. While we have yet to achieve the equality *Brown* promised, our progress is imperiled by extremist leaders like DeSantis who are working to reverse civil rights advances, attack our freedoms, and use public schools for their political and ideological goals.

We can't let the extremists win. It is our job as teachers and labor unionists to resist the demagogues and dividers and to assert that a great nation chooses democracy, equality, opportunity—and freedom—for all. □

AMERICAN Educator
VOL. 47, NO. 2 | SUMMER 2023
aft.org/ae

Transforming Education

aft A Union of Professionals

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.

AMERICAN EDUCATOR (ISSN 0148-432X print / ISSN 2770-4432 online, USPS 008-462) is published online quarterly and in print biannually by the American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2079. 202-879-4400, **aft.org**

Letters to the editor may be sent to the address above or to **ae@aft.org**.

AMERICAN EDUCATOR cannot assume responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

Please allow a minimum of four weeks for copyright permission requests.

Signed articles do not necessarily represent the viewpoints or policies of the AFT.

AMERICAN EDUCATOR is mailed biannually to AFT members in preK–12 education, higher education, and other educational roles as a benefit of membership. Subscriptions represent $2.50 of annual dues. Non-AFT members may subscribe by mailing $10 per year by check or money order to the address below.

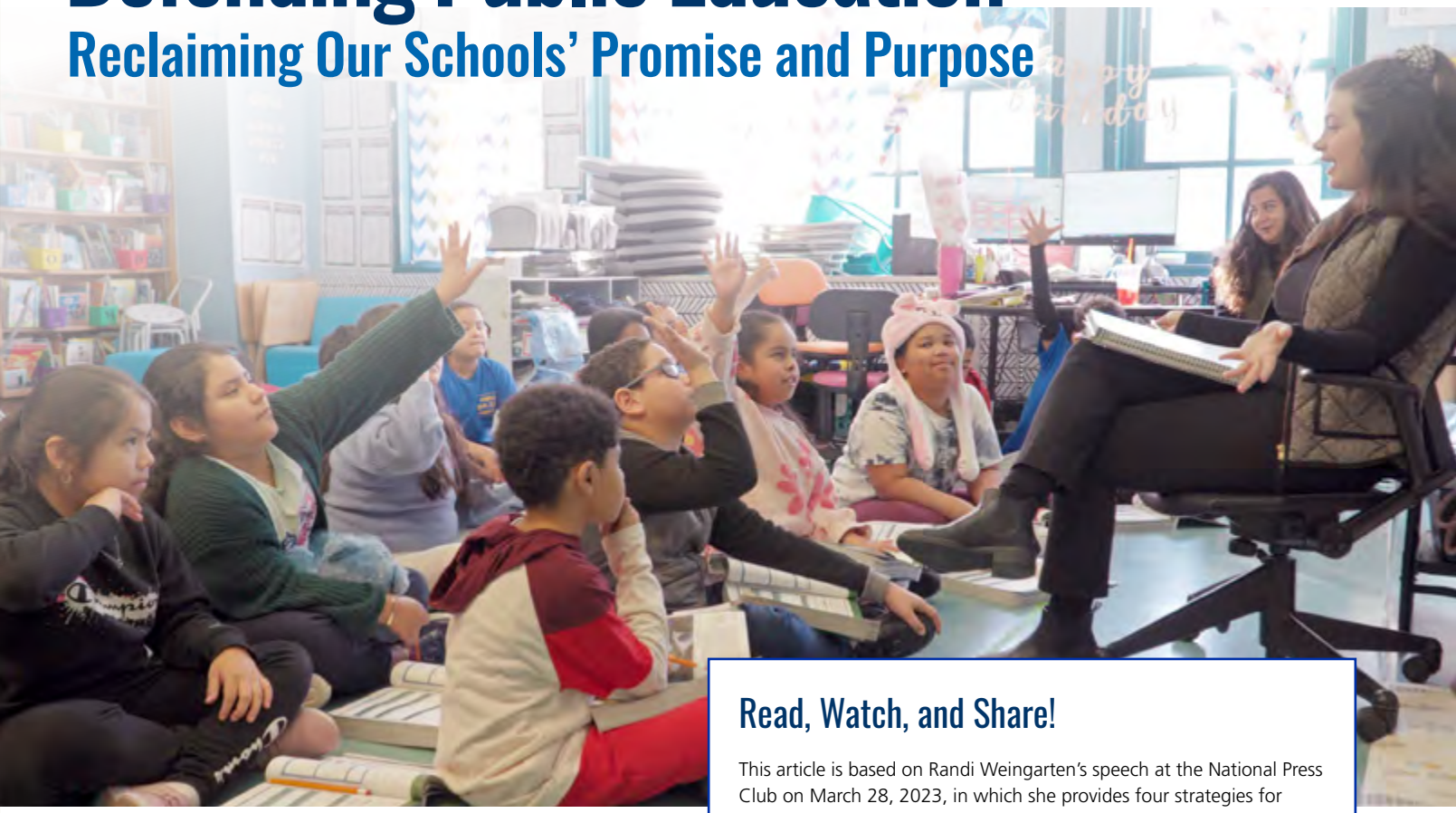
MEMBERS: To change your address or subscription, notify your local union treasurer or visit **aft.org/members**.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to American Educator, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2079.

Cover illustration: FRANCESCA GASTONE

Defending Public Education

Reclaiming Our Schools' Promise and Purpose



By Randi Weingarten

There's a saying: you don't have to love everything about someone to love them. I'm sure my wife doesn't love everything about me, but she loves me. (I, on the other hand, love *everything* about her.) Nothing is perfect. Banks aren't. Congress isn't. And neither are our public schools—not even our most well-resourced and highest-performing schools. Those of us involved in public schools work hard to strengthen them to be the best they can be. But only public schools have as their mission providing opportunity for *all* students. And by virtually any measure—conversations, polls, studies, and elections—parents and the public overwhelmingly like public schools, value them, need them, support them—*and* countless Americans love them.

Public schools are more than physical structures. They are the manifestation of our civic values and ideals: the ideal that education is so important for individuals and for society that a free education must be available to all. That all young people should have opportunities to prepare for life, college, career, and citizenship. That, in a pluralistic society such as the United States, people with different beliefs and backgrounds must learn to bridge differences. And that, as the founders believed, an educated citizenry is essential to protect our democracy from demagogues.

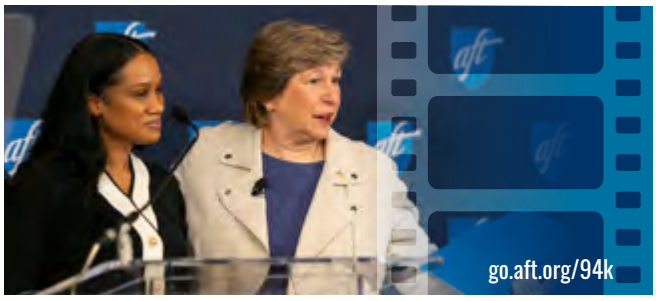
Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."[1] Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The real safeguard of democracy … is education."[2] And Dr. Martin Luther

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her recent commendations include being named to Washingtonian*'s 2021 Most Influential People in Washington and* City & State New York*'s 2021 New York City Labor Power 100.*

Read, Watch, and Share!

This article is based on Randi Weingarten's speech at the National Press Club on March 28, 2023, in which she provides four strategies for powerful public education: expanding community schools, scaling experiential learning, addressing staff shortages, and deepening the partnership between families and educators.

For the full experience—including Randi's passionate delivery and the accompanying graphics—it's well worth watching the speech. You might even want to host a watch party! –EDITORS



PHOTOS: AFT

Students and staff should feel welcome, safe, and respected in school—but the culture wars are fueling hostility and fear.

King Jr., in accepting the United Federation of Teachers' John Dewey Award, made clear: "Education is the road to equality and citizenship."[3]

When kids go to school together, they become part of a community; their families become part of a community. That community comes together at school concerts, basketball games, and science fairs, and for shelter and comfort when people are displaced by natural disasters or, far too often, at vigils for victims of gun violence. In good times and bad, public schools are cornerstones of community, of our democracy, our economy, and our nation.

But some people want that cornerstone to crumble—and they're wielding the sledgehammers.

Attacks on Public Education and Democracy

Attacks on public education are not new. The difference today is that the attacks are intended to destroy it. To make it a battlefield, a political cudgel. After former President Trump lost reelection, Steve Bannon, his key ally, declared that their fight goes through school boards. In a speech last year, culture war operative and Governor Ron DeSantis's appointee Christopher Rufo put it bluntly: "To get to universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust." To this end, he says, his side has "to be ruthless and brutal."[4]

And, I would add, well funded, which it is. The DeVos, Bradley, Koch, Uihlein, and Walton family foundations (and others) have poured many millions of dollars into anti-public education, pro-privatization groups like the American Federation for Children and EdChoice.

The Betsy DeVos wing of the school privatization movement is methodically working its plan: Starve public schools of the funds they need to succeed. Criticize them for their shortcomings. Erode trust in public schools by stoking fear and division, including attempting to pit parents against teachers. Replace them with private, religious, online, and home schools. All toward their end goal of destroying public education as we know it, atomizing and balkanizing education in America, bullying the most vulnerable among us, and leaving the students with the greatest needs in public schools with the most meager resources.

It's an extremist scheme by a very vocal minority of Americans. It's hurting our efforts to do the work we need to do, which is educating the nearly 50 million kids who attend America's public schools. And the urgent work of helping kids recover from learning loss, sadness, depression, and other effects of the pandemic.

And it's not what parents or the public want.

Let's start with defunding: this year alone, 29 state legislatures are considering bills to either create or expand existing voucher programs. This is on top of the 72 voucher and tax credit programs in 33 states already subsidizing private and home schooling, costing billions every year. Voucher programs are proliferating even though research shows that, on average, vouchers negatively affect achievement—the declines are worse than pandemic learning loss. In fact, vouchers have caused "some of the largest academic drops ever measured in the research record."[5]

Proponents of vouchers used to argue that they were a way for low-income and minority families to transfer out of low-performing schools. No longer. Today, most vouchers go to families who already send their kids to private schools. And private schools are not required to follow most federal civil rights laws protecting students, so they can—and many do—discriminate, especially against LGBTQIA+ students and students with special needs.

The universal voucher program signed by Florida Governor DeSantis in March will divert $4 billion from the state's public schools. Florida ranks 44th in the nation in per-pupil spending and 48th in average teacher salaries. DeSantis is sending taxpayers' dollars in the wrong direction.

And then there are the culture wars. What started as fights over pandemic-era safety measures has morphed into fearmongering: False claims that elementary and secondary schools are teaching critical race theory; disgusting, unfounded claims that teachers are grooming and indoctrinating students; and pronouncements that public schools push a "woke" agenda, even though they can't or won't define what they mean. Banning books and bullying vulnerable children. School board meetings descending into screaming matches. This is an organized and dangerous effort to undermine public schools.

Over the last three years, legislators in 45 states proposed hundreds of laws placing public schools at the center of culture wars: laws seeking to ban books[6] from school libraries—even books about Ruby Bridges and Anne Frank and Roberto Clemente; laws restricting what teachers can teach and students can learn—particularly about race, gender, LGBTQ issues, current events, and American history; and laws attacking kids who are transgender. Students and staff should feel welcome, safe, and respected in school—but the culture wars are fueling hostility and fear.

A torrent of enacted and proposed legislation targeting even the mention of "controversial" topics—sweeping and open-ended restrictions on what can be taught—has teachers teaching on eggshells. In Florida, their Department of Education has threatened teachers and librarians with felony prosecution if they provide students with books that the state later decides are inappropriate. Florida lawmakers have prohibited colleges from spending money on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and have undermined tenure and academic freedom. In K–12 schools, their goal seems to be to ban AP courses and the mere utterance of LGBTQ. And forget about facts. Many laws and introduced bills allow any individual to sue schools and teachers for *perceived* violations. The intent and effect are to create a climate of fear and intimidation.

This takes a toll on the quality of education teachers can provide our students, and on the trust and connection that are so important. Shouldn't teachers be free to talk with students who are withdrawn or in distress, and to answer students' questions? Don't we want students to learn both our nation's achievements that make us proud and the failings that make us strive to do better? Isn't that our job?

Teachers should have the freedom to teach. And students should have the freedom to learn.

These same governors who are pushing vouchers and culture wars are also trying to defund and weaken teachers unions, so educators don't have the wherewithal to fight back against censorship, attacks on their academic freedom, threats to their livelihoods, and criminal prosecution.

These attacks aren't about protecting kids. If they were, these officials would be working with us to address learning loss and the youth mental health crisis. They would be working with us to take on social media companies for contributing to that crisis.[7]

If these attacks were about protecting kids, they would be working with us to fight against the leading cause of death for American children: gun violence. I gave this speech on March 28, one day after the shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville; by May 16, there had been 225 mass shootings in the United States this year.[8] Day after day we grieve for families shattered by senseless gun violence.

If this were about protecting kids, instead of putting LGBTQ youth at risk and banning books about Black people and by Black authors, they would give a damn about these kids' safety and well-being, including the youth suicide crisis.

Forty-five percent of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide in the last year.[9] And the suicide rate among Black youth of all sexual orientations has been increasing as well.[10]

This is literally a matter of life and death. These attacks on public education make it increasingly difficult to create the welcoming, safe environment that our students need and deserve.

School Climate and Culture

It is a fraught time in our country. The effects of COVID-19, the climate of conflict, drug abuse, gun violence, economic insecurity, and the youth mental health crisis have all taken a heavy toll. Hate crimes have surged against many Americans—Asian, Black, Latinx, Jewish, and Muslim Americans.

School staff report a rise in bullying, verbal altercations, and physical violence among students, as well as this behavior directed at them.[11]

I recall a teacher saying that when her students are disruptive, it's not because they are *bad*; it's because they're *sad*.

So many students have experienced isolation and trauma. They need help. But there weren't enough mental health specialists before the pandemic, and they are in critically short supply now.

The persistent demonization and disrespect of teachers—from screaming matches at school board meetings to the former secretary of state saying teachers teach "filth"—have contributed to a culture of disrespect that seeps into our schools.

I recently got a report from Florida. In Flagler County, a 17-year-old student with special needs pushed a paraprofessional so hard she went airborne and was knocked unconscious. A teacher in Osceola County was monitoring students in the hallway when a student sucker-punched him. And there are others. The educators who were hurt all cited lack of staff in the schools and lack of mental health support for students as the main reasons leading to the attacks.

Shouldn't teachers be free to talk with students who are withdrawn or in distress, and to answer students' questions?

And this crisis will only get worse as DeSantis's universal voucher bill kicks in. What will the loss of $4 billion do to safety in Florida's public schools? What will that do to the quality of academics, to the condition of school buildings, to teacher pay, to staffing shortages?

Crisis in the Teaching Profession

Even before the pandemic, there were steep declines in teachers' satisfaction. The percent of teachers who were "very satisfied" fell from 62 percent in 2008 to just 12 percent in 2022.[12]

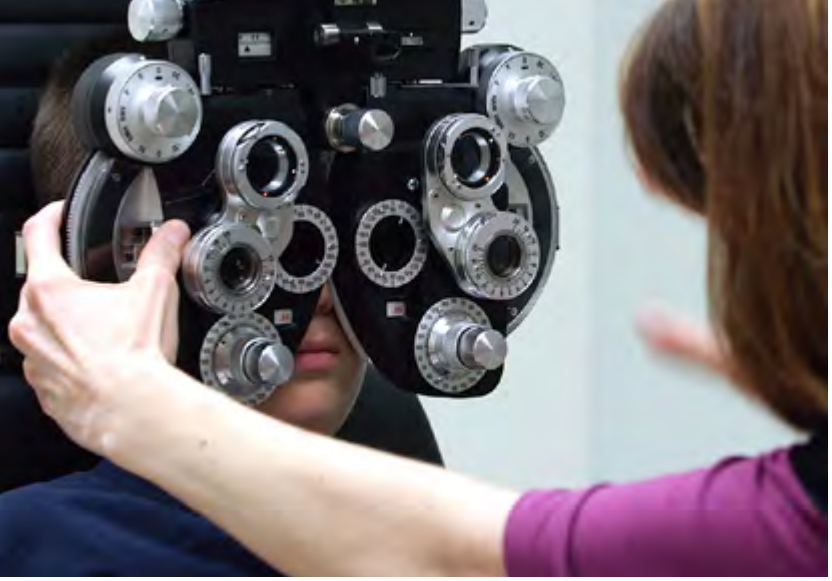
The stresses of the COVID-19 era—plus the culture wars, attacks on teachers, inadequate pay, poor teaching and learning conditions, and the threat of school shootings—have made recent years the toughest in modern times for educators.

Despite it all, teachers have thrown themselves into the mission of helping students recover academically, socially, and emotionally. I witness powerful acts of teaching, of nation-building, every day. Yet, according to our critics, we're responsible for all the woes of society.

Even before the pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers were leaving the profession each year.[13] Now, it's closer to 400,000.[14] And the teacher pipeline has collapsed as college students and career-changers choose not to go into education. How are we going to recruit and retain the staff schools need in this climate?

Our teaching profession is in crisis.

It's in crisis because of the poor teaching and learning conditions created by inadequate funding for public schools. It's teacher



pay, which has been falling relative to other college graduates' pay for the last 40 years. It's giving teachers all the blame and little authority. And it's the deprofessionalization of teaching that demoralizes an already beleaguered profession.

I hear it all the time—teachers just want to teach.

Strategies for Powerful Education

So where do we go from here?

The American Rescue Plan and the programs it spawned, particularly the tutoring programs, have really helped. And we are grateful to President Joe Biden, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, and the last Congress for the much-needed resources. Of course, we will continue to fight this defunding of our public schools and this dividing of our communities. But we also must do better to address the learning loss and disconnection we are seeing in our young people. And we can. We can make every public school a school where parents want to send their kids, educators want to work, and all students thrive.

Four strategies can help transform our schools to realize the promise and purpose of public education. Not just to overcome learning loss or get back to normal, but to truly help us prepare all children with the knowledge and skills they need for their lives, for college, for career, and for citizenship. These strategies can help us create safe and welcoming environments and bring joy back to learning. And in tandem, they have a catalytic effect. I have seen it work. But we need to do these strategies at scale—for every child and in every school. These four strategies are expanding community schools, scaling experiential learning, addressing staff shortages, and deepening the partnership between families and educators.

Community Schools

First and foremost, we need to make sure our kids are OK. That's why we need community schools, which are hubs for neighborhoods, combining academics with extended learning opportunities, family and community events, and an infusion of medical, mental health, and other social services. They are the best system I know to connect students and families to the support they need to learn, live, and thrive.

A recent University of Calgary study found that youth suicide attempts increased 22 percent during the pandemic.[15] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 1 in 3 teen girls seriously considered suicide in 2021—up nearly 60 percent from a decade ago.[16] More than 42 percent of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.[17]

What helps? A recent CDC report found that "school connectedness, defined … as feeling close to people at school, has a long-lasting, protective impact for adolescents well into adulthood."[18]

Our schools must be equipped to support and connect with students, and there is no better model for this than community schools. There is another tragic reality in the United States: half the students in America's public schools live in poverty. Community schools mitigate the effects of poverty by providing essential services right where students are and where families can be.

Once kids' physical and emotional needs are met, they are ready to learn, and teachers can focus on their primary role—which is to teach.

A few weeks ago, I went back to Wolfe Street Academy, a community school in Baltimore, to see how they were doing. Ninety-six percent of the students there qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Since converting to a community school nearly 20 years ago, Wolfe Street has gone from the 77th-most successful elementary school in Baltimore (out of 80) to the second-most successful.[19] And, like other community schools, when COVID-19 hit, it was a matter of ramping up services, not having to start from scratch.

Our schools must be equipped to support and connect with students, and there is no better model for this than community schools.

Students have access to medical checkups, clothing, and mental health services. Families have food assistance, language support, and legal aid. And this school is fun! Wolfe Street offers a wide variety of after-school programs, including chess club, robotics club, Mexican folkloric dance, orchestra, a soccer league, and more. And, by the way, Wolfe Street is a unionized public charter school.*

There are successful community schools in rural and suburban areas as well. The Rome (New York) Teachers Association started a community school with help from the AFT in 2016. Today, its Connected Model† has spread to 14 school districts and provides everything from access to mental health services and dental care to food packages for weekends and holidays, and prom dresses!

A recent RAND Corp. study of community schools in New York City found positive impacts on both attendance and graduation rates.[20] In New Mexico, community schools in operation for five or more years have better-than-average student achievement growth

*To learn more about Wolfe Street, see "Delivering On the Promise: Union Leaders Describe Their Community School Journeys" on page 10.

†To read more about Rome, see "Building Community with Community Schools" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator:* aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin.

and higher attendance rates, and employed more highly effective teachers.[21] And Robeson High School in Philadelphia went from nearly closing to a 95 percent graduation rate after implementing the community school model.[22]

AFT members have helped create 700 community schools across the country, and we see how they meet kids' needs. From Kimball Elementary School in Washington, DC, to the Oyler School in Cincinnati, to Roybal-Allard Elementary in Los Angeles. That's why the AFT is calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025, and our call is gaining steam. California just approved another $45 million to make 1 in every 3 schools in the state a community school. And Biden's budget doubles federal community school investment. We need to make this happen everywhere.

Experiential Learning

Second, we can reengage students through experiential learning, transforming their educational experiences. Why do kids skip school or slump in the back of the classroom? They may feel unsafe or unseen. Or just uninterested. We must do better. And we can.

> Experiential learning embeds the things that make kids want to be in school: the excitement of learning that is deeply engaging and the joy of being together.

Of course, fundamental academic subjects are important. But so is how we teach them. Experiential learning engages students through problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and learning by doing. We need to help kids engage with the world, with ideas, and with each other—not just with their devices.

Experiential learning embeds the things that make kids want to be in school: The excitement of learning that is deeply engaging and the joy of being together, especially after the isolation of the last few years. The camaraderie and responsibility of working together on a team.

And in the age of AI and ChatGPT, this type of learning is critical to being able to think and write, solve problems, apply knowledge, and discern fact from fiction.

Experiential learning can be applied to any content area, from math to computer science to social studies, and often weaves subjects together in powerful interdisciplinary instruction. It can be adapted to any grade level. It can take place in rural, urban, and suburban schools. And it nurtures kids' natural curiosity and creativity. That is what robotics and debate teachers do all the time. It's what I did as an AP government teacher at Clara Barton High School. These opportunities need to be the norm, not the exception.

This type of learning makes clear just how outmoded the standardized test-based accountability system is. Of course, the country needs data on how our kids are doing, but if we are talking about student success, research shows that classroom grades, not tests, are the best predictor of that.[23] And experiential learning takes the classroom to a new level.

Experiential learning is assessed by teachers in their classrooms and focuses on mastery of the skill. It can include capstone projects that allow students to research a topic they're passionate about and present it to their teachers and peers. It can include nature-based pre-K, where youngsters learn by exploring natural surroundings while building social skills with other kids. It can include students working together to code and build robotics projects, service-learning projects to support community members, summer learning on a farm caring for crops or animals, or reporting for and producing a neighborhood newsletter. And it can start with field trips during and after school.

Experiential learning has long been embedded in career and technical education (CTE) programs, where students use their minds and their hands to learn everything from auto repair to nursing, IT, graphic design, welding, and culinary skills. CTE students learn skills that give them a head start when they go to college or start their careers. Shouldn't every student have that opportunity?

It's also a proven strategy. Ninety-four percent of young people who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 72 percent of them go on to college.[24]

Talk to any employer about the skills and knowledge they look for in a successful employee, be it a plumber, a nurse, or a lawyer, and you're bound to hear similarities—employees who are creative, self-starters, critical thinkers, problem solvers; have empathy; and can build relationships. This type of learning provides every student with more options to develop those skills and to find their passion, their purpose, and their pathway to good jobs and fulfilling careers.

Carpentry students use math when they're figuring out the right cuts to make and how the pieces will all fit together. They're using their hands and their minds to construct something. They're acquiring literacy, technology, and writing skills in developing business plans or a website. They're building self-confidence and

public speaking skills when they explain plans and work with customers or their peers. They have a sense of pride in the finished product. When a project doesn't turn out as expected, they have to problem-solve what went wrong and try a new approach.

On Governors Island in New York City, students attending the Harbor School pursue industry certification in specialties like marine science and oceanography. In Louisiana, the Teaching and Reaching initiative is a two-year dual enrollment program that gives high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to earn credits and get a head start on pursuing a degree in education. In Peoria, Illinois, CTE programs are preparing students for green energy jobs.* And the Rio Rancho, New Mexico, public schools partner with the local college to provide stackable microcredentials in robotics, coding, and automotive technology.

Reviving and restoring the teaching profession boils down to treating educators like the professionals they are.

Biden's remaking of the economy through the CHIPS and Science Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the climate provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act will create millions of new high-paying jobs in renewable energy, broadband, semiconductors, construction, cybersecurity, transportation, small business, entrepreneurship, and so much more. Then there's healthcare and education, which have huge staffing crises right now. There are so many incredible opportunities for our young people in the job markets of today and tomorrow. They need to be ready to seize them. This dynamic new economic vision requires a dynamic new workforce vision.

We are all in, but this requires more than educators. And doing this at scale will require new approaches. We need to start by high school. We need employers to partner with us, giving students internships and apprenticeships, including paid opportunities so students who need to work can afford to participate. That's why the AFT donated stipends for high school kids in Newark, New Jersey's Red Hawks Rising teacher pathway program. Teachers need experiential learning, too, and more externship opportunities in industry.

The potential for all of this is in our grasp, but we all need to do better on the alignment of people, preparation, and professions. And it means all of us making changes. That is why we are working with the AFL-CIO, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, Education Secretary Cardona, Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su, and the Bloomberg Philanthropies on this work. We are reaching out to business groups large and small, as experiential learning can take place in the private sector, the public sector, and nonprofits. The formula of starting by high school and identifying school-to-career pathways, including community colleges, partnering with employers, and ensuring the opportunities are paid, can be replicated everywhere.

Revive and Restore the Teaching Profession

Third, for us to meet the needs of the 50 million children in our public schools, we need to revive and restore the teaching profession. That starts with addressing the teacher and school staff shortage crisis. And taking care of the educators we still have.

We know how to solve this. At our 2022 convention, AFT members unanimously approved the report our Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force had been working on for seven months.† That report is a blueprint with scalable solutions that every district and state in the nation can implement. But it boils down to treating educators like the professionals they are, with appropriate pay and time to prepare for classes, the chance to collaborate with colleagues, the opportunity to participate in meaningful professional development, and the authority to make day-to-day classroom decisions. And ensuring they have the conditions that help students learn, like buildings in good repair with safe ventilation, and smaller class sizes.

The Kansas City Federation of Teachers and School-Related Personnel recently negotiated a new contract, and they used the AFT staffing shortage report as their blueprint. Now, every first- and second-year teacher will be mentored by an exemplary teacher, who will be paid for serving as a mentor. The union secured the highest starting teacher salaries in the region and increases to keep teachers in the profession. They won paid family leave for any parent, making them the first district in the state having this essential family benefit. Where there's a will, there's a way.

I'm really worried about the well-being of teachers and school staff. We are working with groups like Educators Thriving on strategies that address well-being. Their program has helped teachers reduce emotional exhaustion, a leading indicator of burnout. And as a union, we are providing a trauma benefit to all our members and have worked hard to reduce student debt and make the bipartisan Public Service Loan Forgiveness program work. That's been life-changing for those who qualify. But I am asking politicians to do their part as well.

*For details on CTE in Peoria, see "Peoria's CTE Renaissance" in the Fall 2022 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2022/brix.

†To read the task force's report, visit go.aft.org/rfq.

A word to politicians—rather than using educators as cannon fodder, why not work with us? Like New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, who enacted a $10,000 raise for teachers in that state. And Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, who signed a bipartisan education budget that will make the highest state investment in Michigan history, investing in school infrastructure, teacher recruitment, school safety, and mental health resources. And Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and Florida Rep. Frederica Wilson, whose bills would raise teacher salaries. And New York Rep. Jamaal Bowman, who has introduced a bill to reduce federally mandated standardized tests.

Parents and Community as Partners

Fourth, the pandemic proved what we always knew: in-person learning is essential for kids, and public schools are centers of their communities. It's beyond obvious that the school-family connection, the parent-teacher connection, is vital to children's success. But as others are trying to drive a wedge in that connection, we need to deepen it.

PTAs are remarkable organizations; so are so many parent groups and parent-teacher groups like Red Wine and Blue, Parents-Together, MomsRising, and the Campaign for Our Shared Future. And we are honored to work with them and others. But we know we need to create this muscle of working together everywhere.

That's why the AFT created the Powerful Partnerships Institute, which supports family and community engagement. In our inaugural year, the institute has given out 27 grants to AFT locals across the country.[‡] Montana is engaging thousands of public education-supporting families and educators across the state. New Haven is working with educators, families, and students on fair school funding.

Let's be role models for how we deal with conflicts and disagreement. During the pandemic, we met via Zoom with parent groups that often disagreed with us on COVID-19 safety measures and school closures. We heard each other out and talked things through. We need more of that in America.

[‡]To learn about these grants, visit go.aft.org/sua.

The school-family connection is vital to children's success. As others are trying to drive a wedge in that connection, we need to deepen it.

Two years ago, the AFT increased our legal defense fund, so we could help if a member was put in jeopardy for teaching honest history or answering a student's question. But in too many places, there are no unions, or educational associations, or parent groups. People feel alone and isolated. Teachers. Parents. Children.

That's why, in conjunction with the Campaign for Our Shared Future, we launched a Freedom to Teach and Learn hotline for teachers, parents, or students to use if they need support. It's a place to call if you've been told to remove a book from the curriculum or from the library, or that there are topics that can't be discussed in your classes, or that you cannot teach honestly and appropriately, or if politicians in your district or state are targeting vulnerable student groups to score political points. The Freedom to Teach and Learn hotline number is 888-873-7227.

These four strategies are worthy on their own. Together, they are transformative. Community schools will help young people not just recover from these punishing years and the scourge of poverty, but thrive. Experiential learning will prepare our youth with the knowledge and skills to seize the opportunities in our changing economy. To nurture and educate our young people, we need an educator workforce that is supported, respected, and compensated befitting their vital role. And we need students' circle of care—family, educators, and community members—to be united in their support.

This is our agenda. But this can't just be the work of our union or of school staff and schools alone. This is the work of a great nation—to ensure that our children's basic human needs are met so they are ready to learn to their full potential. To exchange outmoded and test-driven ways of teaching and learning for effective and engaging approaches that excite students and prepare them to live their dreams and aspirations.

Our public schools shouldn't be pawns for politicians' ambitions. Or defunded and destroyed by ideologues.

We are at a crossroads: fear and division, or hope and opportunity. A great nation does not fear people being educated. A great nation does not fear pluralism. A great nation doesn't have a gun epidemic problem. A great nation chooses freedom, democracy, equality, and opportunity.

All of that starts in our public schools. We are that great nation, and we must act together—to defend, support, and strengthen our public schools. And we must do that now.

Our children deserve no less. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/weingarten.

Delivering On the Promise

Union Leaders Describe Their Community School Journeys

Collaborative play during Wolfe Street Academy's annual Field Day.

In Chicago, a resource coordinator showcases DePriest Elementary's transformative Black Panther Party curriculum circles.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE BOSTON TEACHERS UNION, CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION, AND BALTIMORE TEACHERS UNION

Community schools are a powerful strategy for increasing educational equity, reducing barriers to learning, and helping students succeed academically. That's one reason that the AFT is working to increase the number of community schools we support from 700 to 2,500 by 2027.*

The work of creating a community school, though richly rewarding, is not without challenges, both in building the stakeholder coalitions necessary to implement community schools, and in securing the wide support to maintain them for long-term success. Here, three union leaders and activists describe their journeys, the challenges they've encountered along the way, and their hopes for the future:

- Jessica Tang is the president of the Boston Teachers Union and a vice president of the AFT and the Massachusetts AFL-CIO. Previously, she taught middle school social studies in Boston.
- Jennifer "Jen" Johnson, former chief of staff of the Chicago Teachers Union, taught high school history for 10 years in Chicago. She recently became the deputy mayor of education, youth, and human services for the city of Chicago.
- Katrina Kickbush teaches special education at Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore and is the building representative for the Baltimore Teachers Union.

As their comments reveal, it's true that community schools are hubs where teachers, families, community members, and service providers can come together in purposeful, results-focused ways. It's also true that going to a school where you can also get eyeglasses and take home a bag of groceries can be life changing. But still, the services are not the key. The real secret to community schools' success is the relationships that are nurtured through the process of identifying needs, strengths, and partners.

While integrated student supports, or wraparound services, get a lot of attention, they are only one part of the community school strategy. Community schools are also focused on *deep family and community engagement* along with *collaborative leadership practices*. These pieces of the puzzle are often what set community schools apart as an effective whole-school improvement strategy because they are essential for bringing in strategic partnerships and often pave the way for more deliberate integration between what happens inside and outside the classroom. They are also essential for developing meaningful relationships, which lead to identifying community assets and creating the environment and networks needed for sustainability.

In a world where people feel divided and isolated, community schools are welcoming spaces for people to connect. They are safe places for students and families to find their voices as valued members and leaders of their school community. And, as this Q&A shows, community schools are unifying people and helping them rethink the promise and purpose of public schools.

*For the AFT's community schools resources, see go.aft.org/g75.

–EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us about your community schools journey.

JESSICA TANG: We began advocating for more "community hub schools," as we call them in Boston, 10 years ago. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike in 2012 was one of the formative moments for me on this journey. I was still in the classroom then, and it was an inspiration to see the CTU fighting for what students need. Their message, "creating the schools our students deserve," really resonated with me, and I knew that we as a union needed to be clearer about what we are for, not just what we are against.

I'd learned about community schools through the AFT and other locals, and I was interested in figuring out how we could fight for more community schools here in Boston. Previously, while I was an executive board member, I also helped to found the Boston Education Justice Alliance (BEJA), a coalition of students, educators, families, school staff, and community members fighting together for public education. When I shared what I had learned about community schools, this also became a priority for BEJA. I left the classroom in 2013 and became the founding organizing director of the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) and prioritized this work in that role. The BTU partnered with BEJA, the Greater Boston YMCA, allies in Boston Public Schools (BPS), and other key groups on a campaign to expand community schools in BPS.

It was a long and slow road. Community schools aren't new to Boston, but many people didn't understand them. Some people conflated community schools with neighborhood schools (a very divisive topic because of Boston's history of busing and school segregation). And some schools that were originally established as community schools had lost that focus and framework over the years. So, we started by sharing what community schools are through community forums and professional development for district staff. We also changed the name to Boston Community Hub Schools to lessen confusion.

It wasn't until 2019 that we successfully negotiated in our contract a hub schools coordinator for BPS to help spearhead district implementation. We'd been able to establish three community schools through grants, and we needed to ensure that they'd be sustainable long after the funding ran out, so that was also included in our contract. This all helped pave the way for a citywide expansion and pilot of 11 additional community hub schools beginning in 2022.

Six of our 14 schools have school coordinator positions that are staffed by the YMCA, and seven have BTU hub school coordinator positions. (One school lost its BTU coordinator, and we agreed to fill that position for the 2023–24 school year.) We also now have a director of community schools and another central office staff person working in close partnership and collaboration with the YMCA. In our most recent contract, we also established language to continue to negotiate an expansion of hub community schools.

While we still have outstanding negotiations on the topic of hub schools, we work very closely and collaboratively with BPS and the YMCA, and we are now also partnering with the United Way to continue this work. In addition, our mayor, Michelle Wu, her senior advisor for youth and schools, and our new superintendent are all supporting this effort. We still have a lot of work ahead, but we're poised to do good work here in Boston. We will continue to support a cohort of 14 schools in fall 2023, and we're working to ensure that we're well coordinated and implementing our community hub schools framework with fidelity.

JENNIFER JOHNSON: I appreciate that the 2012 CTU strike inspired Jessica—it was our first in 25 years. In the last decade, the CTU has continued fighting for the schools Chicago students deserve. Our members are not only union members or educators; many are parents and community leaders as well. So we believe in working with our community partners, and we've placed a high value on relationships with longstanding grassroots community groups that are serving the underserved communities of Chicago. For several years, we'd been in constant dialogue with a community coalition called the Grassroots Education Movement, and the topic of community schools began to come up in those conversations.

Our community coalition had put a lot of thought into how to transform public schools into the schools that our students deserve. Community schools have been in Chicago for a very long time, and they do great work. But we are under-engaging our parents and students. We learned from our community partners that we can build on our history of community schooling and implement the model in a transformative way.

There are several different framings of the community school model—some have four pillars, others have five, and there's a lot of overlap in them. We use the six community school pillars from the Center for Popular Democracy report: engaging, challenging, culturally relevant curricula; emphasis on high-quality teaching (not high-stakes testing); wraparound supports; positive discipline practices such as restorative justice and social-emotional learning; authentic parent and community engagement; and inclusive school leadership.[†]

To us, the most important pillar is inclusive school leadership. We believe schooling should be a bottom-up endeavor,

[†]To learn more, read the Center for Popular Democracy report at go.aft.org/yke.

Boston's Mattahunt Elementary celebrates its new school-based pantry stocked with food and hygiene products for students.

where the leaders and decision makers are those stakeholders who are served by the school and incorporate the wisdom of the community into all aspects of the school. That goal is supported by the seven principles that we co-developed with our community partners (and ultimately, the district agreed) to undergird the pillars: racial justice and equity; transparency and trusting relationships; self-determination and governance; build from community strengths, community wisdom, and data/best practice/evidence; shared leadership and collaboration; reflective learning culture; and a whole-child approach to education. The pillars outline what you should see and experience in a sustainable community school, but the principles describe how those pillars should be enacted.

In our 2016 contract fight with the district, we brought a community school proposal to the table. The proposal really originated among our community partners, who had a huge vision: a 75-year plan to build a sustainable community school district throughout Chicago. We held a one-day strike on April 1, 2016, and just over six months later, settled a contract that won $10 million to implement 20 sustainable community schools.*

Our goal was to focus on schools that are not the most well-resourced in our city and district. We wanted to establish feeder patterns so that students could go from sustainable community elementary schools all the way to sustainable community high schools. We wanted our schools to be geographically dispersed around the city. Finally, we wanted a diversity of service partners—not just the citywide community organizations. We very much wanted to make sure that those grassroots community partners who were part of coming up with this idea would be part of its implementation.

We went through the district's scoring and selection process, which we tried to make as nuanced as possible, and then debated with them to land on our final 20 schools and our community partners. The selected partners submitted interest letters to the schools they wanted to work with, and school principals then chose who would partner with their schools. We tried to do it all as collaboratively as we could. Finally, in the 2017–18 school year, we launched our 20 sustainable community schools, which we're very proud of.

*To learn more about CTU's fight for sustainable community schools in Chicago, visit go.aft.org/yzh.

Chicago students, parents, educators, and community members work to ensure schools embody the sustainable community school principles and pillars.

KATRINA KICKBUSH: My journey was a little different. I joined Wolfe Street Academy† about four years after it had become a community school. Wolfe is part of Baltimore City Public Schools and is operated by the Baltimore Curriculum Project. We became a community school in 2006, essentially in response to a school need.

Shortly after our principal, Mark Gaither, began at Wolfe, someone approached him about becoming a community school. He was hesitant at first. It seemed like one more in a long line of things to oversee, and he had bigger priorities: Wolfe was struggling, and he needed to get it turned around. The person who approached him, the community school site coordinator, offered to help him focus on our biggest problem, which at the time was chronic absences. And so they worked on attendance for most of that first year. Our school staff made a lot of phone calls and home visits, but our approach was community-centered and supportive, not punitive or accusatory. Rather than asking families, "Why aren't your children in school?," we'd say, "It's so important that we see your students in school. What barriers are making it difficult to get them here, and how can we work on a solution together?"

Some students couldn't get here on time because of family work schedules. Some parents kept their children out of school altogether because they thought students would be punished for tardiness. We listened. Then we asked, "How can we help?" Did families need alarm clocks? A wake-up call? An arranged ride? We told one family, "We just want to see your child; we don't care what time you get here. School starts at 7:45, but if you get home from work at 9 a.m., bring them in at 9 a.m."

We also implemented a "walking school bus," where a local parent (who was also our lunch cafeteria monitor) would walk to the homes of these families every morning, collect their students, and walk with them to school. We began incentives like giveaways, attendance competitions, and awards to allow whole classes to celebrate the importance of being at school.

Attendance over that first year improved so dramatically that Mr. Gaither was convinced. He began advocating for Wolfe to become a community school. And after a couple of years focusing on getting students and families into the building—making connections and relationships with families in the process—we began adding services to meet other needs. Based on what we heard from families, we partnered with local organizations for dental, vision, and other services, always focusing closely on one before adding another, and always listening to our community to determine the next step.

Five or six years into our journey, I had the opportunity to explain to others in a stakeholders meeting how this strategy was impacting our school. Because we now had systems in place to meet our students' needs, they came to class ready to learn and teachers could focus on teaching. That was the beginning of a larger discussion about bringing more community schools to Maryland. Strong Schools Maryland, a grassroots organization fighting for public education, began advocating for legislation of a new funding model so that every school could open as a community school or with a community school site coordinator. Like Jessica did in Boston, we started working with our community to build support, meeting with parents and providing education

†To learn more about Wolfe Street Academy, watch "How a Community School Helps ELLs Succeed" by Colorín Colorado and the AFT: go.aft.org/5lw.

about community schools. We rented a bus and brought families with us to talk to our state legislators about community schools. Because most of our community speaks Spanish, we also brought interpreters so that all families had a voice in the process. And we continue to work together to get policies that give our children what they need moving forward.

EDITORS: What challenges did you encounter, and how did you overcome them?

JESSICA: This work is not easy, and we've learned so much not only from the last 10 years of getting these schools started, but also just from our pilot year. One of our greatest challenges was having leaders who weren't knowledgeable about community hub schools, didn't really seem to believe in them, or had very different ideas about which schools should be community hub schools. That's what happened with a former assistant superintendent when we were in the process of selecting the schools for our first cohort.

This person had never taught or worked in a school, and truthfully, we butted heads with her when she chose dual language schools for our first cohort. Dual language schools already have a lot going on, so transitioning to community schools would be especially difficult. We had trouble in our pilot year because the principals of these schools didn't really understand the community hub schools strategy or the role of the site coordinator. I think they agreed to participate because it meant getting an extra staff position, but they didn't have a full understanding of what a community hub school is.

Leadership turnover in the city and Boston Public Schools has also been a huge challenge. In the last 10 years, we've had no less than six superintendents and three school committee chairs. On the city leadership side, we've had four mayors and a few education chiefs and health and human services chiefs. This lack of stability has been frustrating. It seemed every time we made some progress, there'd be a leadership change and we'd have to start all over, explaining what community hub schools are and why they're important. For this work to get traction, you need district and city leaders with experience who will champion community schools. Having partners in the central office doesn't necessarily mean that will happen. You need people with decision-making authority in place. Ideally, anchor positions for the community hub schools would be jointly funded by the district and union and codified into our contract so that we have leverage from the inside to elevate the work.

One of our internal challenges was role confusion. There are so many different roles necessary to make community hub schools function with integrity—including the hub schools coordinator, family liaisons, community field coordinators, social workers, operations leaders, school leaders, and student support teams. In some schools, not everyone understood their roles, what they were responsible for, or how the roles work together. This led to people feeling threatened or territorial about their role, which is not the collaborative team culture we're cultivating. So we're trying to work that out at the contract level by negotiating job descriptions and at the site level by providing professional development based on each school's needs.

Leaders of Boston's city government, school district, teachers union, and YMCA learn and strategize together on community schools.

Currently, our city and district leaders are fully supportive of this work, and our district is really trying to stabilize. Our mayor has three years left in her term, our new superintendent is fully committed, and the school committee chair was recently reelected. So we are finally all on the same page and hopeful that we have a period of progress ahead. But with our history of leadership turnover, we feel some urgency to get things in place while we have this support so that our community hub schools are functioning well long-term. For our next contract, we are working to codify the number of schools we have, all job descriptions, and joint district-union roles for the citywide coordinator and director positions.

> "We are trying to amplify the power of our students, families, and educators so that they can drive bottom-up … solutions."
>
> –Jessica Tang

JENNIFER: District support is so critical to moving this work forward. Our battles for the first year and a half were also about getting on the same page with the school district. For us, it was critical to help them see that they were obligated to enact this partnership and to influence the implementation to make it more transformational.

One of our biggest challenges has been the district bureaucracy we've encountered in getting our community-based partners to the table. We know that certain district rules are well-intentioned to protect against legal liability and conflicts of interest. But some processes just don't align with the principle of building community schools on community wisdom. The district didn't want our community-based partners to help implement community schools because they'd receive funds through the schools. And of course, we need to operate ethically; community schools are not a slush fund. But this is about doing real work, and the community-based partners who do that work need to be given a voice and space at the table. They need to be treated like assets rather than potential liabilities.

We fought to have all of our partners included in the initial round of implementation, but the district leadership was particularly intransigent at that time. To move forward, we had to reset our negotiating team and bring in new partners who were connected to our community-based organizations and to our schools, but who wouldn't ever receive funding.

We've lost some of the community partners who were part of this vision from the beginning, largely because of the bureaucracy. There's so much red tape that our partners have to get through to receive funds, to pay their staff, and to even be inside the school buildings. If their organizations are not large enough to allow them to manage things like data entry or tech support, it can be an overwhelming barrier. The district's reimbursement model also creates tremendous cash flow problems for smaller organizations—they have to render services and use their own funds when necessary and then wait for weeks to be reimbursed. We need these partnerships to be sustainable long-term, but the bureaucracy does not align with our goal of building long-term relationships in which partners are deeply invested. We have better relationships now with district leaders and some of this has improved, but it's still a challenge for grassroots partners. Fortunately, many of our stalwart grassroots organizations are still with us.

The district also wanted some citywide service agencies brought in because they have popular, engaging services and schools are more familiar with them. And we want students to get those programs and services. But we don't think community schools should just be about programs and services. Ultimately, we want to create space for collective advocacy to achieve systemic change aligned to our seven principles. But larger agencies don't necessarily have the same justice-centered, transformational, movement-building mindset as our grassroots organizations. They want to meet needs but not necessarily challenge systems. What citywide agencies do have is cash flow and the ability to expand quickly and manage the bureaucracy, so they are favored by these district processes. Other wonderful organizations that are already doing transformational work centered on healing and restorative justice can't meet the bureaucratic requirements. It's just wrong that we're not set up to support the transformational organizations that are deeply rooted and do the nitty-gritty community work.

We're really interested in figuring out how the district can meet its ethical and legal obligations while also adding flexibility to its processes to allow more of our community members who are the most deeply connected to do this work. There's no single solution, and I can see lots of different models working better than what we have now. Even something as simple as eliminating the arbitrary fee the district charges to expedite an organization's reimbursement would make a significant difference. Ultimately, it's about the district showing that it values our partners as an integral part of our community and working with them to make our schools better.

KATRINA: My school is a well-established community school, so we no longer have the start-up strain that Jessica and Jennifer have experienced, but we still have challenges. Ours are more related to sustainability, as Jennifer mentioned. We're always asking how we can continue to grow and meet more of our community's needs.

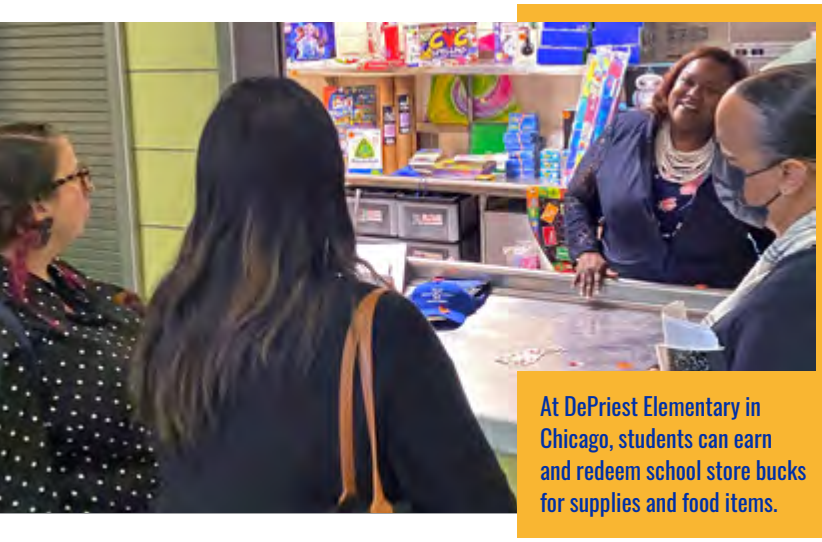
Our building and infrastructure are a challenge. When I started at Wolfe 13 years ago, we had one class at every grade level. We've now doubled that, but our building is not equipped for it. We don't have a gymnasium or the space for so many things we want to do. We also really wish we could be a P–8 school. We feel that we could really help shape our kids' future if we could keep them through middle school and prepare them for high schools that will move them forward in their education.

> "The shared leadership of the community is at the core of transformational community schools."
>
> –Jennifer Johnson

But we need resources to develop solutions to these challenges, which introduces another challenge: our resource pool can't keep up with the growth of community schools in Baltimore. Baltimore City Public Schools went from 17 community schools when I started to 125 now—and more are being added. The same handful of community partners is serving all of us, and we need to consider how that impacts the sustainability of our model.

Our food bank partner is doing its best to keep up with the demands of our community schools with its monthly food giveaways. These giveaways feed about 100 people in our school community, and sometimes the need is greater and there are more people standing in line waiting. Every time we place our order, it is more challenging to find the items our community needs. Many times, what's available are things our families have told us they aren't comfortable eating. How do we get more of those foods they need prioritized—and how do schools with similar populations do the same—when that resource is being continually spread out over more schools?

Our dental program is now serving so many other schools that it's hard to get Wolfe students on the calendar. The Vision Van of Baltimore, which used to come every year, now only comes every three years. The district is pushing for more Baltimore community



At DePriest Elementary in Chicago, students can earn and redeem school store bucks for supplies and food items.

schools, and rather than asking our partners to provide services to more schools, we need to tap into more resource partners in Maryland. We have tried to research additional resource partners on our own, and it's very challenging. This year, the district has a new partnership and volunteer office that plans to begin looking for additional partnerships. I'm hopeful that this office will be able to support us—and all of our community schools—in managing and developing partnerships so that we will no longer be fending for ourselves to find additional resources.

And another issue is what Jennifer already mentioned: the district bureaucracy governing becoming a community resource partner. The approvals process can get very complicated, and then once approved, the strings attached to the money are what really guide or even determine the program instead of being able to use the money to guide the program that our students need.

Volunteers at Wolfe Street Academy ensure all students have backpacks and supplies at the beginning of the year.

EDITORS: Speaking of what students need, how do you approach the common misconception that community schools are just coordinating partners for wraparound services?

KATRINA: Obviously, wraparound services are an important component, but that's not really the heart of what a community school is. A well-functioning community school is intentional and strategic about what services are offered, based on the needs of the community. And it's about looking to the community to identify those needs and to be at the table in deciding how to meet them.

JESSICA: Exactly. Sometimes we see schools and principals wanting whatever resources they can get, so they partner with dozens of different organizations—but there's no way of determining whether these programs are meeting the actual needs of the community. They're not asking, "Is this program helping to amplify our strategic or academic priorities? Is it giving voice to our families who really need to be heard?" That alignment is critical.

You could have a great afterschool program for technology, like Laptops 4 Learning, which gives laptops to families. But if 80 percent of the families in your community are actually looking for English as a second language classes, the laptop program won't be as effective as it could be—because you didn't ask them what they wanted. In the same way, you can bring in an urban gardening program that's not as richly engaging as it would be if you had included families who have expertise in gardening. Strategic partnerships—and great family engagement opportunities—come from intentionally assessing both the needs and strengths of the community.

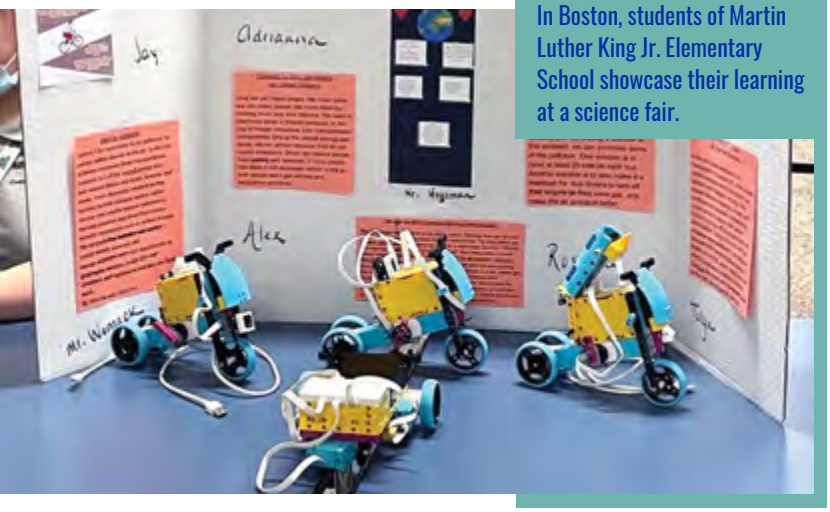
KATRINA: Building on the community's assets to address needs is key. All our teachers and school staff know this, so when we talk with families, we're constantly asking both "What do you need?" and "What is your strength? What can you help us with in our community?"

Families feel so much more valued and invested when they know that we are going beyond providing solutions for problems in their lives to really engaging them in working toward those solutions. So, we focus on authentic family engagement at Wolfe Street. It may start through a service, but as we build trust and relationships, families see us as partners in education and in making things better for all of us. That's why parents stood with us to advocate for legislation that strengthens public education. And that's why we have high family participation in our parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school nights, and other school activities. Parents want to be involved here. Some end up working at Wolfe or sharing their skills and assets here, such as using language skills to translate for families or catering a school event with a family-owned restaurant. And through that engagement, those relationships, and that trust, our school community grows, our staff grows, and our ability to collectively meet our community's needs while building on our community's strengths is greater.

JENNIFER: The shared leadership of the community is at the core of transformational community schools. It's not just about services. It's about creating school communities of stakeholders who are advocating collectively for themselves. Part of that is ensuring educators are empowered and supported to create and implement curriculum that is racially just and engaging. This in turn allows students to find their own agency and understand the systemic challenges we all face. It's not rocket science that students feel more connected and have better academic outcomes when they have engaging curriculum and their basic needs are met. And at the CTU, we're going to continue to fight for every school to have those basics: school nurses, dental services, librarians, food pantries, clothes closets, and more. But it's beyond that. It's about a true spirit of shared, inclusive leadership where stakeholders see that "Oh wow, look at all that our school can achieve—and I can be a part of it. I can be a leader and fight for the things we still don't have, even with additional services and resources."

That's why we have guiding principles in this work. Everything we do is from the belief that school communities deserve to have self-determination, and they have wisdom and knowledge to be built on.

KATRINA: Those guiding principles affect everything we do: how we teach, how we problem-solve with our communities, even how we approach student behavioral issues. We don't believe in suspension at Wolfe Street Academy. We use mindfulness strategies and restorative circles, as well as knowing families well enough to understand what's happening in each child's life. While some behaviors do require more serious consequences, we strive to not suspend kids unless we're legally required to. Our philosophy is inclusion, community rebuilding, community talking together. Students thrive in that environment, and it's easier to teach in a



In Boston, students of Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School showcase their learning at a science fair.

school with these systems and supports in place. Wolfe is my first community school, and after this experience, I wouldn't want to teach anywhere that wasn't a community school.

EDITORS: Looking back over your journey, what are you proud of, and what's next?

JENNIFER: One of our biggest successes is the extensive professional development we've provided for our schools over the last five years. We prioritize an annual summer institute for the administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents of all of our 20 schools to gather and learn from each other about important topics. We also try to do a full day of professional development each quarter, largely centering anti-racism through restorative justice practices or curriculum. It's been incredibly important for building relationships and shifting mindsets in our very segregated city to make sure that our students—who are largely young people of color—have their experiences and history centered. Our last PD focused on Black-Brown solidarity, which has historically been a challenge in Chicago and can be challenging in some of our sustainable community schools today.

We're also really proud of our curriculum circles, where teachers, students, and community partners co-create curriculum on culturally relevant and engaging topics, which aligns with our first pillar of community schools. A small group of our CTU member teachers came together with our organizer and, with support from an AFT innovation grant, co-created a Black Panther curriculum with some of our schools and communities. The idea came about collaboratively, as our community partners shared that part of the vision for sustainable community schools was rooted in Chicago's history of community-based struggle. Teachers and students visited the West Side Community Justice Center, met current Black Panther Party leaders, and worked together to tweak and pilot a curriculum that demystifies organizing and stereotypes around the Black Panthers. We shared our curriculum circles through two Share My Lesson webinars—one on the Black Panther curriculum,* and the other on the process of co-developing curriculum with students and community partners.†

*To learn more about the Black Panther Party curriculum, watch the Share My Lesson webinar at go.aft.org/c0y.

†To learn why co-developed anti-racist curriculum is central to Chicago's sustainable community schools initiative, watch the Share My Lesson webinar at go.aft.org/cov.

There are lots of things we want to do next. We want to keep improving on our inclusive school leadership. In Chicago Public Schools, there can be a real deference to principal autonomy. If you have a thoughtful principal who's aligned with the community schools pillars and who engages with stakeholders without seeing that as a threat to their power, it's wonderful. But too often, school leaders are rewarded for being tightly in control. So we're still on a journey of building champion administrators who share power and decision-making and have a different mindset about how school leadership can look.

We are in conversations about adding more community school positions that are co-staffed between the union and school district, and we want to make the community schools evaluation process much more transformational through participatory research led by members of our school communities. Eventually, we also want to win more community schools. But meanwhile, we are still working on building trust with the district, which hasn't always seen us as a valued partner. In some ways, we've really turned a corner, and we've got a lot more credibility as a union than we had 10 years ago. We've shown that we're not fighting just to fight—we're fighting for what kids and communities need. But when you bring us to the table, we don't just fight: we work, we collaborate, and we're capable of compromise. We're not audacious to the point of impracticality. So we're in a much better place now.

And we're looking forward to elevating sustainable community schools through our elected leaders and organizing more people to understand this as a priority. In April, CTU member, Cook County Commissioner, and former middle school teacher Brandon Johnson won the tight Chicago mayoral race. He supports public education and the sustainable community schools model, so we're confident that we're moving into a phase where this work will be respected and built on. We still have work to do to remove barriers to expansion, like increasing funding for all our schools and supporting our community partners to have greater capacity to work with our schools. But we're in a place of lots of possibility and hope. We just have to keep fighting and winning.

KATRINA: I'm really proud of the trust and relationships we've been able to sustain with parents and families. Those relationships are what get parents to engage deeply in their students' learning. We have near-100 percent attendance at special education meetings. We host curriculum nights because our migrant and bilingual families said they wanted to learn our curriculum better so they could more deeply engage with their children. Now we have a curriculum night every month, and we have 50 to 60 parents come each night to learn how they can support their children in science, reading, math, and other learning. Once a month we also have an ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) parent meeting, and we again get about 50 parents attending—that's significant.

We've built these relationships by listening to families' needs and working together on solutions and supports to meet those needs. And we want to keep growing in our ability to do that. Our families are telling us they want support with filling out applications for public library cards. They want support with landlords and landlord laws in Baltimore. More families need support with

the Fair Connectivity Act to be able to get access to the internet. And this year especially, we've seen parents pushing for ESOL classes; they want to become more proficient in English so they can better advocate for themselves and their families.

In the spring, we worked with our community center to find teachers for these ESOL classes. We were hoping to start offering them in late 2022, but our partner withdrew. It was a disappointing setback, but our leadership team quickly regrouped to figure out how we could make it happen—and ESOL classes began in late March.

We also hear from our parents that they want parenting classes. Our community school site coordinator and our mental health professional led some parenting classes, but our families want more. So, we are looking at our next steps, determining how we can bring in other partners or resources, like the Chicago Parenting Program, to help address this need.

JESSICA: I'm proud of so many things about our journey. It's taken 10 years, but we're still here, we're finally in a great place with our leadership and partnerships, and I think we feel more hopeful than we have in a long time that we're going to get this right. I'm proud of the fact that we've made anti-racism and racial justice a huge focus of our community school work. Anti-racism isn't typically the centerpiece of a community hub schools model, but it's so important to the Boston Teachers Union that we passed a resolution in 2019 specifically calling for our union to lead in anti-racism work.

We know how damaging structural and institutional racism can be and has been for the students we serve, so we are trying to lead the effort to fight it intentionally. How can we have a model for school improvement that doesn't also thoughtfully include the anti-racism perspective and how it contributes to racial equity? We are trying to amplify the power of our students, families, and educators so that they can drive bottom-up rather than top-down solutions. So approaching this work with a racial justice framework is important.

Looking forward, our goal is to eventually have all Boston schools be community hub schools. We have a lot of work ahead if we're going to accomplish that. Ideally, we'd revisit the process of identifying and selecting prospective schools so it's more intentional and leads to schools with real interest in and knowledge about community schools. We also want to get some key things like roles and job descriptions codified in our next contract so we are able to expand the model to more schools and expand our leadership group to the larger community. And we want to negotiate new language for our community hub schools coordinator positions that doesn't attach a set amount of money to the position (a lesson we learned from observing other districts). But we need to start with ensuring all our school stakeholders really understand the framework and what it means to be a community hub school.

EDITORS: What advice would you give those who are just starting this journey or thinking about creating community schools in their areas?

JESSICA: Know that this work takes time and requires a groundswell of community support and coalition work—and truthfully, that work is not easy. But it's OK to start slowly and small, with just a few really committed people who don't give up. The core group of us pushing for community schools in Boston have been working together for 10 years now. We've been through so many challenges together. We've had to be flexible. We've had to start over. We've had to be patient. But we didn't give up.

JENNIFER: Definitely don't give up. This really is a journey, and it doesn't happen overnight. Also, be prepared to spend a lot of time winning folks over and fighting for what you know your students deserve. Even though there's so much research and history supporting the value and impact of community schools, there are some ingrained traditional systems and perspectives that you'll need to push against to win a community school that's truly transformational and sustainable. And things won't always go like you planned, so you need to be resilient and persistent and keep trying. Keep fighting.

KATRINA: What I'll add is that you need persistence even if you're an established community school. Even 17 years in, we are still struggling to get certain services off the ground. And that's why I think it's important to start small, as Jessica said. Pick one thing and do it well; otherwise, you'll lose the trust of your staff, students, families, and the community partners that are supporting you.

The community school strategy has made a huge difference for the students at Wolfe Street Academy. It's changed how and what we teach, and it's changed our community for the better. I think everyone needs to be talking about community schools with their union representatives, students, families, and community members. People really need to understand why and how this strategy makes a difference in children's lives. □

> "The community schools strategy has.... changed how and what we teach, and it's changed our community for the better."
>
> –Katrina Kickbush

Wolfe Street Academy students focus on math daily in their homerooms.

Collaborative Community Schools

From Wraparound Services to Co-Leadership

By Emily Lubin Woods

Educators, policymakers, and researchers find themselves now, more than ever, at a moment of inflection. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health and wellness disparities, food insecurity, housing challenges, and the digital divide. Our country is poised to confront its history of racial inequity and perhaps start to think about education reform as something not done "to" kids, but something that entire communities, especially those that are the most disenfranchised, can make decisions about together.

Community schools are an example of a comprehensive education reform initiative that brings communities together to address many of the pressing challenges facing education today.[1]

Emily Lubin Woods serves as head of education for the Richard K. Lubin Family Foundation. Previously, she was a teacher with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) and senior co-trainer in the BPS New Teacher Development Program. This article is reproduced from The Path to Successful Community School Policy Adoption, *1st Edition, by Emily Lubin Woods, published by Routledge.*

PHOTOS: AFT

Unlike traditional schools, community schools serve as a hub, engaging educators, families, and community partners. Open to the community during evenings, weekends, and summers, these schools work with families, students, teachers, and local organizations to identify and coordinate health and social services and to become centers of the community. In this article, I briefly review the research supporting community schools, then turn to the most critical factors for creating sustainable community schools. I also underscore community schools as an equity strategy, focusing on community-based problem solving, drawing on local strengths to address local needs, and engaging in a thorough planning process that ensures shared decision making.

The Case for Community Schools

There is a small but growing number of noteworthy studies that illustrate many of community schools' positive outcomes. These studies include evaluations conducted by Fordham University and ActKnowledge in the 1990s,[2] a 2017 landmark study out of the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center (LPI-NEPC),[3] and a 2020 study by the RAND Corp.[4]

These studies found improved outcomes in areas such as attendance; chronic absenteeism; high school graduation rates;

perceptions of school climate by teachers, parents, and students; and reductions in disciplinary incidents. Gains in academic performance were more nuanced, but the 2017 LPI-NEPC study concluded that well-implemented hub schools reduce barriers to learning and help at-risk students succeed academically.[5] Furthermore, LPI-NEPC researchers concluded that "Ample evidence is available to inform and guide policymakers, educators, and advocates interested in advancing community schools, and sufficient research exists to meet the ESSA [Every Student Succeeds Act] standard for an evidence-based intervention."[6]

These studies, along with the work of policy analysts, have also revealed an important emphasis on equity. As deftly explained by Christopher Edley Jr. and Linda Darling-Hammond of the Learning Policy Institute,

> The promise of community schools is in how they prioritize the education and enrichment of vulnerable students and how they integrate services with systems of governance, professional support, and ongoing community-level dialogue. Comprehensive community schools represent a powerful equity strategy because they are designed to identify and address inequitable practices, disrupt the systems that perpetuate educational and economic disparities, and increase opportunities for all through partnerships among all of the actors who shape children's opportunities. By building from the knowledge and assets of students' families and fostering collaboration across a community, these schools provide students with integrated supports and enrich their academic skills in ways that fundamentally undermine entrenched inequities.[7]

The LPI-NEPC study found that community school partnerships among the school and various community-based organizations are intentional, strategic, and relationship-driven, and as such, can serve to replicate some of the learning environments of students in higher-resourced areas and help close opportunity and achievement gaps. A brief from Policy Analysis for California Education corroborates these findings, explaining that in community schools, families "Are not blamed for students' behaviors or challenges, and instead school staff and partners are trained and explicitly supported to disrupt habits and patterns of racism and inequality as they appear in classrooms and schools."[8]

It is also important to note the power and impact of community schools to mitigate some of the longer-term hardships exacerbated by the pandemic. The relationships, partnerships, and infrastructure that were in place from the start provided an immediate network of support and clear channels of communication with families. Community school advocates argue that community school strategies enable a more agile and streamlined approach to crisis response than many non–community schools, some of whom compare school staff to paramedics and the work during the height of the pandemic to triage.[9] At Harlem Park Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, for example, the head of the BellXcel afterschool program expressed that the school had been able to sustain at least 80 percent of what they had been doing prior to the pandemic. She also noted that at the outset, staff would often spend 10–12 hours a day on the phone with families helping with issues such as child care and mental health needs.

Still, community schools are not a Band-Aid or a silver bullet. In the wise words of Jane Quinn and Marty Blank, two community school pioneers, community schools "represent a long-term strategy, not a quick fix."[10] While the community school movement is fully aware of the difficulty of its mission, proponents believe that real systemic change will only happen slowly over a long period of time.

Understanding Community Schools

Many scholars have studied community schools and offered helpful insights into their essential elements. One basic working definition describes the community school as "both a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities."[11] It further states that community schools use public schools as a locus to cultivate "inventive, enduring relationships among educators, families, community volunteers, business, health and social service agencies, youth development organizations and others committed to children."[12] Community schools are not a standalone program; they are a comprehensive strategy.[13]

Making Community Schools a Reality

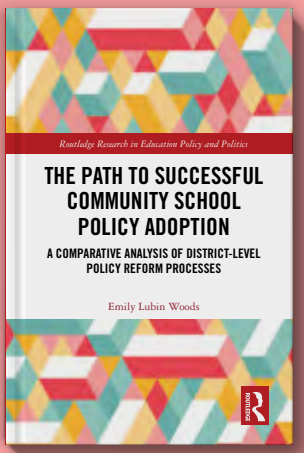
Though much research demonstrates the promise of community schools to improve academic achievement and mitigate structural inequality, very little work has investigated what must happen in the policy process for these schools to become a reality. This book helps to fill this gap in policy research by looking closely at policy processes in two districts—Boston and Baltimore.

I approach this work through several different lenses. I am first and foremost a qualitative researcher who spent close to a year and a half conducting interviews and extensive follow-up conversations with nearly 100 policy actors and community school advocates who care deeply about this work and were eager to share their part in the history. I dug through files upon files of minutes from budget hearings and convenings of activist groups, trying to make sense of what happened.

I am also a former Boston Public Schools middle school teacher who later spent the better part of a decade in classrooms all over Boston as one of two senior trainers in the district's New Teacher Development Program. As a teacher, trainer, and colleague of teachers at all levels across disciplines, I have lived a day-to-day, on-the-ground urban school experience.

It is my hope that this book will catalyze policymakers and school leaders to think about comprehensive school reform efforts such as community schools and will provide some concrete starting points. To that end, this article drawn from the book includes key questions stakeholders should ask themselves to determine if they are ready to establish community schools.

–E. L. W.



It is important to consider several other attributes of community schools. Compared with other schools, community schools engage a far broader range of stakeholders to educate students[14] and offer a "more concrete alternative to standardized testing and privatization, one that begins to connect school reform to broader community development efforts that holistically address the needs of children."[15] Some scholars see community schools as a hybrid of community centers and traditional schools,[16] becoming better able to respond more democratically to a variety of unpredictable issues facing communities when they serve as central institutions and spaces.[17]

Furthermore, community schools must respond to idiosyncratic community contexts, including differences in populations, potential external partners, and general community needs.[18] More simply, every single community school is and must be different from the next.[19] As such, community schools serve as a narrative that presses against the "powerful crosscurrent of bureaucracy and centralization" and campaigns against the notion of the school as a separate and isolated institution.[20] In fact, the Black Panther Party was a staunch supporter of community schools, instituting the Oakland Community School that existed from 1974 to 1982.[21] It provided

> An education that, among other things, taught African American and poor people about their history in the United States … and [served to challenge] existing public education concepts for black, brown and other poor and racially marginalized communities during the 1970s and 1980s.[22]

This coordinated, community-centered, heterogeneous, and community asset-oriented approach is one that is currently absent from the dominant education reform discourse.[23] While community schools can benefit all children, they are perhaps most potent in meeting the needs of students who face the greatest challenges both within and outside the educational system.[24] It is also important to note that an assumption of community schools is that these challenges arise from "policies and social/economic structures rather than with the characteristics of individual children and their families."[25] This notion stands in sharp contrast to the assumption that these inequalities stem from some sort of deficit model. In other words, community schools seek to build upon and leverage community assets. At their core, they require collaboration, community wisdom, and true participation.[26]

One way of conceptualizing community schools is rooted in what's known as the "Four Pillars" of a community school strategy, as identified by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center.[27] These four pillars are:

- Integrated student supports: through partnerships with social and health service providers, coordination of a strategic set of services and supports is designed to meet previously identified needs.[28]
- Expanded learning time and opportunities: out-of-school-time enrichment that provides a combination of targeted academic support and activities "emphasize[s] real-world learning and community problem solving."[29] The *Community Schools Playbook* underscores that out-of-school enrichment opportunities must be co-owned and the responsibility of schools and the community itself.[30]
- Active family and community engagement: families and communities are engaged participants in decision-making around their children's educational experiences.[31]
- Collaborative leadership practices: school leadership, in tandem with parents and community partners, creates a participatory practice of shared ownership, trust, and responsibility for community school strategies.[32]

Marty Blank and his colleagues describe an additional pillar centered on the connection between teaching and the community: "Using the tools of project-based and culturally relevant learning, a community school curriculum also engages neighborhood assets as a resource for education and community development."[33]

Together, as a meaningful whole, these components are greater than the sum of their parts.

Community Schools as an Equity Strategy

One of the key drivers behind the movement to establish community schools is their potential to mitigate entrenched social inequities through the opportunities and resources provided to students and families.

> Community schools cannot overcome all problems facing poor neighborhoods—that would require substantial investments in job training, housing and social safety net infrastructures, and other poverty alleviation measures. However, they have a long history of connecting children and families to resources, opportunities, and supports that foster healthy development and help offset the harms of poverty.[34]

Moreover, community schools have the potential to increase social capital available to students and families.[35] They "can be important sources of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital that build families' capacities to facilitate consequential changes in their communities."[36]

To get to the heart of equity, however, it is helpful to think not just in terms of community schools' potential to mitigate inequities but about how advocates might get there. This "how" can be fraught with equity implications. Here, it may be helpful to look at the work of education professor Novella Keith, who considered questions of equity throughout the evolution of community schools,[37] and to

Well-implemented community schools reduce barriers to learning and help at-risk students succeed academically.

think about how today's community schools could be the vehicles for a different way of involving the community in their students' schooling. Keith warns against a community schools initiative that solely emphasizes service provision, explaining that those charged with establishing the initiative must challenge the mainstream notion that "Outside professional experts know and have the solutions to the community's problems."[38] Keith also asks the important questions of "who" should be included in the community school partnerships and "what roles should the participants play."[39]

Keith's work provides much to consider and unpack. Inherent in the vision of community schools as a service delivery approach is the danger of seeing parents and community members as willing or passive supporters of the school culture, or worse, those needing to be fixed (often referred to as a *deficit model*).[40] Alternatively, community members must be recognized as valuable, asset-laden "change agents."[41] Many of today's community school advocates view community schools not as a more efficient service delivery strategy but as a way to lift up the voices of the people who have not been able to engage fully in the life of their students' schooling. When partnerships are truly authentic, the families and community members are seen as essential contributors—key educational partners—who can co-lead the work.[42]

Another way in which community schools can become a true equity strategy is with an emphasis on developing "enriching opportunities for learning and engagement that are culturally sustaining and transformative."[43] Among other things, this requires a commitment from school leaders to anti-racist and culturally appropriate pedagogy.[44] For schools to become a true equity strategy, they must be welcoming spaces in which both students and the communities around them can become part of a culturally responsive ecosystem and "feel empowered to exercise collective agency in the quest for broader change."[45]

Tapping social capital to "improve underserved communities' access to power structures and institutions in their surroundings"[46] is a demonstrable way in which community schools can promote social justice. When community members are enabled access to "political leaders, media representatives, activists, grantmakers, and others with critical resources,"[47] they can become agents of change.

In sum, if community schools are seen solely as a mechanism for providing more services to more students; if there continues to be a deficit perception; and if communities, students, and families do not have an authentic and valued voice in how their students are taught and supported, then these initiatives will fall short of their promise to promote equity. Advocates touting community schools as an equity strategy must consider these concerns from the outset as they map out their strategic plan for how to get to a place of equity and transformative change.

Planning for Sustainable Community Schools

Before trying to implement community schools, advocates may want to examine factors that indicate readiness in their respective districts and may wish to determine a plan to fill any gaps. Even with the growing body of national and international research that speaks to the potential of community schools, so many proverbial stars must align in the policy world for community schools to even have a fighting chance of getting established, let alone staying put as a long-term, viable, and successful policy path.

Strategic, relationship-driven partnerships can help community schools close opportunity and achievement gaps.

Based on my intensive investigation into the development of community schools in two cities, as well as my review of existing research on community schools, I developed the following questions to help assess a district's and city's readiness for policy action to adopt community schools.

Policy

1. Is there a strong public perception of one or two pressing and urgent challenges that policymakers and communities feel obligated to address?
2. Can advocates articulate a persuasive case for why community schools fit these problems/challenges, whether as a discrete initiative or a policy option that could operate in conjunction with a new or existing policy solution?
3. Are designers of policy learning from districts nationally that are doing analogous work? Is there a plan to receive ongoing support around implementation and feasibility?
4. Are there people who have the ear of leadership and the ability to exert pressure to facilitate policy adoption?
5. Is there commitment from city leadership and school district leadership to establish a citywide steering committee to oversee the work and/or ensure clear systems for communications between the city and the school department?

Stakeholder/Community Ownership

1. Do a broad array of the advocates for community schools possess a clear definition of what it means to be a community school, one that provides common language that is owned and co-developed by multiple stakeholders?
2. Has the set of strategies that comprise the community schools initiative been examined from a variety of perspectives, including ensuring that they do not perpetuate any deficit conceptions of students and their families?
3. Is there a shared commitment to involving all stakeholders in developing an outcomes framework to guide the work?
4. Do principals and members of school leadership teams have a commitment to and desire to engage in the work?
5. Has the school district established a set of protocols that enables community voice to influence school practices and policies at each school?

6. Are community organizations aligned with the community school vision and willing to bring together various stakeholder groups around common advocacy issues?

Technical Feasibility

1. Is there a roadmap that inspires confidence at a number of technical levels, including short- and long-term funding, as well as building and enabling capacity of principals and members of school leadership teams?
2. Is there a plan (agreed to by school and city leadership) that uses an outcomes framework to guide both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the initiative on a school-by-school basis and for the districtwide initiative as a whole? Will this plan address how outcomes will inform ongoing course corrections? Will this plan address how the data that emerge can help bring other stakeholders onboard during determination processes and ensure longer-term sustainability? In other words, will the plan address how to use results and data for proving and improving impact?

From Vision to Reality

For community schools to live up to their expectation as a true equity strategy, the meeting of physiologic and safety needs must happen with, not to, a community, and the individual community members must play a much greater role. It may be helpful here to bring in once again the work of Novella Keith[48] and her dichotomy between service-provision models and initiatives that build authentic partnerships by viewing community members as valuable change agents who can co-lead the work.[49] Her work begs the question: What would it look like if equitable outcomes are achieved in a way that is truly transformative and does not perpetuate the status quo? Without meaningful participation, it may be that community schools are better able to connect students and families to services, but they will not stand as a true equity strategy.

Community schools help students, families, and community partners build on their collective strengths.

Pushing the conversation further, are there ways in which community school policies could serve as levers for equity? What would it look like if policy could embed measures of equity that transcend service provision outcomes? Traditional student- and community-centered outcomes include the reduction of chronic absenteeism, increases in attendance, a more positive school climate, increases in the percentages of parents involved in the school, and a higher volume of community partnerships. These outcomes are important, but should there be outcomes that directly address issues of equity? And if so, how does one measure these more invisible, transformational equity components of the work—namely, the changes to how stakeholders participate and the power shifts therein?

Another critical conversation concerns who should be present at the districtwide policy table and who is making decisions on behalf of whom. One community schools advocate summarized key problems:

> It is very frustrating to me to be in rooms where we're talking about full-service community schools and all of these folks who are middle-class, it becomes more about them than it becomes about the children and the families.... Collaboration works ... when people take the time to be reflective.... What kind of biases am I bringing to the table? What kind of dynamic am I creating? Do I understand the reform process sufficiently to really be a partner in the process? Reform in education is messy and is not easy.... You have principals with a certain level of autonomy, you have community-based folks with a certain level of autonomy, you have teachers with a certain level of autonomy, and you're trying to get everybody on the same page to focus on students. It is not easy. Being at the table is the first start.[50]

As this last statement underscores, it is a question of not only who should be at the policy table but also what types of collaborative and reflective behaviors should be the norm. Moreover, who should hold the power? Future study is needed to begin to scratch the surface of the intersection of race, class, power, and equitable collaboration and participation in the design and implementation of community schools.

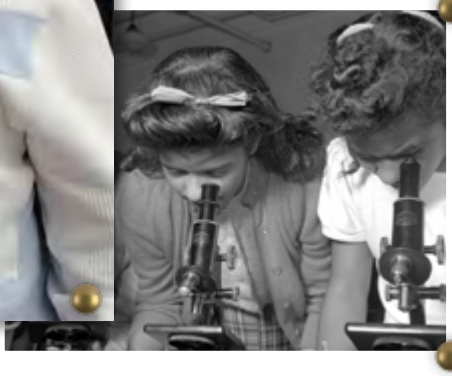
For decades, education reformers have wrestled with the complex question of what roles schools can and should play at the intersection of social service needs and in-school learning,[51] leading inevitably to the overplayed yet accurate refrain that "schools can't do it alone."[52] This truism has resulted in the argument that education reforms focused solely on efforts inside school walls are not broad enough to transform the educational landscape.[53]

If schools couldn't do it alone before, they certainly cannot now. Community schools rest on the assumption that students will not succeed in school without a focus on the broader community[54] and that education policy must offer an alternative to the myriad single-reform solutions that have neither narrowed the achievement gaps nor ensured positive academic outcomes for all children.[55] More importantly, they offer a way forward for students, families, educators, and community partners to collaboratively build on their collective strengths and make their own visions of success a reality. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/woods.

THE POWER OF BELONGING

HBCUs Cultivate Excellence in STEM and Beyond



By Fedrick C. Ingram

There's a point in your life as a parent, as a father, when you find yourself in uncharted territory. One point is when your child has an idea about their future that you never considered. That point for me was when my daughter told us that she wanted to be a doctor.

Of course, I was proud. Medicine is an incredible field filled with talented, giving people who spend their lives trying to help others. But I had nothing in my background to pull from. No life experience I could impart to help her along this journey. All I knew for sure is what my parents told me and what I'm sure every Black person has heard a million times in their lives: "If you are going to be successful, you will have to work twice as hard to be considered just as good."

For those reading who are not Black, understand that little Black boys and girls are raised knowing that this country has a long history (distant and recent) of undermining and sometimes erasing Black achievement. They know that mediocre will not cut it, not for long. If you want to appear competent, you study for four hours where others study for two. If class starts at 9 a.m., be there at 8:55. It is tiresome, draining, and ultimately necessary to always strive for excellence just to be seen as competent.

I've done a lot of hard work in my life. As someone who grew up playing music in the school band, I've spent thousands of hours practicing on my saxophone—devoting nights and weekends to chasing excellence. And while I never pursued medicine, I know it's *very* hard work. I know the hours are notoriously tough. The exams are brutal. I would be lying if my knees didn't shake a little when I contemplated what it would take to succeed as a Black woman in a field that is already incredibly taxing. Not due to lack of faith in my daughter, but because I could not see far enough down that road to prepare her for what was coming. I could not look back in my own life to offer any clues because my life had been so different.

In 1991, I was a smart kid and pretty good musician about to graduate from high school in Southern Florida. Even though I had no political dog in the fight or any military background, I had all but decided my future was in the Army as part of the military band. Chance had it that my high school band director was a graduate

Fedrick C. Ingram is the secretary-treasurer of the AFT. Previously, he served as the president of the 140,000-member Florida Education Association and as an AFT vice president. In 2022, he was elected to serve as a trustee on the board of the NAACP Foundation. Early in his career, he was a music teacher and band director in Miami-Dade public schools; he has performed nationally as a saxophone soloist and conductor.

of Xavier University of Louisiana, an HBCU (historically Black college or university) in New Orleans. He suggested I think about college, specifically a Black college, instead of the military. This one conversation changed the trajectory of my life.

Ultimately, I chose Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach—mainly because it was the closest HBCU to my house—making me the first in my family to attend and graduate from college. So you can imagine that I was not particularly prepared for the experience, which was highlighted by a phone conversation I had with my mother shortly after meeting my band director, Dr. Harold Bray.

"Yeah, he's a doctor, too. I guess he teaches and then works in a hospital to deliver babies," I told my mom on the phone, astonished. I laugh now, but 18-year-old me had never met a Black PhD before. I had no frame of reference for what the fruits of academic labor looked like. I had never thought about education as a goal in and of itself—just a requirement. But at Bethune-Cookman, I began to understand and admire people my age who strove to be greater, who did not aspire to hang out on the corner for the rest of their days.

At Bethune-Cookman, the kids *wanted* to be better. They had ambition, and that ambition began to rub off on me. Soon, I was joining organizations I'd never thought to join, taking courses I'd never thought to take. I thought, "If these people can do it, so can I."

What I didn't quite appreciate at the time but am grateful for now is that Bethune-Cookman was giving me models of success I had never seen before. I was witnessing ambition in real time as my fellow students booked it to class and camped out in libraries. I was seeing the results of that ambition in my professors, who opened the world of science and history to me while treating me like their own child. This university gave me a new appreciation for Black people, *my people*, and everything we have contributed to the world, sometimes despite the world. Every day I swam in the waters of Black excellence, and it made my chest big with pride.

I couldn't have known then, but that sense of belonging would be crucial for my success; indeed, the success of most students, especially in their first year, is dependent on that feeling of belonging. According to a summary of research by the Teaching + Learning Lab* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Numerous … studies spanning the K–20 spectrum have reported a connection between a student's sense of belonging to a community or set of communities, and the student's achievement motivation, expectations to achieve, as well as actual academic achievement."[1]

When I was at Bethune-Cookman, I didn't know all of this research on the importance of belonging. But I lived it. So when my daughter declared she wanted to be a doctor, I knew that one piece of the puzzle would be finding the right HBCU for her. And I knew there would be several to choose from. One of the reasons I was so confident in HBCUs was not just my personal experience but their track record for graduating roughly 50 percent of all Black doctors in this country.[2]

Consider Spelman College in Atlanta, which "has been recognized by the National Science Foundation as the leading producer of Black women who earn doctorates in the sciences—even while 45 percent of its students come from low-income families."[3] Spelman has graduated the likes of Audrey F. Manley, the first Black female chief resident at Cook County Children's Hospital in Chicago and the first Black female assistant surgeon general.[4] While the push for more people of color in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) feels recent, Spelman was ahead of the curve: nearly 40 years ago, the school "committed itself to becoming the nation's principal educator of Black women in STEM fields."[5]

But Spelman isn't the only HBCU excelling in STEM. Xavier University of Louisiana "produces more Black students who graduate from medical school each year than any other university in the United States."[6†] These are the stories and headlines too often left out of the narrative about the state of Black education and replaced with narratives about failure and dysfunction.

My confidence in HBCUs is not simply personal. These schools—a network of more than 100 schools nationwide—have been serious about Black excellence since the 1800s. A recent study by the United Negro College Fund[7] showed that while HBCUs make up roughly 3 percent of all colleges and universities, they educate 10 percent of all Black college students and nearly 20 percent of Black students in STEM majors. (And even though my focus here is STEM, I have to mention our judicial system: HBCUs account for 80 percent of Black judges and 50 percent of Black lawyers.)

*For tips on how to enhance students' sense of belonging, visit go.aft.org/v75.
†For an in-depth look at how Xavier supports aspiring doctors, see go.aft.org/tgb.

When we coupled that with the fact that Black STEM students at HBCUs are less likely to experience identity threat than their peers at predominantly white institutions (PWIs),[8] the choice seemed even clearer.

Ultimately, my daughter chose Howard University—not far from where her old man works—and earned a degree in chemical engineering. As an undergrad, she had access to Howard University Hospital, where she developed and applied practical knowledge, and to professors who looked like her and who went from the operating room to the classroom. Now, she's in medical school at Emory University. But that win is bittersweet, because I know for every one child with her story, there are 10 more without it.

Equalizing STEM Opportunities

When my daughter told me she wanted to be a doctor, I was a long way from the college freshman who didn't know the difference between an MD and a PhD. I knew it would take years of planning, researching, and money to properly nourish her dream. And because I was lucky enough to have Black teachers and professors who saw promise in me (and because I had made good on that promise through hard work), I had the financial resources to supplement my daughter's STEM education. For example, she attended STEM programs at the University of Michigan and Boston College while moving through high school. And unlike many Black students, she was able to take many challenging STEM courses at her public school.

Obviously, all public school students are introduced—to varying degrees—to subjects like math, biology, chemistry, and other sciences as they progress from elementary to high school. But that picture becomes less equitable as coursework becomes more specified and intense. One critical disparity is in access to calculus. A shocking 20 percent of Black students (compared with 13 percent of white and Hispanic students) are in high schools that don't offer calculus, according to researchers with the Urban Institute. They framed that inequity as a civil rights issue because Black students are among those who benefit the most from advanced math courses—such courses increase both learning and the likelihood of choosing and completing a STEM degree.[9]

Similarly, advanced coursework in all subjects has been found to enhance students' self-esteem and increase engagement, resulting in fewer absences and suspensions.[10] But the on-ramps to advanced coursework in high school can appear as early as elementary school with "gifted and talented" programs, or in middle school with Algebra I and other advanced coursework; for students who are not identified as "gifted" early on, it can be much more difficult to gain access to these kinds of preparation, requiring persistent advocacy and significant time and energy that families may not have.[11] An analysis by the Center for American Progress found a concerning "funnel" reducing Black and Indigenous students' opportunities to experience Advanced Placement (AP) and other advanced courses. While Black students were only slightly less likely than white students to attend a school that offers AP courses, Black students were far less likely to enroll in those courses. And, of those who enrolled and took an AP test, Black students were far less likely to earn passing scores.[12]

There are plenty of reasons for this, but there are two I feel the need to highlight: the legacy of redlining and the lack of diversity among teachers.

Redlining

The biggest culprit began nearly 100 years ago, when the federal government took steps to protect homeownership during the Great Depression—but only for white homeowners. The government-sponsored Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) bought up mortgages that were about to default and offered new loans with more favorable terms. In determining which loans to refinance, the HOLC implemented the practice of redlining, a (fully legal) housing segregation policy that identified which neighborhoods were safe or unsafe for investment, using explicitly racial criteria; regardless of socioeconomic status, neighborhoods with Black residents were designated red, or highest risk, while neighborhoods with white residents were much more likely to be designated green, or safe for investment. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA), which was created to help renters become homeowners, also refused to insure mortgages in or near Black neighborhoods—with the explicit goal of maintaining segregated schools as well as neighborhoods. To make matters worse, the FHA—an arm of the federal government—funded and worked with builders who refused to sell homes to Black people. Under these policies, Black neighborhoods or even the appearance of Black neighbors became a sign of trouble, places and people to be avoided by white people for fear of losing their investments or bringing harm to their children.[13]

These practices didn't just explicitly maintain a system of racial segregation—they also exacerbated the wealth gap. Black people were essentially trapped in neighborhoods and homes that could not accrue the same levels of value to be passed down to their kids, systematically endowing this cornerstone of wealth-building to white people.

However, another cost was the quality of education these Black families were—and still are—able to obtain. In addition to maintaining school segregation (explicit or de facto), redlining impacted and continues to impact the health of local schools,[14] which are primarily funded on the local level by property taxes. The lower the value of homes, the less money flows into schools. That means lower-paid teachers and fewer resources for those who need it most. Some of those resources, like AP courses, end up being the purview of wealthier, whiter neighborhoods that are often out of reach for Black families.

In many ways, HBCUs have been our conduit to the middle class when other ways were closed to us. While white men returning after World War II took advantage of the GI Bill, which helped them buy houses and build the generational wealth that is still being enjoyed today, Black soldiers were barred from that government handout. This is one reason you so often see the Black community relying

on itself to save itself, to feed and clothe itself. Our HBCUs, though built primarily to educate when others refused, have had another purpose: building the Black middle class and building equity at the same time. HBCUs not only give us access to high-quality education—they also correct the wrongs of redlining by helping students from families with low incomes seek the American dream.

By providing "nearly twice as much college access to low-income students than other colleges and universities,"[15] HBCUs have become a crucial lifeline for Black folks. At non-HBCUs, only about 32 percent of students receive Pell grants (which are only for students with low incomes), but the percentage is more than double that at HBCUs.

The cumulative impact is enormous. Evidence suggests that HBCUs are far more effective than highly ranked universities in moving students up the economic ladder.[16] That is a real, tangible impact on the wealth, and therefore the health and well-being, of the Black community. This is the reason Black folks treat high school graduations like parties—we know our babies are on a path to do better for themselves and, ultimately, for the community they came from.

As impressive as this is, HBCUs should not be shouldering so much of the weight of recovering from redlining. There is a consistent correspondence between redlined neighborhoods, concentrated poverty, and school funding inequity. Our K–12 funding system depends heavily on local property taxes, and Black homeowners tend to have lower incomes and home values than white homeowners. That means less local money available for Black students, even as greater investments are needed to help them reach the same educational outcomes.[17]

While redlining is no longer legal, it's still setting up Black families and students to fail. Districts serving majority Black students are far more likely to have inadequate funding and to have poor student outcomes—in a recent study from the Albert Shanker Institute, 76 percent of the nation's majority Black/Hispanic districts were underfunded and scored below the US average on math and reading tests, compared to only 14 percent of majority white districts. Racial segregation in the United States was intentional, coordinated, and large-scale, and we need similarly intentional, coordinated, and large-scale interventions in both housing and K–12 school funding systems in order to right these wrongs.[18]

This vicious cycle is often ignored while society instead congratulates those few who escape it as examples of hard work and determination. I'm not here to say otherwise, only to point out that sometimes you also need just plain luck to help you escape the systems that trap you. My story is a testament to that.

Teacher Diversity

One way I got lucky was having about 90 percent Black teachers in K–12. Sadly, that was just luck because the teaching force has long been primarily white. These days, the numbers are a little better, but they are still not where they need to be: the teaching profession is 79 percent white, with Black teachers making up only 7 percent of the force. In contrast, just 47 percent of K–12 students are white, and 15 percent are Black.[19]

Recruiting and retaining more Black teachers is critical because research repeatedly shows that Black students benefit greatly when they see and are seen by Black teachers. One study says that Black students who have at least one Black teacher by the third grade are 13 percent more likely to go to college. That number jumps to 32 percent if they have two Black teachers. And for Black boys like me, from low-income families, on-time high school graduation rates jump nearly 40 percent with just two Black teachers in their lives.[20]

The simple truth is that representation is a powerful tool for self-actualization, especially for people who are *routinely left out* of centers of power and influence. Networks like BET, magazines like *Ebony*, or movies like *Black Panther* are not just there to serve a niche commercial demographic; they are there to feed the souls of those who don't see themselves reflected, let alone lauded, in a proportionate way. It may be hard to truly grasp if you're from a group that is often the default, but seeing a Black woman on the Supreme Court makes the dreams of little girls real. Seeing a Black family in the White House makes the United States feel more like home.

But these avatars for hope start much closer to home by way of teachers, the mentors our children look to in order to learn about the larger world outside their windows and their place in it. And when Black children don't see Black educators holding classes on the intricacies of gravity or how photosynthesis works, it signals a long, lonely road toiling as an "only" in their future STEM classes and professions.

Thankfully, we know Black teachers have an impact on taking advanced courses, such as AP, honors courses, and International Baccalaureate. Not only are Black students more likely to enroll, stu-

dents of all races and ethnicities are too.[21] As a student who benefited from seeing and being seen by Black teachers, I can't emphasize this research enough. As a father, I know seeing and being seen had a huge impact on my daughter too. And as a union leader, I'm committed to increasing teacher diversity—especially in STEM courses.

Last summer, our Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force released its report *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?*; it found, among other things, that retaining and expanding the number of Black teachers will require treating them like professionals, showing them the respect they deserve, and, yes, offering better compensation.*

When you consider that HBCUs deliver half of all Black teachers,[22] it only makes sense to empower and engage HBCUs when looking for the next generation of educators. Sadly, not enough attention or funding has been paid to these crucial institutions.

The United Negro College Fund released a study showing that the federal funding gap between HBCUs and PWIs quadrupled between 2003 and 2015, from $400 to $1,600 per student.[23] And that gap is targeted: during that window, federal funding for HBCUs decreased much more dramatically than for PWIs, with the most significant declines for private HBCUs (about half of all HBCUs).[24] But the problem is much worse than that. About 20 percent of HBCUs are land-grant schools, which are supposed to get annual funding from federal and state governments—but many states have refused to fund their share, to the tune of $12.8 billion between 1987 and 2020.[25] And many non-land-grant public HBCUs have had to sue the states to get the funding they have been owed for decades.[26]

Among other problems with facilities, faculty pay, and more, this chronic underfunding puts HBCU STEM programs at a serious disadvantage. For students pursuing PhDs in STEM, the ultimate goal is to end up at an R1 (top-tier research) university. Researchers at R1 schools are significantly more likely to be awarded the grant funding they need to complete their research and advance in their careers—including in ways that reflect well on the university and make it more likely to attract funding, faculty, and the most promising students in the next generation of researchers. While many HBCUs have sought R1 status, none have received it to date.[27] The impacts of generations of underfunding ripple out in a thousand ways like this, creating still more challenges that HBCU STEM programs, faculty, and students have to overcome.

While we know Black folks have always had to make dimes out of nickels, there's no excuse for this targeted inequity. By deeming HBCUs unimportant to our nation's overall education, this country has starved crucial institutions of crucial funding. This is not accidental. Everyone knows that the path to economic equity often goes through a school building, and if the past is prologue, then it's not surprising that Black economic freedom—a major target of racist laws and intentions—is hobbled through the starving of Black centers of education.

But all the news isn't bad.

Educators and students were elated to see the Biden-Harris administration recognize the vital role of HBCUs with several billion dollars in federal funding starting in 2021, including $3.7 billion in COVID-19 relief funding and $500 million in grant funding.[28] In addition, the FY21 Omnibus Appropriations Act authorized the Department of Education to cancel nearly $1.6 billion in HBCU loans issued for capital improvements, the result of a bill sponsored by North Carolina Rep. Alma Adams.[29] These are welcome signs from a government that seems to understand the value of Black education. But elections change things. Who is to say what will happen to HBCU funding if a politician who works overtime to erase our history from libraries and lauds the criminals who take our lives as "heroes" gets into the White House?

I am not here to say that every Black child must attend a Bethune-Cookman, a Hampton, or a Howard—or that no Black student should attend a predominantly white institution. But I do feel that a foundational pride and encouragement to excellence is a unique gift given only in the halls and campuses of HBCUs. So I'm glad to see interest in HBCUs surging. The *New York Times* reported in summer 2022 that applications to HBCUs rose 30 percent between 2018 and 2021.[30]

It is my opinion that young Black people watched the spread of President Trump's naked bigotry, plus the constant deluge of Black people turned into hashtags thanks to often unpunished police officers, and looked to HBCUs as a welcome respite. I remember reading of four young women, all excellent students with acceptance letters to our country's most prestigious Ivy League schools, saying they chose schools like Hampton and Spelman because "College is the time when you're trying to figure out who you are.... It's impossible to figure that out in a space where you not only feel like you have to assimilate to fit into that space, when they didn't invite you there or they tolerate you there, but you have to prove that your existence has value."[31] HBCUs not only offer a respite for young adults but act as an incubator for people determined to make the world more equitable.

That feeling of belonging is crucial. If we want to maintain or increase the number of Black doctors, nurses, engineers, and scientists graduating from HBCUs, we have to nurture that same feeling of belonging in their K–12 education when it comes to STEM courses.

Education has proven to be one of the most reliable tools in Black America's quest for equality in this country. As a leader, a teacher, and a father, I'll close by speaking directly to Black youth: I ask you to consider joining the legacy of those like Vice President Harris, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, author Toni Morrison, and countless others. I ask you to join the ever-expanding ranks of Black excellence who have left an indelible mark on American history. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/ingram.

*To read the task force's report, visit go.aft.org/rfq.

Photo Credits

Page 23: courtesy of Fedrick C. Ingram; Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Page 24: Erik S. Lesser / Stringer / Getty Images Entertainment; Alpha Stock / Alamy Stock Photo

Page 25: WENN Rights Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Page 26: Kevin Coles / Flickr; AB Forces News Collection / Alamy Stock Photo; State Archives of Florida / Florida Memory / Alamy Stock Photo

Page 27: Mandel Ngan / Staff / AFP / Getty Images

How to Read Difficult Books

A Guide for High School and College Students

By Daniel T. Willingham

It seems obvious why textbooks are hard to read. The material is dense; there's a lot of information packed into relatively few words. Authors often feel obligated to give you a broad, complete understanding of a topic rather than to weave an interesting story from selected details. Teachers are ready to assign a textbook, even if it's boring; it's seen as a regrettable but unavoidable problem.

But there's a more subtle reason that it's hard to stay engaged when you read a textbook. To find out why, read this paragraph, one you might find in a typical high school textbook.

> The Manhattan Project was the United States' effort to produce a nuclear weapon, and it was the largest construction enterprise in the history of science. Because of its sensitive nature, a massive effort was made to keep the project secret. Famous scientists traveled under aliases; Enrico Fermi was known as Henry Farmer, for instance. And all telephone conversations at the test sites were monitored. Despite those efforts, historians agree that it probably would have been impossible to keep the secret if not for the fact that the project was of relatively small size.

Did you notice that the last sentence contradicted the first? Embedding a mistake or contradiction into a text and seeing whether readers notice it is a common research technique to measure comprehension. Readers are asked to judge each text on how well it's written and explain their rating.

Readers are *very* likely to notice a word they don't know. They are also very likely to notice if the grammar of a sentence is wrong. But they are **much less likely to notice when two sentences contradict each other**. Forty percent of high school students missed the contradiction in the paragraph above. To put it another way, if readers simply understand each sentence on its own, they figure they are doing what they're supposed to do.

Coordinating meaning across sentences is crucial to reading comprehension, because sentences can take on quite different meanings depending on the surrounding context. For example, consider a simple sentence, "Maxim waved," in different contexts:

> Ann walked into the pizza parlor, looking for her friends. Maxim waved.
>
> The boat slowly circled the wreckage, looking for survivors. Maxim waved.
>
> "Oh, my God, that's my husband!" Kate whispered. "Don't do anything that would attract his attention!" Maxim waved.

Daniel T. Willingham is a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia. He is the author of several books, including the bestseller Why Don't Students Like School? *This article is drawn with permission from his latest book,* Outsmart Your Brain: Why Learning Is Hard and How You Can Make It Easy.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SERGE BLOCH

In one way, the sentence always means the same thing (the physical act of waving by Maxim), but the more important meaning—why Maxim waved and the likely consequences of his action—is very different. It can be appreciated only if you interpret the sentence in light of what you've already read.

The same issue applies in a far more complex way to reading textbooks. Writers organize the material hierarchically, so readers often need to connect what they're reading now to something they read a few pages ago. But readers expect a simple format. We first learn to read storybooks. Stories are easy to understand because the structure is simple and linear: A causes B, which causes C, and so on. Textbooks' hierarchical format and content are more challenging, so you shouldn't sit down to read a textbook and expect that the author will make your job easy. You need a different approach to reading such content.

When Reading to Learn

What your brain will do: It will read the way you read for pleasure, because that's familiar to you and it's not obvious that it won't work. You'll read making minimal effort to coordinate ideas, trusting that the writer will make the connections explicit and easy to follow.
How to outsmart your brain: Use specialized strategies for comprehension that fit both the kind of material you're reading and the goals you have for reading it.

Learning by reading is a substantial challenge, but with a few strategies under your belt, you can be much more successful in connecting the ideas as the author hoped you will.

TIP 1—Don't Do What Most People Do: Just Read and Highlight

Let's start with the most common tactic people use when reading with the intention of learning. They open the book and start reading. When something strikes them as important, they mark it with a neon highlighter. They believe that the act of highlighting will help affix the information in their memory and that highlighting creates a ready-to-use study guide. Later, they believe, they can refresh their memory by rereading what they've highlighted.

This is a terrible plan. It does not address people's habit of failing to coordinate meaning across sentences and paragraphs. How can you be sure that you are highlighting the most important information if your understanding is hit-or-miss in the first place? Furthermore, even if you understand everything quite well, how can you be sure that you are a good judge of what is important enough to highlight as you read the content of a topic you know little about *for the first time*?

Both problems—you may not understand as well as you think and you may judge importance poorly—suggest that **people don't highlight the most important information.** Researchers have tested that prediction with a simple, clever method. They went to a college bookstore and bought 10 used copies of the textbook for each of three courses. If spotting the most important content were easy, everyone should have highlighted the same material. But the researchers found little overlap in what students had highlighted. That's why I've used boldface type for the important points in this article (and the book it's drawn from); I've done the highlighting for you.

> You shouldn't just plunge into a difficult text; if you first consider what it's about and why you're reading it, you will actually read it differently.

Please note that this advice doesn't mean "never highlight." **Highlighting might be fine if you are reading about a topic you already know a lot about.** If you've been a political consultant for 20 years and you're reading a briefing on a recently concluded statewide campaign, your deep knowledge of the topic means that you will read the document with good comprehension and your knowledge will also make you a good judge of what information in the document is important.

A college student reading the same document as part of a political science course lacks the necessary background knowledge, but there's another reason the political consultant reads the document with better comprehension: she knows what to expect. She knows the type of information such a document usually contains, and she knows the function it's meant to serve. The novice doesn't.

If you have even a vague idea of what to expect when you read, that will make you read differently. You'll notice and remember different details, for example. A chapter on the Human Genome Project, the effort to map all the genes in human DNA, might focus on any of several aspects of such a complex topic. It might describe the expected economic benefits to the pharmaceutical industry or the project's impact on gene therapy. It might describe the politics of the government funding such a huge project. Knowing the author's goal before you begin reading gives you a start on evaluating which ideas in the chapter are most important.

Thus, highlighting is not the only flaw in the "just read and highlight" approach. "Just read" is also a bad strategy, because **you shouldn't plunge into a text without some preparation**.

Now let's consider what you *should* do.

In a sentence: Reading and highlighting is a poor strategy because it fails to provide a framework for understanding before you read and it leads you to decide that some material is more important than other material, even though you have little basis for that judgment.

People can easily fool themselves into thinking they understand what they're reading when they don't.

TIP 2—Use a Reading Strategy That Fits Your Goal

With a textbook or other difficult text, you can't just start reading. You need to bring something to the process rather than wait for the author to intrigue you. At the same time, the advice "Read actively" is nearly useless. You may earnestly set the goal "I'm really going to think as I read, and I'm going to connect ideas," but it's just too easy for your attention to drift.

The solution is to **set a concrete task to be completed as you read**. The best known is called SQ3R, which has been around in various versions since the 1940s. SQ3R is an acronym for these steps:

Survey: Skim the reading, looking at the headings, subheadings, and figures. Get a rough idea of what it's about. This is how you'll determine, for example, that an article about the Human Genome Project is about its economic consequences, not the ethical implications of sequencing human DNA.

Question: Before you read, pose questions that you expect the reading to answer. Headings can be especially useful for this task; for example, if you see the heading "Marr's Contribution to the Philosophy of Science," the obvious question to ask is "What was Marr's contribution to the philosophy of science?"

Read: Keeping in mind the rough idea of the article's content you developed when you surveyed the reading, it's time to actually read. And now you have a concrete task to be completed as you read: look for information that answers the questions you've posed.

Recite: When you've finished each section, recite what you've learned as if you were describing it to someone else. Summarize it and decide if it answers any of your questions.

Review: Reviewing is meant to be an ongoing process in which you revisit the content, focusing especially on the questions posed and the answers you derived.

Research confirms that using SQ3R improves comprehension, and it's easy to see why. I've explained why you shouldn't just plunge into a reading; if you first consider what it's about and why you're reading it, you will actually read it differently. The Survey and Question parts of SQ3R get you to do exactly that. I also emphasized that it's essential to build meaning across sentences, and reading with the questions in mind also helps accomplish that.

The Recite step of SQ3R ought to help you pull your thoughts together and retain content, but even more, it's a check of your comprehension. Remember that people can easily fool themselves into thinking they understand when they don't. Reciting will help you better evaluate your comprehension.

The one drawback to the SQ3R method is that you may slip into "just reading" without thinking much. Here's a trick that might help: after you've posed your questions (and before you start reading), **place some blank Post-it notes in the text**—maybe one at the end of each section. They'll serve as visual reminders that you should stop, try to summarize the section you've just read, and think about whether the section answered any of the questions you posed.

SQ3R is useful, and it's the best known of this sort of strategy, but there are others, including KWL (think about what you Know; what you Want to know; what you've Learned), SOAR (Set goals; Organize; Ask questions; Record your progress), and others. It's no accident that most reading strategies have two important properties in common: they get you to **think about your goal for reading before you start** and **connect the pieces of the reading** by asking big-picture questions.

If these strategies seem like overkill, let me offer an alternative with just one step that may be an easy start to this kind of work. Instead of posing questions in advance, **pose and try to answer questions as you're reading**, especially "Why?" questions in response to stated facts. For example, when you read, "The president can propose legislation, but a member of Congress must introduce it if it's to become a bill," you might ask, "Why must a member of Congress introduce it?" "Why?" questions tend to lead

you to deeper principles and connections, in this case perhaps to the idea of the balance of powers among the three branches of the US government.

The advantage of this method is its flexibility—you don't commit yourself to a set of questions before you've started reading. In addition, it's easy to adapt this strategy to readings that tell you how to do something rather than telling you a bunch of facts. How-to information tends to occur in stages, so you can ask, "Why does this step come next?" The disadvantage of this method is that you can't pose a question to yourself every time the author states a fact—that would slow you down too much—so effective question posing takes some practice.

Again, there's no definitive evidence that one strategy is superior to another. What the evidence shows is that **using a strategy is better than not using one**.

In a sentence: Good reading strategies prompt you to think about the content and set concrete goals for what you're to learn before you read, and help you connect ideas as you read.

TIP 3—Take Notes as You Read

Whenever I meet with a student who is struggling in one of my classes, I always ask her to bring her notes. Everyone has notes they've taken in lectures, but most people do not take notes on the readings. Surveys bear out my experience. People don't take notes on readings because they figure that highlighting serves the same purpose. But we've been over why it doesn't. Taking notes on readings serves the same functions as taking notes during a lecture: **it helps keep you mentally on task, and the notes will help refresh your memory later**.

How should you begin? In particular, how should you prep for taking notes? The same way you prep for reading: by posing questions at the start. But how can you craft good questions about a text you haven't read? The author may give you a good overview in the first few paragraphs, or perhaps there are questions at the end of the reading that provide some guidance. Or maybe the instructor, God bless her, told you what she hoped you'd get out of the reading. Write these at the very top of your notes, so you can keep them in mind as you read.

If the reading includes **headings and subheadings**, you might write those in your notes; they can serve as a skeletal outline. As you read, complete the outline. **For each subheading, write a summary and about three other statements**. These statements might include, for example:

- An important qualification to the summary
- A comment on how this section relates to the main section
- How the section answers one of the questions you posed for the reading as a whole
- An implication of the summary for something else the author concluded

You should also include any new vocabulary terms and their definitions. As much as possible, use your own words, not the author's. There's no point in taking dictation; you need to manipulate the material mentally.

As you consider exactly what to record in your notes, you might **think ahead to how you will use them**. If you'll later be tested, consider that there are different types of test questions, such as short-answer and essay questions. Each emphasizes different types of content. Answers to the former are necessarily short and often call for definitions, dates, or examples to be categorized. Essay exams, of course, pose broad questions, so you had better understand themes and how things connect. If you know how you will be tested, pay special attention to the content that's vital for that type of assessment.

When you've finished reading and taking notes, you may be delighted to be through with the job. Actually, you're not quite done. **Once you've completed the reading, you should look over your notes to be sure you're satisfied**. Did you answer the questions you posed? Are you still convinced that they were the right questions? Do you think your notes are good enough that even if you set them aside for a few weeks, rereading them will enable you to recover all of your insights into the content?

Finally—and you don't have to do it right now—if there's a lecture associated with the reading, you should consider how the two relate. If you are virtuous and completed the assigned reading before the lecture, you can try to anticipate. If the lecture has passed, don't let this task be forgotten.

In a sentence: Take notes on the thoughts generated by your reading strategy; doing so will help ensure that you don't mentally drift into casual reading, and the notes will, of course, be useful for reviewing later.

TIP 4—Allocate Significant Time to Reading

It's difficult to read texts on complex topics written by authors who are not afraid to bore their audience. What's more, you're taking multiple classes, and you also have work around the house (and possibly a job) to do. So if reading makes you feel overwhelmed, you should know that you're not alone.

Most school-related tasks—giving a presentation, for example, or taking an exam—carry immediate, obvious consequences if you fail to prepare. But the cost of failing to read something you ought to is usually delayed, so that's the task that is postponed or abandoned.

Some study guides suggest that that's a good idea, and they offer methods to figure out which readings to neglect as well as tactics for skimming those you do take on. Let's start by debunking a couple of common tricks meant to allow you to skip readings.

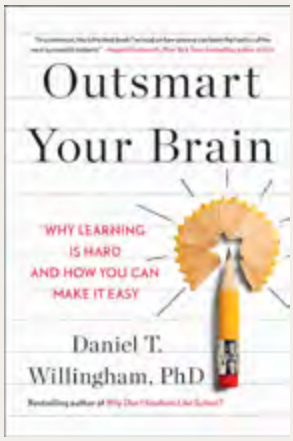
First, **speed reading is not a thing**. You can waggle your hand from the top to the bottom of the page, but you literally cannot read that fast. Lots and lots of studies have been conducted over the decades showing that people who claim to be speed reading are skimming, and as you'd expect, if you skim difficult, unfamiliar material, you won't understand it very well.

Second, if the readings include learning aids such as chapter outlines, chapter previews and summaries, boldface or italicized terms, or practice test questions, **don't try to use these learning aids as a replacement for reading the text**. The funny thing about these features is that there's very good research evidence that they work. Publishing companies paid to have high-quality research conducted; researchers had people read textbook chapters (with or without the learning aids), and they found that people who used the learning aids understood and remembered more than those who did not.

> Taking notes on readings helps keep you mentally on task, and the notes will help refresh your memory later.

Outsmart Your Brain

When you started preschool, your teachers and parents had no expectation that you would be responsible for your own learning. No parent has ever said to a five-year-old, "Your teacher tells me that you're not really giving your best when it comes to learning your colors. She also says that you don't fingerpaint like you really mean it. I don't see why I should keep paying for preschool if you're not going to apply yourself!" It was your teacher's responsibility to create an environment where you would learn.



But by your early teens, school had morphed into a format where you carried much greater responsibility for your own learning. The teacher lectured while you took notes; at home, you read textbooks, completed assignments, and studied for tests. This class format meant your teachers expected that you knew how to (1) set priorities and plan your schedule; (2) read difficult content independently; (3) avoid procrastination; (4) memorize content; (5) avoid distractions; (6) judge when you had studied enough; (7) show what you knew on a test; and (8) deal with emotions like anxiety that interfere with learning. And if you didn't do those things well, it was your problem, not the teacher's. In short, you were expected to be an independent learner.

But your brain doesn't come with a user's manual. Independent learning calls for many separate skills, and you needed someone to teach them to you. Most likely, no one did. Surveys of college students show that the vast majority devise their own strategies for studying, avoiding procrastination, and so on. But the strategies they come up with usually aren't very good. That's why I wrote this book. It's a user's guide to your brain that will allow you to fully exploit its learning potential and so become an independent learner.

For a quick introduction to becoming a better learner, check out Daniel T. Willingham on TikTok: tiktok.com/@daniel_willingham.

But the psychologists Regan Gurung and David Daniel pointed out that students "in the wild" will not necessarily use such materials the same way they were used by students in the laboratory. Gurung and Daniel suggested that some students use learning aids not to supplement the reading but to avoid it. They read the summary, look at the boldface terms, and then try to answer the practice test questions to see whether they understand enough to skip the reading.

Now, everyone has times when their schedule backs up or something unexpected happens. I can understand doing selective skimming of a reading when your planning fails you. But planning to skip readings strikes me as foolish. I've seen study skills books in which the author encourages the reader to adopt this strategy for "secondary" readings. Guessing which readings will be the important ones is like trying to second-guess the stock market; it's not very likely to pay off.

I suggest that you allocate "significant" time to reading. What does that mean in practical terms? In college, you'll often hear "three hours of preparation for each hour in class." A typical college course load calls for 12.5 hours of class time per week, so that rule of thumb means around another 37 hours of preparation outside class (which breaks down to 5.5 hours a day), totaling about 50 hours of work per week. So a lot, but nothing outrageous. That said, people vary in how quickly they read, and obviously some readings take longer to get through than others.

In a sentence: Reading textbooks and other difficult texts is hard work; be sure you schedule enough time to give it the attention and mental effort it requires.

Although even a rough figure of how much time you'll need is difficult to pin down, you should recognize that reading is the chief way that you will learn in college and beyond. It is worth reading carefully, both to learn now and to develop the knowledge, skills, and habits that will make you a successful reader in the future. □

Excerpted from OUTSMART YOUR BRAIN by Daniel T. Willingham, PhD, published by Gallery Books, a division of Simon & Schuster.

For Instructors

Instructors can help students learn to absorb more from their reading. The techniques you use can follow those I've outlined for students.

First, even middling readers don't see a need to improve. So you might consider a demonstration like the Manhattan Project passage at the start of this article. Clip six paragraphs from materials that you're not assigning but that match the subject matter of the class. For two of the six paragraphs, rewrite a sentence so that it contradicts an earlier statement. For each paragraph, students should provide separate ratings for how well written and how easy to comprehend they find it. Collect their responses and see if they have spotted the contradictions.

Second, students will benefit from you modeling the reading strategy. Devote some class time to demonstrating how you would implement it for one of the assigned readings. Even better, stretch this exercise to several readings where you initially provide very explicit instruction in strategy implementation and then offer less support while providing feedback on their attempts.

Even if your students are adept readers, you should tell them the goal for each reading you assign. What do you expect they will learn from it? How does it relate to other readings or topics in the class?

Once your students understand what it takes to read a text deeply, be sure that other policies in your class align with the expectation that they will do that work. If you demand deep reading, you should respect the fact that it's time-consuming. It's fair to trade breadth for depth, so assign fewer pages.

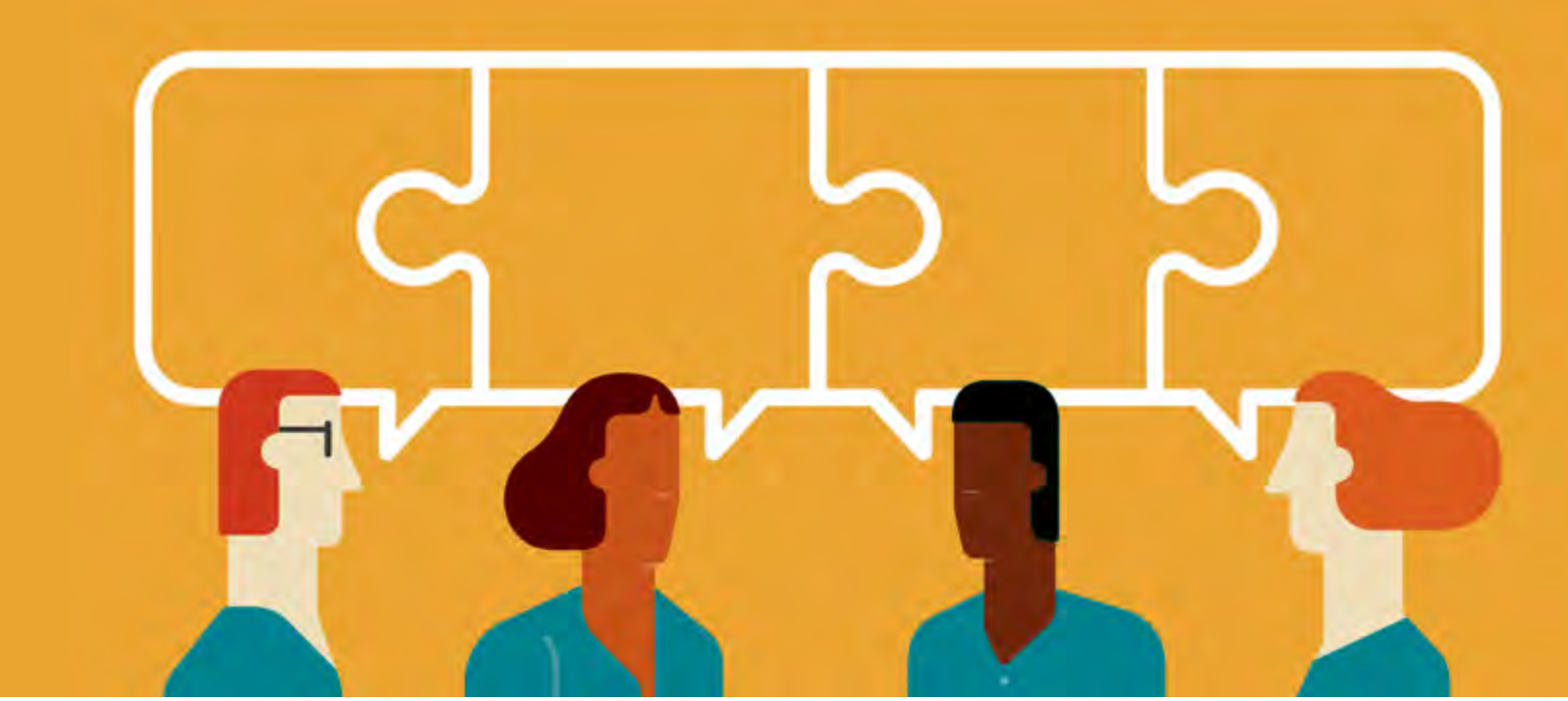
The message that you expect deep reading should also be reinforced by your expectations in class and on assessments. If you say you want students to read deeply but classroom discussions skim the surface, students will quickly perceive what you *really* expect. In my experience, students love class discussions that go deep—they are so accustomed to courses that require only that they absorb information that they are excited to feel they understand something in greater depth. Admittedly, they are a little less enthusiastic about assessments that probe deep understanding, but that's another way that instructors communicate the importance of getting beyond assembling facts in memory: they give tests that require analysis.

Summary for Instructors

- No matter how experienced your students are, don't assume they know how to comprehend difficult texts; you may need to teach reading strategies.
- If your students are overconfident about their abilities, consider a classroom demonstration to show them that they understand less than they think they do.
- Teach students the strategies described in this article, but assume that they will need you to model the process.
- Be explicit about why you assign each reading and what students are to get from it.
- If you want students to read deeply, be sure that the rest of the course aligns with that expectation. For example, the number of pages assigned should be reasonable, and assessments should probe for deep reading, not factoids.

–D. T. W.

The Urgent Need for Free, Frequent Classroom Discussion



By Mike Schmoker

In these fraught, divisive times, K–12 educators have an opportunity to make a profound contribution to students' academic, intellectual, and civic maturity by giving civil, purposeful discussion the priority it deserves. With reading and writing, discussion is a co-equal leg of the tripod of literacy. By engaging in frequent discussions of challenging academic content, students could learn to *listen* (not just wait for their chance to *talk*), to offer their thoughts with an open mind, to fairly consider multiple perspectives, and to agree to respectfully disagree. They could carry these vital abilities with them into adulthood, which would prepare them to become more contributive citizens, better neighbors, and more productive employees. In fact, employers rank communication and interactional acumen among their highest priorities.[1]

We've all seen how growing segments of the population, right and left, are refusing to look beyond their ideological horizons. Because of this, social psychologist and professor Jonathan Haidt is worried that young people growing up in these divided times will enter adulthood unable to communicate effectively and amicably to solve urgent problems in our democracy.[2] Haidt attributes much of the current polarization to extremist social media and excessive screen time, and he urges us to turn away from our screens and talk with each other.

I wholeheartedly agree. But I also believe that K–12 educators could have a profound, even near-term impact on these problems by building text-based classroom discussion, in which every child participates, into every course. Public school teachers could equip a generation of students to become an articulate, fair-minded antidote to our society's current unwillingness, if not inability, to listen to each other. They could achieve this by infusing instruction with purposeful, civil, content-based argument grounded in reason and evidence. By doing so, they could even help right the ship of civic life.

In a moment, I'll describe how any teacher can conduct such discussions. I'll highlight schools where these discussions have led to both high engagement and significant academic gains. But before we get to *how*, we need a firm grounding in *why*.

The Case for Civil, Rational Argument in the Classroom

I often wish that teacher preparation programs did more to impart an appreciation of frequent classroom dialogue because of its indispensable contribution to education and to democratic self-governance. In the 19th century, the philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that human progress in every sphere hinges on our

Mike Schmoker, a former English teacher, administrator, and football coach, is an author, speaker, and consultant. His most recent books are Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning, *2nd ed. (ASCD, 2018), and* Results Now 2.0 *(ASCD, 2023).*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTIN LEÓN BARRETO

willingness to not only tolerate but *seek out and carefully consider* opposing arguments. As Haidt reminds us,

> Mill said, "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that," and he urged us to seek out conflicting views "from persons who actually believe them." People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you *make you smarter*, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics *make themselves stupider*.[3]

Indoctrination and censorship—including self-censorship—are the enemies of progress in a self-governing society.

Eminent educators concur: "Free human dialogue," wrote the late professor and culture critic Neil Postman, "lies at the heart of education."[4] For Gerald Graff, former president of the Modern Language Association, "*talk about* books and subjects is as important educationally as are the books and subjects themselves."[5] Not surprisingly, these views have been roundly validated. The University of Oregon's David Conley conducted a landmark study on the skills and dispositions most essential to both college and career success. He found that tremendous advantages accrue to students who arrive at college able to participate effectively in discussions and to support their assertions with evidence from their reading assignments.[6]

I saw these educators' wisdom many years ago while witnessing an extended dialogue in a high school chemistry class about the states of H_20 (liquid, solid, and gas) that was scheduled after students read about the concepts in their textbook. To deepen their understanding, students articulated aloud and speculated about the conditions by which each of these states were created and transformed. They referred regularly to the language and diagrams in the text as they interacted with one another—always politely, even where they disagreed. The teacher and his colleagues had been trained to keep them on track and to ensure that every student participated. All were deeply engaged as they explored the practical and scientific implications of their new knowledge. Several continued the discussion after the bell rang.

For all this, the greatest value of civil, logical, text-based discussion is civic and humanistic.

The "Lifeblood of Democracy"

"Genuine dialogue is the lifeblood of democracy, requiring an unending exchange—and testing—of ideas,"[7] according to two Northwestern University professors, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro.

Such "genuine dialogue" is our best hedge against intolerance and extremism. But how can we cultivate it? Philosophy professor Jennifer Frey believes we must start with civility. She asserts:

> When we teach civility to students, we must be clear that the basis of its demands is that we all deserve, as members of the learning community, equal respect and equal opportunities to succeed.... If true civility is promoted in our schools, students will feel empowered to speak their minds because one fruit of civility is mutual trust between persons. When we respect one another in speech and deed, we come to trust one another as equals, and it is this trust that gives us the freedom to state our grievances, concerns, and objections without undue worry of retaliation or reproach. In a classroom where rules of civility are recognized and enforced, students can trust that they will be heard and understood and that disagreements will be handled respectfully.[8]

Having learned to exchange ideas with civility, students would be prepared to engage in what Haidt calls the "cure" for political entrenchment and civic enmity: frequent "interaction with people who don't share your beliefs," who will "confront you with counterevidence and counterargument."[9]

The State of K–12 Discussion

Although research on classroom discussion is limited, it seems that most students don't engage in nearly enough meaningful discussion across the curriculum:

> Studies from the past several decades consistently show that students in most classrooms *rarely have the opportunity* to participate in an open, extended, and intellectually rigorous exchange of ideas, during which they get to formulate and defend their own opinions, and consider alternative propositions offered by their peers.[10]

This is especially unfortunate in light of a large-scale survey in which 83 percent of high school students identified "discussion and debate" as a way of learning that would excite them.[11]

When I conduct demonstration lessons on text-based dialogue as a consultant, it immediately becomes apparent that most stu-

Human progress depends on our willingness to seek out and carefully consider opposing arguments.

dents have very limited experience with it. For many, this is the first time they've been *required to participate*, the first time they have received coaching and constructive feedback on speaking audibly enough for all to hear them, and the first time they have been gently coaxed to repeat a remark more clearly—or logically. They need such coaxing, from which they benefit immensely.

I try to be as gentle and affirming as possible when providing feedback. If students only utter a few words at low volume, I try to catch a word or two, repeat it, and tell them that I think they are on the right track and that we would like to hear more. So, could they please repeat their remark just a little louder, so all of us can hear? If they are looking down or are slumped in their seats (out of timidity or habit), I gently suggest that they sit up a little straighter in their chairs—not rigidly, but so that their voices project to the rest of the class. When students' remarks are too brief or disjointed, I compliment them on the attempt and then ask them to try again, with a little more clarity or detail. I often suggest that they use sentence stems (which I write on the board) like "I think … because…." Throughout, I remind them to cite evidence and then elaborate—to explain how an item in the text supports their response to the question or prompt. I sometimes ask if anyone has a different view or interpretation of the same item. If so, I help the next student to explain that view with reasons or examples. Almost invariably, these efforts result in clearer, more logical student thought.

In the course of these brief demonstrations, I often see students brighten as they learn to express themselves more effectively and as they are helped to see that their thoughts matter and are being taken seriously. I think this explains the positive feedback that observers often hear from students in the days after these discussions.

Without opportunities to practice civil academic discussions, many students will struggle in college, on the job, or in civic participation.

Without adequate opportunities to practice having civil academic discussions in K–12, many students will struggle in college, on the job, or in civic participation. Northwestern University professors Morson and Schapiro report that too many of their current students are often "remarkably confident in their views on nearly everything." Therefore, "getting students to consider that they might just be wrong, to be comfortable articulating not only their opinions but willing to entertain the best arguments of those on the other side, is *the* challenge facing us today."[12] To meet this challenge, the professors developed a course where structures ensure that students feel completely safe as they listen carefully to each other's strongest arguments, voice their still-developing perspectives, and strive to learn from each other—and sometimes to modify or change their views.

A professor at Occidental College and one of his students also felt the need to increase dialogue among students. Together, they started "a club where students could discuss ideas openly and honestly, in a spirit of charity and good faith." In the club, students are free from social pressures and classroom hierarchies; they are also expected to "relentlessly question beliefs—one's own and those of others."

The results have been gratifying: club discussions have promoted "not merely mutual respect but mutual affection." Students report that open, logically argued disagreement "engenders deeper insight and understanding." Best of all, it promotes "affective bonds of community" among participants.[13]

Versatile Focus Questions and Prompts for Text-Based Discussions

These questions and prompts are samples from chapters 4–7 of the second edition of *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*, which I published in 2018.

For fiction: These questions can be adapted for virtually any short story, novel, or book chapter.

- What is your opinion of key characters, and what do we learn from analyzing their words, actions, interactions, or development?
- What do we learn about human nature or about our own (or another) time, place, or culture?

For fiction or nonfiction: These prompts will require more adaptation to suit the content you are teaching, but they should offer some guidance.

- Compare and contrast key aspects or accomplishments of two or more people, phenomena, cultures, etc., such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.; Thomas Jefferson and John Adams; bodily systems (respiratory, cardiovascular, digestive); Aztec and Incan cultures.
- Evaluate/rank order relative reasons/causes; musical/artistic/historical epochs; scientific theories; nations or regions (e.g., causes of World War I; Romantic and Impressionist periods; continental drift; quality of life in several countries in a region or continent).
- After analyzing pertinent information and data, argue for or against respective options for a policy or solution regarding an issue or problem (e.g., alternative energy sources, higher minimum wage, rank-order voting, universal healthcare).
- On a controversial topic, identify and discuss the strongest arguments from two or more writers with divergent perspectives on the topic.

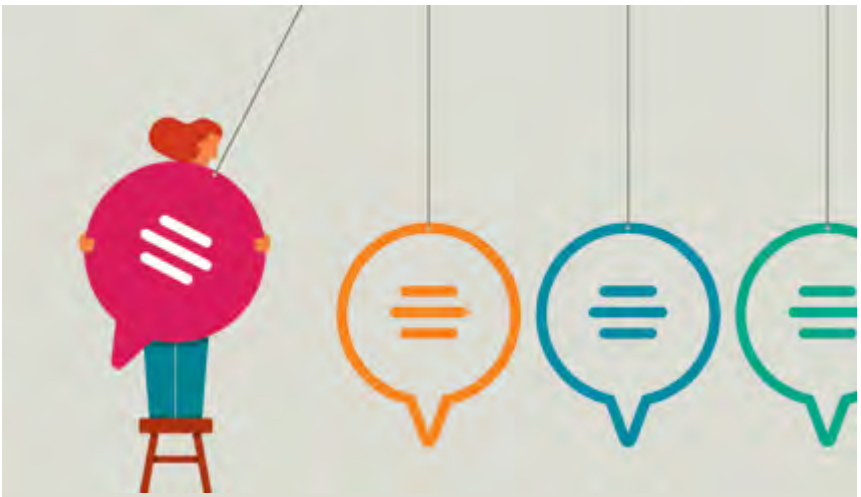
–M. S.

Such courses should be the model for K–12 educators as they devote more time to intellectually oriented discussions, grounded in evidence and subject-area content. Consider New Dorp High School in Staten Island, New York, which accomplished a dramatic two-year turnaround after being marked for closure because of low achievement. The effort, which centered on teaching students expository and persuasive writing, included explicit instruction in how to read analytically, listen carefully, and then interact across the curriculum. To support respectful, effective interactions, the teachers learned to model the use of simple sentence stems. For instance, when commenting on each other's remarks, students were taught to respond with one of the following:

> "I agree/disagree with ___ because …"
> "I have a different opinion …"
> "I have something to add …"
> "Can you explain your answer?"[14]

Each discussion centered on one major focus question or prompt, such as Willy Loman's state of mind and what might be contributing to it in the opening of *Death of a Salesman*.

Faculty discovered that such text-based questions motivated and lent purpose to students' reading, refined their analytic thinking and expressive skills, and were excellent preparation for writing. During this period, New Dorp's English state assessment scores soared, making the school an educational mecca.[15]



We owe our students the opportunity to consider reasoned, fact-based voices from the right, left, and center.

How Teachers Can Facilitate Rich, Civil Discussions

Like any instructional approach or strategy, facilitating rich discussions takes practice.* With each try, you'll hone your craft. Here, I'm sharing tips I've learned through my own experience and by talking with educators who routinely make time for student dialogue.

Strong facilitation begins long before the first discussion. To set the stage in your classroom, you need ground rules to ensure the civil, open, fair-minded exchange of ideas and perspectives. These can be crafted by both students and teachers. One ground rule I always contribute is that participants' claims are mere opinions unless they are supported with facts and evidence.

Once you think the class is ready to engage with open minds, consider selecting texts that allow them to practice using the new ground rules on an arresting but not highly charged curriculum topic. More contentious issues can come later; there is ample material in a solid curriculum that creates opportunities for productive discussion. In my demonstration lessons, I often use an article that contains arguments both for and against nuclear power.

Then, be sure to set aside time for a crucial step in preparation for such discussions: you must *carefully read the text or texts* that will form the basis of discussion. This may be the most critical (and overlooked) aspect of lesson planning. Take notes as you try to predict which aspects of the texts may be most challenging for your students. And, when their discussion takes turns you did not predict—as it surely will—be prepared to respond with interest and a willingness to do more research; don't feel like you have to have the answers. A discussion is about exchanging ideas, not providing answers or even winning others over.

To prepare your students to discuss the texts:

- Provide them with brief *background* for the topic and texts and remind them of the ground rules for discussions. Also, let them know that you will be cold-calling on students during the discussion and that full participation (including close listening) is necessary for a worthwhile discussion.
- Provide a substantive, higher-order *primary question or prompt* to focus their reading and create an arresting purpose for the discussion. For examples, see "Versatile Focus Questions and Prompts for Text-Based Discussions" on page 36.
- Teach them—carefully *model*—how to underline and *annotate or take notes* in response to the prompt. Be sure to explain, including by "thinking aloud," how these relate to the focus question.
- Provide sentence stems or starters, such as "I think/agree/disagree … because …" that can facilitate discussion when students are making their early attempts to offer their thoughts in a logical, ordered fashion.
- Ask students to *share thoughts and interpretations in pairs* to rehearse for whole-class interaction.

*We should bear in mind that educative discussion and debate must be situated within a curriculum rich in literature, history, civics, economics, the sciences, and the arts. As a society, we have scanted these for decades—devaluing the liberal arts in higher education and focusing on reading and math test scores in K–12. For a discussion of the benefits of a rich curriculum, see "The Spark of Specifics" in the Winter 2010–2011 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/x1u.

With this preparation, virtually every student will be primed for the ensuing discussion. Don't be surprised if those least apt to raise their hands are ready and willing to make solid contributions.

During the discussion:

- Cold-call liberally, but not exclusively, on pairs and individuals to ensure maximum participation. Punctuate cold-calling with opportunities for students to volunteer responses to each other's remarks.
- Direct students to turn toward, and give eye contact to, whoever is speaking.[16]
- Pause periodically to give students a moment to write about how a peer's remarks influenced their previous thinking.
- Listen carefully to ensure that students are accurately referencing the text as well as their peers' comments, reasoning logically, and speaking audibly—and always with utmost civility. When they aren't (as is often the case), thank them for their thoughts and then *gently, encouragingly* request that they repeat or revise their remarks to be just a little clearer, more logical, or more courteous.

After a discussion, you may want to have students write a reflection on the strongest arguments of those with whom they disagree, and then share those reflections with the class. This will enable them to better understand and give serious consideration to each other's thoughts—and perhaps to identify areas of agreement or where compromise is possible.

In my experience, offering such structure and coaching is typically well-received. I've seen how just a few such discussions enable students to make great strides toward becoming more effective, confident listeners and speakers.

When I conduct demonstration lessons using such processes, observers are often surprised at how much students enjoy them—and are shocked at how almost all students participate. They shouldn't be: it only makes sense that students will be ready, even eager, to share and be called on when first given a reasonable purpose to read, when they are taught how to analyze the text, and when they are given a few moments to test their fledgling thoughts on each other in pairs. With such preparation, cold-calling actually becomes something closer to what one friend calls "warm calling."

Once your students have had a few civil, engaging discussions, they may be ready to take on contentious issues.* It is vital that you do your best to maintain a disciplined neutrality. This doesn't mean dignifying Holocaust or election deniers. But we owe our students the opportunity to consider reasoned, fact-based voices from the right, left, and center. Anything less is indoctrination, not education.[17]

There will be a learning curve, but practicing with such protocols as members of a professional learning community will accelerate your command of these processes.

Along those lines, we should celebrate the availability of rich, well-organized resources for fostering discussions like AllSides for Schools and ProCon.org. These remarkable, free websites provide a spectrum of news and views on major controversies. They provide both summaries and links to an abundance of literary, historical, scientific, and current topics and texts. They even provide discussion questions.

Perhaps our primary goal should be what Socrates advocated for—that we enter into dialogue not to win the argument but to learn from each other as we seek the truest, most rational, evidence-based conclusions and solutions. In a democracy, we should acknowledge the need for *compromise*: it is a pillar of healthy self-government.[18] That is a high, necessary ideal, since real differences will always be with us.

Based on my classroom experiences, I believe that even a few years of regular, structured opportunities for genuine dialogue could leaven our discourse and—who knows?—help to produce a generation that is more objective, fair-minded, and willing to listen to all sides. It just might begin to alter the disposition and rational capacities of tens of millions of future voters, to make a significant contribution to comity, prosperity, and the health of our democracy. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/schmoker.

*Once students are skilled in grounding their views in facts and evidence, they may also benefit from opportunities to analyze and discuss popular (if often mindless) slogans and their impact. Such analyses, which could require them to prepare by finding and considering existing critiques, will help them develop what Ernest Hemingway dubbed a "crap detector": the capacity to understand and thus arm themselves against slick, misleading language.

Becoming a School Librarian

A Career I've Come to Love and Fight For

By Maria G. O'Brien

As a young Latina girl, I aspired to become a sports journalist. I grew up watching baseball, boxing, and wrestling—sports that the men in my family gathered to watch. I observed in the distance and discovered over time that I had an affinity for sports. And I wrote a lot. A self-described *barrio poet*, I was that kid from the projects who wrote so I could make sense of things. I wrote so I could escape. I wrote so I could transfer meaningful thoughts to a surface that would allow me to reflect, like a mirror. The combination of these things led me to believe that a career as a sports journalist was possible. One thing led to another, and I decided instead to earn a degree in physical education. I often reflect on this decision and realize that if it were not for the support and mentoring of my eighth-grade art teacher, PE teachers, coaches, and community center personnel, I might not have reached this initial milestone. And for that, I'm immensely thankful.

After college, teaching took a back seat. I started work at a biopharmaceutical company, first as a receptionist and then as an administrative assistant in the business department. I learned to search databases for industry trends and provided assistance in organizing a collection of books. The combination of this work and the advice of a kind soul led me to pursue a master's in library and information science.

Shortly thereafter, I moved to Florida and found work at a university as an academic librarian providing research assistance online to soldiers stationed around the world. Later, I transitioned to an on-campus position as a reference librarian and got to help students face-to-face. I then decided to support two student organizations on campus: Latinos Unidos and the Caribbean Student Association. I was also asked to represent the university at selected trade shows. I mention these experiences because I know that the relationships I built with these students and the conversations I had with prospective students gave me reason to believe that I could do more to impact students. I connected with them culturally and was awed by their academic drive. So, I returned to public education. This time as a school librarian.

The Journey

I'll never forget the fall of 2001. I started a new job, driving nearly an hour each way to an awesome middle and high school in a rural area. Then September 11 happened. I remember my heart sinking and my mind racing. My children were far from me, and I was reminded of all the little details of the trip my family and I had made to the northeast that July. We'd stopped in Washington, DC, on the way

Maria G. O'Brien is a media teacher at Atlantic High School in Port Orange, Florida, a Florida Power-Library School, and the diversity chair of the Florida Association for Media in Education (FAME). In 2021, she won FAME's Amanda Award for engaging students in ways that make them feel welcome, seen, and heard. An educator who routinely seeks grants to enhance her library programming, O'Brien is also an AFT teacher leader.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LONDON LADD

up and visited the Twin Towers with our boys and their cousins. As I watched the events of September 11 unfold, I thought of my children and their well-being while realizing that other families' children were entrusted to me. In the aftermath, I watched and listened to countless interviews of individuals describing this horrific day. And I wondered about the individuals we crossed paths with during our visit to these places. When I look back at this initial experience, I must have known then that this career was purposeful and worth pursuing.

I stayed at this school for the next three years. What I remember most is hearing the students calling out, "Miss, miss, miss." It was a respectful way for Spanish-speaking students to gain a teacher's attention. Over 40 percent of the student population was Hispanic. Many of them were first-generation immigrants whose parents worked on nearby farms. Since I was also a native Spanish speaker, some students would test my knowledge of certain Spanish words, knowing full well that they meant something different in our countries of origin. An innocent word in Puerto Rico could be highly offensive in Mexico or a South American country. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." These idiom exchanges were an organic exercise that led to building meaningful relationships with my students.

I'm worried about the children growing up like I did, without any books of their own—or none that they see themselves in.

The school library was immediately to the right of the main office. It felt like a welcome center. I assumed that a library space in a school setting would be a lot like a revolving classroom. This particular library had desktop computers, a small collection of books, and two areas with tables. One area was used for active instruction, and a smaller area was used for leisure reading or classroom work. I was initially assigned to students from sixth to eighth grades. At the time, the school ran a double-block schedule, and the library had a flexible schedule. This meant that teachers could visit and/or ask to use the library whenever and for whatever academic purpose they wanted, including collaborative work or projects with me. What I can say for sure is that it was rarely used for testing.

Our schedule allowed me to do the behind-the-scenes work (e.g., conduct a book inventory to review, replace, and/or order books) in a timely manner. It also meant that I could devote some time to planning activities and promoting literacy in fun and engaging ways, like book fairs, reading competitions, or programming that would include opportunities for our students to expand, explore, and experience the world of reading. For example, I invited the author Pat Mora to speak to our students about her book *Tomás and the Library Lady*. It's a true story about Tomás Rivera, a son of migrant workers, who was introduced to the wonder of books by a librarian. Years later, Rivera became the first Mexican American chancellor of the University of California. I chose the book because I knew my students would connect with it. But as a relatively new educator in this field, I didn't know just how underrepresented people of color were in books. I thought it was common sense to include books that reflected all of us.

When I think of my own experiences, I don't recall ever reading a book that mirrored me or my culture as a Hispanic youth. It wasn't until my early 30s that I picked up *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Every short story spoke to me and my cultural experience. I was fortunate to find this, but I took being reflected in this book for granted. I didn't know how difficult it could be for a child or an adult of color to see themselves in books. I learned to appreciate reading and books over time. I wasn't a child who grew up with books, went to public libraries, or was encouraged to read books. The only real memory I have of being in a school library was in my elementary years. I read textbooks with purpose and read other books when assigned. I hardly ever read for joy. That changed when I became a parent. I prioritized reading. When I took my children to visit the public library, I'd allow them to choose their own books. The same was true for books they checked out at their respective school libraries or books they purchased at their book fairs. Still, I didn't see the big picture. It wasn't until years later that I came to realize what was truly missing on our bookshelves and to what extent.

In the summer of 2016, I attended the American Library Association conference. This particular year, sessions on diversity, equity, and inclusion were emphasized. I found myself listening to a panel of authors who shared their thoughts and encouraged us to continue the conversation beyond the conference. This is where I first heard of Rudine Sims Bishop's paper, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors."* She wrote, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors."[1] I left the conference feeling different, reimagining my role as a school librarian and how I could help to transform the future for our students—all of our students. And I don't think I've been the same since.

Inspired, I decided to dedicate more time to diversifying my library collection and sought out others, like the Florida Association in Media Education, for resources that reinforce the same. This practice has become the cornerstone of my library programming, and I continue to implore all stakeholders to join me in this endeavor.

For the past several years, I've applied for grants to create partnerships and collaborative projects centered on reading books that serve as "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors." Almost all of these grant-funded activities have been multilayered and involved cross-generational participants. When I transitioned to high school librarianship in 2015, many of the high schools in my district offered prekindergarten programming (as part of student-educator career programs or early learning pathways). The projects I highlight below are high school driven and aligned to pre-K programming, local elementary schools, or other entities as community service.

In 2017, I was working at Deltona High School, where over 40 percent of the students were classified as Hispanic. I focused on the community and parent involvement. One event I created was "The Familia That Reads: A Cross-Cultural Reading Experience," featuring *Sofi and the Magic, Musical Mural*, written and presented by Raquel

*Bishop's metaphors ring true: mirrors, seeing yourself; windows, seeing the world and, when the lighting is right, as Bishop says, seeing yourself in the window; and sliding glass doors, entering the book's world. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" is available at go.aft.org/wwu.

M. Ortiz. The book club members and faculty were encouraged to bring their families, young siblings, and grandparents. Families listened, discussed, and then together spent time in our library's maker space creating squares representing their own heritage and ancestry. The completed squares were placed side by side to create a community mural.

Two years later, I selected another Ortiz book, *When Julia Danced Bomba*, which features Afro-Latinos, for a schoolwide event in celebration of Black History Month. The book introduces island beats, African rhythms, and the traditional Puerto Rican dance called the *bomba*. I shared lessons on the intersections of Black and Latin histories and cultures, and afterward I read the book aloud, followed by some bomba music and some dancing.

In 2020, I transitioned to my current school, Atlantic High. Implementing the same practice, I established a book club, "Sharks Read-4-Real" (named after the school's mascot). As Black Lives Matter rallies were held across the country, I collaborated with one of my elementary school library peers for an activity based on *All Because You Matter*, written by Tami Charles. Described as a lyrical text, it's part love letter, part anthem to her son, and it reveals the importance of heritage and why we matter. With help from my high school book club, we opened this activity to elementary and prekindergarten children. After the book was read aloud and discussed, each child received a kit with a photo of themselves (taken in advance), a frame, patterned paper petals cut to resemble the illustrations in the book, a glue stick, and a personalized placard. Together, the children decorated their own portraits—true mirrors—so that they saw themselves in the book even more strongly. The elementary students also received their very own copy of the book.

This school year, I wrote a grant for "The Mason Project: Capturing Meaningful Stories." The project focused on our prekindergarten students. The inspiration for this project was twofold: retired reading teacher, now local author, *Linda Mason* and *mason* jars. I selected three of Mason's books and seven other books to read aloud to the children. After reading the featured book, I introduced students to a trinket I had selected to represent it, and I placed the trinket in a mason jar. At the end of every visit, I'd randomly select a trinket and they would call out the associated title or point to it if the books were displayed. I continued to do this until the mason jar was emptied. On occasion, we had additional book discussions to check for understanding, comprehension, and recall of details over time. Children kept signed copies of Mason's books and their personalized mason jars with the 10 items (along with a handout to help families continue discussions of these books).

One of my favorite reads for this project was *Gibberish* by Young Vo. I knew it would provoke thought, and I anticipated laughter and confusion. The book is about a young boy preparing to go to school for the first time in a new country. His mother is doing her best to explain that most of what he'll hear throughout the day will sound a lot like gibberish. In the book, there are speech bubbles with rows of symbols that mimic figurative language. I introduced the book and then spoke in gibberish to the four-year-olds. They all froze and stared. Expecting this reaction, I then drew a speech bubble with a few squiggles and a random star on the whiteboard. I asked them if they recognized any of the symbols on the board. A few recognized the star but nothing else.

As I read aloud and showed the illustrations, several students noticed the difference between the main character, who is colorfully drawn to resemble a young boy, and the other characters in the classroom: gray figures outlined in black resembling young monsters. "Why do you think that is?" "Do you think he was so scared that he saw the children in his room as monsters?" After reading the book, I introduced the trinket, a star (noted in the speech bubble), before placing it in the mason jar. Seeing the world from someone else's view is an exercise in empathy. As students lined up to return to their classroom, some continued to speak gibberish. Their teacher and I exchanged looks, realizing that it might take a minute before the gibberish dissipated. I relished the thought that after they stopped speaking this newfound language, they'd understand what it meant to be in the little boy's shoes.

Everything Books

> *"It is an awfully sad misconception that librarians simply check books in and out. The library is the heart of a school, and without a librarian, it is but an empty shell."*
>
> *–Jarrett J. Krosoczka*[2]

Among the many things school librarians do, checking books in and out remains at the heart of this profession. I consider it a privilege to make these transactions with students. These face-to-face exchanges are informal but highly effective for collecting information. They are a strategic way to establish a healthy rapport with the student and a means of gaining better insight on what students enjoy reading. My colleagues and I also use these opportunities to facilitate curriculum, project-based learning, and research assignments by reinforcing the use of the inquiry process and demonstrating how to use online resources, platforms, and other materials. We get to discuss the lighter side of things, including *why* students can't judge a book by its cover. And it also gives us one more opportunity to inquire about their reading habits, essential to establishing a general sense of their learning and how to best contribute to the overall academic environment and culture.

Book Studies

If students don't check out books, they can still engage in reading by joining a community book study, which is one of my favorite ways to spark conversations on trending topics and issues. It is also a strategic way to discuss topics that open *windows* to other people's worlds or invite others to see theirs as *sliding glass doors*. The following are examples of books I've used in recent years for community book studies. Some are realistic fiction and others are anthologies.

- *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi[3]
- *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed: 15 Voices from the Latinx Diaspora*, edited by Saraciea J. Fennell

- *We Are Not from Here*, by Jenny Torres Sanchez
- *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America*, edited by Nora Shalaway Carpenter

Student participation in this activity is voluntary. Teachers, parents, and other community members are invited to join the conversation. Each contributes to the discussion by sharing their perspectives, experiences, and voices. They also get to keep the books!

Book Clubs

Book clubs are intended to engage both the individual reader and the collective group as they come together to experience, explore, and discuss the books they read. In the 2022–23 school year, we met every week, and every other week we did activities that allowed us to bond as a club. I had a list of books for members to choose from. Books initially read by the whole group were selected by majority vote. A follow-up survey featured the remaining books, which were read in small groups and then shared or discussed with the whole group. This ensured that the members read what they loved and were exposed to books that led them to windows and sliding glass doors. In an ideal environment, book clubs serve as vehicles that drive potential lifelong readers and those who identify themselves as lovers of books—something that should be celebrated as students are often pulled in different directions with other extracurricular activities.

Libraries Are Spaces of Refuge

I know this to be true: school libraries are spaces of refuge. In the years that I have served as a school librarian, I've gotten to know my students. I know who frequents the library, and I recognize new faces—as well as those who haven't stopped by in a while. I've learned to observe clusters of students and their interactions as well as moments when a student is lonely, perhaps lost, or has found some comfort in having a place to be. Sometimes they come from different places. Sometimes they don't have a home to call their own.

Some come to escape, and others come to belong. Some are yearning to be treated equally or included by their classmates. Some want to come in from the cold, the rain, or the heat. They come to eat or meet up with other students. Some just don't want to be alone. Others simply want to regroup, get ready, finish up, start on something new, or give themselves a minute or two to reflect on the day thus far or plan for the day ahead. A few need a little shuteye after a long night of working, babysitting, or participating in multiple extracurricular activities.

Some students have open laptops, others have open notebooks, and most, if not all, have a cellphone in hand. A few come to check books in or out, read, complete homework, or take advantage of other services, such as tutoring or printing. Some want to focus on their studies. Some will focus on everything but their studies. Still, I designate spaces, move the flexible seating, and block out some areas and open others, all so that each can find a space of their own. Should you decide to visit on Working Wednesdays or Focus Fridays during lunch, expect the library to be quieter; on these days, students are expected to sit, eat, talk, study, read, and work… quietly.

And *safe* is never a word we take lightly.

Teaching Together

I now have 23 years of experience, and I've adjusted, adapted, and in many ways moved on. But some things are vital to librarians' existence in education. One of these things is collaboration. School librarians need to collaborate to succeed in this role. It is essential to how others perceive our roles and responsibilities, and it's harder to impact student learning without the opportunity to provide instruction. While some subjects don't readily lend themselves to reading, literacy, and research, there can still be opportunities to provide supplemental materials and create an environment that fosters learning in these areas (e.g., through our maker space or STEM area). And although this is not direct instruction, it still allows us to contribute to student learning.

I may not be speaking for all school librarians, but I continue to grow as an educator when I instruct students, engage with them, and check for their learning. Each time I get the opportunity to teach, I'm revisiting the value, ease of use, and application of our print and digital resources. And this isn't just for students; these resources are also valuable for teachers. I have countless examples of work I've done in the past with fellow teachers. And as I make my case for more collaboration, I'm also aware of how complicated it is for my peers to work beyond their curriculum maps to meet each and every standard—not to mention other restrictions that limit our mutual ability to do anything outside the box. Still, school librarians need to be considered in planning and instruction. It's better than doing it alone. It's better when we teach together, especially when getting the right information in our current environment matters.

The Fight

I received an anonymous note from a student just before Thanksgiving this past year. The cover read, "I Appreciate U." Inside it continued, "To the Wonderful You.... I want you to know that there are people out there that really appreciate everything that you do, even if you may not see it right away." I felt restored and renewed, if only for a moment.

A few weeks earlier, I had been presenting to our faculty—one of the few opportunities I get to share information about the library and our resources and services. Just before the end of my presentation, I got emotional and held back tears. I caught a glimpse of my peers. They looked confused, and some even snickered. Embarrassed, I silently consoled myself. Later, I tried to make sense of my emotions. I realized that I was exhausted. And again, I started to question: do I matter?

I know there are other school librarians like me—silently screaming to be seen, heard, and understood. With the pressures of standardized testing and the pandemic, the school librarian role has morphed. It's become difficult to do the instructional collaboration and student engagement that used to be at the heart of our work. Our roles as school librarians have been diminished, misused, and deeply

misunderstood. I'm aware of the teacher shortage and the need to be a team player in a time of crisis. But what does it mean when the expectation of being "flexible" supersedes every other aspect of your professional or certified role?

In the fall of 2021, I was given an opportunity to do action research. I could have done it on anything. But we were just beginning to recover from COVID-19, and I began to wonder about my role as a school librarian. Was it just me who was exhausted? I really needed to know. So, I decided to ask my peers and school librarians in my district. The survey questions were basic, asking participants to reflect on their past, evaluate their current situations, and share their expectations for our future. Ninety-three percent responded "No" to the following question: "Do you feel that your role is thoroughly understood by other teachers?" Sixty-eight percent also responded "No" to the same question about administrators. I was relieved to have learned that I wasn't "in my head," so to speak. But this also meant that we had issues to resolve.

Along with restoring time to collaborate, we need to reinvest in school libraries and librarians. A nationwide study[4] examining data for 2009–10 through 2018–19 found that far too many librarian positions have been eliminated:

- While school librarians decreased by 20 percent and teachers decreased by about 1 percent, district and school administrators increased by about 15 percent and instructional coordinators increased by almost 34 percent.
- The number of students per librarian increased by almost 28 percent, from 939 to 1,199 students per librarian.
- The number of teachers per librarian increased by 23 percent, from 61 to 75 teachers per librarian.
- A follow-up study found a similar trajectory between 2018–19 and 2020–21, with district administrators increasing by 6 percent and school librarians decreasing by 5 percent.[5]

We are all impacted by this reduction in school librarians.

Pedagogy as we once knew it in public education has changed. There is little room for flexibility or autonomy. Standards-driven curricula leave very little room for working outside the box. There is too much content and too little time to ingest it. So, classroom teachers and school librarians have limited opportunities to collaborate on lessons, projects, and other work. Our district, like many others, is a one-to-one laptop environment, which requires a lot of time to organize and manage. And for some, no assistant (like a media clerk) is available to help. In addition, instruction is frequently interrupted by standardized testing. In my district, the typical school calendar has a test of some type scheduled nearly every month; these interruptions make it difficult to plan holistically.

Sadly, much of the testing takes place in the library, which means these spaces are frequently closed, preventing teachers from using the area for instruction or academic purposes. When the library is closed for testing, I have no claim to the space, and I'm given no other recourse. Endlessly looking for ways to be an effective school librarian and information professional, I find myself revisiting my history and my career path. Being a school librarian no longer resembles the two degrees I worked so hard to obtain.

Earlier in my career, school librarians had a seat at the table and were recognized as essential partners in instruction. Today, our role is more important than ever as we battle misinformation and disinformation. Getting lost in the stacks could never be as dangerous as getting lost in unknown virtual spaces. From social media to artificial intelligence to the incomprehensible vastness of "resources" online, students need to be taught when to ignore "influencers" and how to find trustworthy sources—and that starts in a safe space that respects their basic humanity.

Our intellectual freedom and the right to read is under siege by certain stakeholders. I'm baffled by the idea that these individuals are more preoccupied with challenging books[6] and less attentive to the pervasiveness of technology and the possibility that libraries and librarians may cease to exist because of it. It sounds like science fiction (I know, I read it). I'm worried about the children growing up like I did, without any books of their own—or none that they see themselves in. I'm worried that society will forget about the essence of reading for joy and instead embrace short bursts of entertainment. I'm worried about conversations that will never be had for fear that we can't be truthful about our history, can't engage, provoke thought, explain ourselves, or solve a problem. Even though fewer books may be found on our shelves these days, the stacks remind us that information can still be tangible and overtly present for all to appreciate. The school library (media center) is the one place students should be able to access books that speak to our common humanity. It should also be the place with books that celebrate diversity and inclusion. Let us allow for choice and self-selection of books, so every student voice is valued in our democracy. Our collective efforts should be to encourage students to read more, speak more, and learn more about our world. If we allow the doors to our school libraries to close, we will miss a vital step in contributing to our students' futures and the society we live in. This is worth fighting for.

Our collective efforts should be to encourage students to read more, speak more, and learn more about our world.

What will school librarianship look like tomorrow? I can adapt. I can adjust. I can compromise. But I can't pretend that all is well with school libraries. I wonder how we will remain relevant in education. All educators, including those of us in this role, need to work together—to fight—to keep libraries relevant by providing pathways for our students to recognize trustworthy information and use it safely to succeed academically. We also must provide books that represent and reflect our student population. And most importantly, we must keep students safe by restoring and reserving this open, common place of refuge for all who need it.

Ode to Pura Belpré

As I reflect, I recognize that wanting to be a sports journalist was aspirational, and becoming a school librarian was inspirational. I can't help but think that a library lady like Pura Belpré, the first Puerto Rican female librarian in New York City and an advocate for bilingual reading, could have influenced me as a Puerto Rican youth.[7] This career led me to discovering her story, and it is her example that I'm hoping to follow as I endeavor to continue this path. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/obrien.

Creating Opportunities to Learn: A Look Inside Equity-Driven High Schools

For more on the Schools of Opportunity project, visit schoolsofopportunity.org.

The National Education Policy Center's Schools of Opportunity project highlights public high schools that address societal inequities with research-based practices. To become a School of Opportunity (SOO), schools are evaluated on 10 criteria that include an inclusive school climate, formative assessment and project-based learning, culturally relevant curriculum, supports for students' mental and physical health, and authentic parent and community engagement.

Schools of Opportunity: 10 Research-Based Models of Equity in Action, edited by Adam York, Kevin Welner, and Linda Molner Kelley, celebrates SOO-recognized schools. Each chapter, coauthored by a leader of a recognized SOO, details reform practices aligned with specific SOO criteria that other schools can emulate. Below is a small sample of the practices profiled.

Broaden and Enrich Learning Opportunities, with Particular Attention to Reducing Disparities in Learning Created by Tracking and Ability Grouping (Criterion 1)

South Side High School (Long Island, New York) eliminated ability grouping and low-track classes to help close the achievement gap between students of diverse ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and academic preparation. International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement courses are open to all students, with extra help periods and support classes available. The general education curriculum challenges yet supports all students, including those in special education, who are integrated into general education with support staff and classes, as well as close monitoring. And administrators annually balance enrollment in general education to ensure all courses reflect the school's demographics. As a result, IB participation increased from 30 percent to over 80 percent. The 2019 four-year graduation rate was 100 percent, and 90 percent of graduates earned a New York State Regents diploma with Advanced Designation—nearly three times the statewide average.

Use a Variety of Assessments Designed to Respond to Student Needs (Criterion 4)

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School (FLHFHS; the Bronx, New York) integrates performance-based portfolio assessment with instruction focused on real-world, inquiry-based learning. Unlike traditional high schools, FLHFHS teachers work closely with just 60 students—in small groups with block scheduling—for two years at a time, first as content instructors, then as advisers. Students take ownership of their learning through community activism and college- and career-relevant internships. Students work with teachers to present and defend their work orally, thinking critically about their learning in each subject area. Through this model, FLHFHS's four-year graduation rate and the number of graduates considered college ready are significantly higher than comparison high schools.

Provide Students with Additional Needed Services and Supports (Criterion 7); Enact a Challenging and Supported Culturally Relevant Curriculum (Criterion 8)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Early College's (DMLK; Denver, Colorado) holistic approach to student learning prioritizes wellness through a Whole Child Team that includes mental health counselors, social workers, a school psychologist, a trauma specialist, a school nurse, and a health technician. Additionally, all teachers are trained to identify signs that students are struggling, and DMLK offers a Strengthening Families program for those experiencing trauma. DMLK students are also agents in their own healing. They campaigned for and won a school board policy requiring that the curriculum promote antiracism and asset-based truths about historically marginalized communities. These initiatives have led to significant increases in the number of students who enjoy going to school and feel safe at school.

Correction

We extend heartfelt thanks to an astute reader who sent us the following correction:

The article "Creating Confident Readers" (Spring 2023) includes an error. On pages 8–9, it reads, "the letters *c*, *u*, and *x* are among those that are not doubled." Very quickly I named *success* and *vacuum* and began to question the validity of the entire article. I thought I'd let you know.

–Kira Herbert, Croton-on-Hudson, New York

And we are pleased to share this reply from the author, Louisa C. Moats:

Thank you for being a vigilant reader! *Vacuum* (and *continuum*) results from a Latin root plus the neutral noun marker *-um*. In addition, a combination of a prefix and Latin root can result in doubled *c*, as in *success* and *accord*. In Anglo-Saxon based words, the *-ck* was invented for use after short vowels because *c* was not doubled; that's why when we add *-ing* to *traffic* or *picnic*, we have *trafficking* and *picnicking*, and words like *pickle* are not spelled *piccle*. So, the inclusion of those letters as "never doubled" needs qualification, and I did not do that. I apologize for this omission. We have corrected the digital versions of the article.

sharemylesson
By Educators, For Educators

Highlights of the 2023 Share My Lesson Virtual Conference

There were 30,000 registrations for the 30-plus free professional learning webinars offered for the 2023 Share My Lesson Virtual Conference from March 21–23. Session presenters covered a wide range of topics—including STEM, English language arts, civics education and engagement, social-emotional learning and mental health, and more—to help inspire and equip educators, school staff, and families. All webinars—each worth one hour of professional development credit—are now available to watch on demand. Here, we share just a few of attendees' favorite sessions.

Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Several webinars focus on strategies to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive classroom environments with resources to help educators talk about racism, address antisemitism, and affirm students with diverse backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

In "Talking About Race and Racism with Young Children," presenters discuss the importance of talking with children ages 2–6 about race. They also share a research-based activity guide with tips to help families lead positive, age-appropriate conversations about bias and belonging so children can connect with each other across differences. Also helpful is "Inclusive Learning Environments for Religiously Diverse Students," presented by the US Department of Education's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. This session provides guidance on constitutional protections for religious expression in public schools. It also gives inclusive practices that foster a supportive school climate and help all students feel valued and able to be their full selves, free of religious-based bullying and harassment.

Fostering STEM Learning

With the rise of popular and increasingly complex technologies impacting students' learning and well-being, how can educators emphasize creativity, digital citizenship, and making smart decisions? In "Practical Approaches to Advance Original Thinking in a World with ChatGPT," consultants from conference sponsor Turnitin discuss how educators can adjust assignments to encourage authentic learning for students in grades 6–12 and share how to incorporate generative artificial intelligence tools into instructional practice. And in "Using Stories to Teach Financial Capability," educators and families of students in grades K–8 learn about tools developed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to help students develop financial literacy and well-being. One tool, the Money as You Grow Bookshelf, is a collection of stories (with family reading guides) featuring characters who learn about earning and saving money and setting financial goals.

Sharing stories is also one of many strategies that can help spark students' curiosity about science. Educators of all grades can discover how in "Why Wonder Matters: Creating Authentic Connections in the Classroom," presented by Science Friday. In this session, educators learn how cultivating wonder fuels students' enthusiasm for and engagement in learning. Instructional strategies such as project-based inquiry, student-led learning, and giving students plenty of opportunities to play and explore can bring complex concepts to life and empower students to take ownership in their learning.

Supporting Educator Development and Well-Being

Educators strive to meet students' academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs but too often neglect their own needs. A handful of conference sessions address ways educators can meet their needs for professional development and well-being, including how to increase the rigor of their instructional strategies and how to reduce stress and foster connections with their colleagues and students.

One webinar, "That Wasn't On the Syllabus," is intended specifically for new teachers and those who mentor and support them. Presented by Amber Chandler, Frontier Central Teachers' Association president and long-time middle school ELA teacher, the session emphasizes strategies that foster trusting collegial relationships and can help new teachers acquire institutional and professional knowledge to navigate their role successfully.

For a complete list of the 2023 virtual conference webinars and to watch them on demand, visit sharemylesson.com/vc2023. Please reach out to us with any additional ideas or requests at content@sharemylesson.com.

–THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

Recommended Resources

Talking About Race and Racism with Young Children
go.aft.org/jcr

Inclusive Learning Environments for Religiously Diverse Students
go.aft.org/rzo

Practical Approaches to Advance Original Thinking in a World with ChatGPT
go.aft.org/coz

Using Stories to Teach Financial Capability
go.aft.org/vkc

Why Wonder Matters: Creating Authentic Connections in the Classroom
go.aft.org/5sl

That Wasn't On the Syllabus: Survival Guide for New Teachers and Their Mentors
go.aft.org/qgv

Save on eligible vet bills*

With our pet health insurance for dogs and cats, powered by Pets Best, you'll get reimbursed up to 90% on eligible vet bills.*

UNIONPLUS | aft A Union of Professionals AFT+ Member Benefits

See more at aft.org/benefits

*Select a plan that reimburses 70%, 80% or 90% of the cost of eligible veterinary treatment. Limited to covered expenses.

Pet Insurance coverage offered and administered by Pets Best Insurance Services, LLC and underwritten by American Pet Insurance Company, a New York insurance company headquartered at 6100 4th Ave. S. Suite 200 Seattle, WA 98108. Please see www.americanpetinsurance.com to review all available pet health insurance products underwritten by APIC.

AFT-PI-0223

Trauma Counseling Program

for AFT members to provide help and healing after facing personal or workplace trauma.

TRAUMA COVERAGE®

Covered Incidents

To receive this ***free benefit***, AFT members who are actively working or on leave may submit a claim for up to one year after one of the following incidents:

24/7

- Aggravated assault
- Domestic violence
- Sexual assault
- Mass shooting
- Acts of terror
- Major disaster

AT WORK

- Bullied, harassed or threatened
- Traumatized by witnessing a violent incident
- Infection by contagious disease
- Secondary trauma

aft.org/members-only

aft A Union of Professionals AFT+ Member Benefits

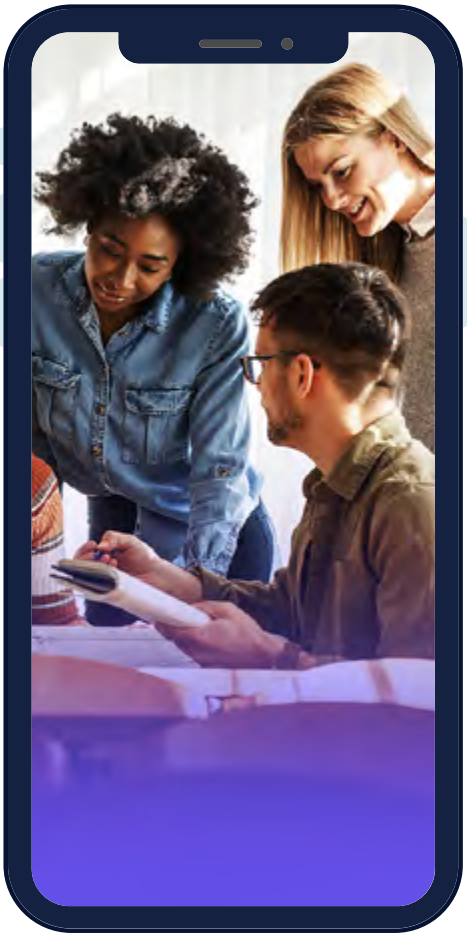
LifeBrand | aft A Union of Professionals

Your Benefits Look Good.

But How About Your Social Media?

25% off

Take advantage of this exclusive offer to run your LifeBrand wellness check and clean your social media profiles.



> Having been on social media for over a decade posting over a thousand times, I felt relieved to have my historical posts checked for what could be a misunderstanding or typo like in texting.

– **Jeff Freitas,** President
California Federation of Teachers

go.aft.org/lifebrand