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## Real Solutions for Kids and Communities

**Hands-On Strategies to  
Help Children Recover  
and Thrive**



# A Vote for Real Solutions

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

WE ARE IN a time of high anxiety, and perhaps no one feels that more acutely than children and families—and their teachers. Gun violence, social media, COVID-19, economic concerns, political and cultural divisiveness, and so much more all fuel worries about our young people's well-being. Over the last few years, extremists

ists peddled fear or tried to smear and divide, they lost voters' support.

This did not surprise me. I am in schools across the country all the time, constantly talking with students, educators, parents, and community members. They want strong, supported public schools. They want young people to be able to discuss complex issues and bridge differences. They want students to have access to tools and curriculum that address the challenges of today and that prepare them for the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

That's the goal of the AFT's Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign, which aims to tackle learning loss, loneliness, and literacy challenges. Our campaign focuses on key strategies to create joyful and confident readers; care for young people's mental health; expand community schools; engage students in their learning through hands-on experiences, including career and technical education; and secure the investments public schools need—for improved teaching and learning conditions, adequate staffing, fair pay for teachers and school staff, and other fundamentals for a high-quality education in every school. (Learn more at [aft.org/realsolutions](https://aft.org/realsolutions).)

In just the past several weeks, I've seen so many examples of this. Students at Saunders Trades and Technical High School in Yonkers, New York, can get hands-on experience in fields as far-ranging as architecture, biochemistry, auto mechanics, and cosmetology. At Lincoln-West School of Science and Health in Cleveland, which is located in a hospital, students can get valuable immersive experiences leading to in-demand careers. In Beaverton, Oregon, I saw a fantastic literacy program and the many ways school staff are providing social and emotional supports for students. And, in one weekend alone, the AFT gave kids and families 120,000 free books, through the

AFT Reading Opens the World program, at book fairs in Houston and in Queens and Webster, New York. (The AFT and First Book have given away more than nine million great, diverse books—and counting.)

The AFT is also fighting for higher education access and quality by protecting intellectual freedom, organizing to improve wages and conditions for adjunct faculty, and reducing student debt. (Learn more at [aft.org/highered](https://aft.org/highered).)

Contrast any of these programs for young people with the extremists who work so hard to divide people and undermine public schools and colleges but offer nothing to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life.

These election results should be enough to retire the myth that entities like Moms for Liberty, which the Southern Poverty Law Center includes on its list of extremist groups, represent the majority of this country's parents. AFT members and our partners in groups like Moms Rising, ParentsTogether, Red Wine & Blue, and the Campaign for Our Shared Future represent tens of millions of Americans.

Families and educators are together on team humanity, strengthening public education and helping all our children get the well-rounded education they deserve in the safe, welcoming, and supportive environments they need. □

## When public education was on the ballot, public education won.

have sought to exploit parents' anxiety to advance their political and ideological agendas. But on November 7, voters rejected extremist politicians and school board candidates running on culture-war agendas grounded in divisiveness, fear, and smears. Majorities of mainstream parents supported candidates who champion public schools that are safe and supportive for all students and that provide a robust curriculum and the resources needed to help young people recover and thrive.

When public education was on the ballot, public education won. An AFT analysis of approximately 250 races where the far right backed anti-public education candidates found that AFT-supported candidates won over 80 percent of the time. Anti-public education candidates publicly supported by Moms for Liberty and the 1776 Project PAC lost 75 percent of the time.

The results underline what families have been telling us for the last two years: Families want their kids to get a well-rounded education, develop strong fundamental academic and life skills, and have pathways to career, college, and beyond. They want a voice in their kids' education, but that doesn't mean banning books or censoring curriculum. They value and want to work with their kids' teachers. So, when extrem-



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KEN ORVIDAS

# Granite City

## Building Partnerships Across the Rural-Urban Divide



By Jackson Potter

**A**s the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), I used to assume that many of our big urban teaching realities were a world apart from the concerns of educators in smaller rural towns on the Illinois and Missouri border. However, a recent experience challenged that assumption. Now I see that our urban and rural locals face many of the same challenges—and so we should be working together. Activism is in my DNA (I led a walkout of my high school in 1995 to highlight the need for equitable school funding statewide), so when I see a need, I start by exploring the problem and identifying potential campaigns and activities. Then reality settles in. My plate is full in Chicago—can I really add urban-rural partnerships into the mix? While I haven’t been able to devote the time I’d like, I have been taking advantage of opportunities to learn.

In the fall of 2022, our Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) convention was held in St. Louis, Missouri (the St. Louis metro area spans Missouri and Illinois). Wanting to get to know nearby locals in Granite City and Madison, Illinois, I arrived early. And thanks to my fellow IFT executive board member Chuck Noud—a music teacher and the president of the Granite City Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 743)—I was scheduled to teach a civics

lesson at Granite City High School before the convention officially began. Ahead of my visit, Noud described Granite City as “a community in flux that has experienced a lot of changes over the years, resulting in economic decline and presenting opportunities for a creative resurgence. We see large economic growth in surrounding areas.”<sup>1</sup> Granite City currently has a population of nearly 30,000, down from a high of just over 40,000 in 1970 (before a recent decline in industrial plants, and therefore jobs, began).<sup>2</sup>

An avid biker—and a believer in getting to know an area by experiencing it—I decided to bike from my hotel in St. Louis to Granite City High School. It was pitch black when I started riding on the river trail out of St. Louis at 6 a.m. Soon, I was surrounded by construction yards, encampments for unhoused people, steel manufacturing shops, and timber salvaging operations on both sides of the trail. It was the most industrial section of bicycle path I’d ever seen—until I got closer to Granite City. After dodging numerous gravel sections, dump trucks, and semis loading up and shipping out, I crossed a bridge and reached the Illinois side of the Mississippi River.

Almost immediately, my senses were overcome by the intensity and magnitude of industrial activity. The streets were lined on both sides with warehouses, a US Steel Corporation mill about a mile long, a coke processing plant, refineries, concrete production, railroad depots, lumber and millwork facilities, and more. Mixed in were small bungalows—a residential-industrial

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remnant of how many mill towns in the United States were developed. Steel jobs have been part of Granite City's identity since 1895,<sup>3</sup> soon after the nascent industry was boosted by the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890.<sup>4</sup>

Granite City has experienced its share of the old and new economies. Shuttered plants have been replaced by hospitals and retail jobs, and there has been an influx of Black, Latine, and Asian families taking the lower-paying jobs left in the wake of deindustrialization and divestment.<sup>5</sup> While the city's population is still about 80 percent white,<sup>6</sup> the high school's student population is now about 64 percent white, down from over 70 percent in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

Although all the students and their families share similar economic interests, class solidarity in Granite City is being challenged by these changing racial demographics and job scarcity.<sup>8</sup> In 2024, the US Steel mill that employs about 1,400 people is scheduled to shut down its steelmaking and finishing operations, with two blast furnaces being repurposed by SunCoke Energy and nearly 1,000 people losing their jobs.<sup>9</sup>

In this community, saving jobs is a top priority, even though another interest all the students and families share is environmental. More than a century of steel production means more than a century of pollution, and the Environmental Protection Agency has noted very high rates of cancer in the area.<sup>10</sup>

Arriving at Granite City High School, I was struck by both how close the school is to the steel plant and how racially divided the classes were. As is true in high schools throughout our country,<sup>11</sup> white students were disproportionately enrolled in the higher-level honors and AP courses,<sup>12</sup> and students of color were disproportionately in the regular and remedial courses.

The civics lesson I had been invited to teach was for an AP economics class. I chose a lesson about power that the CTU uses with its summer organizing interns (who are CTU members seeking to boost their advocacy and activism skills). It centers on an interactive discussion in which students grapple with and define power. AP economics students already have a macro understanding of power; they are studying economic power, concentrations of wealth, and supply and demand. Part of our discussion personalizes power: Who has it? Who doesn't? What are their experiences of power? How do they distinguish the powerful and powerless—and why? Given how few students of color there were in this class, it was striking when a Latino student shared his experience of being exploited at work. He said that he often has to “deal with verbal abuse and arbitrary demands, low pay, and preferential treatment of some employees over others.” None of the white students had a comparable example to share.

Through this discussion, we established a shared definition of power focused on organized money or organized people. Students soon saw that the ability to make and act on decisions is key: you can't put money under a blanket and expect to have power, and you can't not interact with people and expect to have power. Then, we considered examples of people who have or had power, from Elon Musk to Martin Luther King Jr.

In the next phase of this discussion, I asked students what they would do if they had a great deal of power. Like other classes in which I've taught this lesson, the students in Granite City started thinking very small, like buying a nice house. As I challenged them to think bigger, soon they were demanding affordable housing for all, free universal healthcare, free college, and so on. After egging

them on for about 10 minutes, I shifted gears abruptly, making it clear that they have no power—I have it. Then I told them what I was willing, and not willing, to do. I took on a bullying persona like a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, telling them they had to stay in the room, simply because I said so. After a few minutes of this bullying behavior, a student grasped that they had to stand up and organize themselves to take power from me.

The lesson wraps up with a debrief: Why were they reluctant to stand up to me? What aspects of our social conditioning were holding them back? Why do powerless people accept abusive, controlling behaviors and take so long to decide to organize in order to create some power for themselves? What would it take to wield power collectively? This activity always generates an intense and memorable conversation for most students (and adults).

For these students in Granite City, it was a good opening exercise to inspire them to consider what's possible. Now, they need to connect to a local challenge in which they see how exercising their agency looks and feels in motion. They should be asking tough questions of decision makers and figuring out how to organize people to advocate on the street and in the boardrooms. So one question I left with that day was obvious: How can we, as educators and union activists, help them help their community?

In the following months, the more I thought about the CTU's work in Chicago and the challenges facing Granite City, the more I saw how much our needs and goals overlap. Then more specific questions came to mind: Can we teach students in Granite City to become advocates for both saving steel mill jobs and reducing pollution? Can we give them the skills and tools they need to form diverse coalitions to bring about the just transition to a green economy that will be critical for their futures? Can the common causes of saving jobs and improving health and the climate become enough to form strong bonds between the long-standing white families in the area and the more recently arrived families of color?

### Lessons from the CTU's Freedom School

It may seem like our big city locals are a world apart from our rural ones, but efforts by the CTU to build coalitions across diverse community and labor networks show how powerful partnerships can transform our landscapes.<sup>13</sup> The CTU's current drive to provide educational and economic opportunities while addressing the climate crisis is a good example.

In the fall of 2024, the Chicago Public Schools will open up a citywide public engagement process to create a 10-year facilities master plan. The CTU has big plans to impact the district's vision. In the 2022–23 school year, we started a campaign to convert all 600 district schools to green, sustainable, and anti-racist schools that convey love and liberation for our students and families. That objective requires anywhere from \$15 to \$25 billion to ensure all students are transported by electric buses (instead of diesel) and all schools are powered by solar, have heat pumps, possess gar-

Community challenges are opportunities to build coalitions around shared goals.

dens and green space, and are free of PCBs, lead paint, lead pipes, and asbestos. If achieved, this ambitious plan will provide countless opportunities to partner with the trades and form career and technical education (CTE) programs to ensure that our students, nearly 90 percent of whom are students of color (with 47 percent Hispanic and 36 percent African American students<sup>14</sup>), gain valuable insights and skills to participate in the green economy. Imagine school renovations that require contractors to hire and train people of color in economically distressed parts of the city. And imagine CTE programs that provide apprenticeships for students in solar panel design and installation, allowing them to improve their school facilities and nearby residential housing units.

Starting to bring this vision to life, in the summer of 2023 the CTU ran its first Freedom School with 16 students and 5 educators from schools across the city. Over two weeks, they engaged in a series of learning adventures about environmental issues and their impact on communities throughout Chicagoland.<sup>15</sup> The participants developed action plans for refurbishing their own schools and reimagining buildings across the city. On the final day, June 23, 2023, students met with the heads of the school district and the school facilities department and then the mayor and the deputy mayor of education to share their proposals. In early July, three student leaders from three different schools testified at a Board of Education meeting about their experiences at the Freedom School. They detailed the specific needs of their schools and the importance of including them and their communities in the development of the new master plan.



The idea for our Freedom School emerged from the work we've been doing the last two years through our Climate Justice Committee. This is where CTU members forged our vision for a green, healthy, sustainable, anti-racist school district that improves the facilities where we teach and where students learn, starting with the communities that have endured the greatest systemic inequities, such as environmental racism.<sup>16</sup>

Two critical issues are removing lead paint from our schools and adding solar panels. In addition, we have several hot zones for pollution, mainly in communities of color. This is an ongoing legacy of environmental racism.<sup>17</sup> For decades, industrial zones, bus depots, highways, landfills, and other sources of pollution were intentionally placed next to Black and brown neighborhoods when people of color had no other housing options because of redlining.<sup>18</sup>

For our Climate Justice Committee, key questions are: How do we center the communities that have been harmed the most

to receive the greatest school renovations and healthiest environments? How can we offset some of the historical damage and environmental racism that those communities have experienced and continue to endure? How can we ensure this is a coalition effort with community organizations involved? Knowing that students are very interested in climate change and environmental racism, how do we involve students in their own school communities as advocates?

The Freedom School was intentionally designed to build connection and coalition between Black- and brown-led environmental justice organizations, our students, and our members throughout the city. For instance, on a field trip to the South Side's Altgeld Gardens community, students met with Cheryl Johnson, the daughter of the late Hazel Johnson, who is known as the mother of the modern environmental justice movement.<sup>19</sup> Altgeld Gardens has been referred to as the Toxic Doughnut, in large part because of the steel manufacturing that used to be in the area.<sup>20</sup> It's a public housing community with almost entirely Black families, and there's a Black-led organization, People for Community Recovery (which Hazel founded and Cheryl now leads), advocating for the corporations that polluted the area to now clean it up. In addition, they are demanding restitution for the families who have suffered. For students, it was striking to grasp how a community that has been repeatedly poisoned for decades is standing up for itself.

Along with studying environmental challenges, we wanted students to reconnect with nature, even in our urban environment. We did a camping trip in Big Marsh Park, a relatively new addition to the Chicago Park District system. Big Marsh first opened in 2016 and was erected out of the rubble of the industrial dumping ground in the Lake Calumet area that used to house the nation's largest steel factories. It is now an incredible urban wildlife oasis where students hiked, biked, engaged in birding, and listened to dozens of coyotes howl throughout the night. It was also the first camping trip for 15 of the 20 participants. The students really had a memorable experience that reinforced the importance of preserving and conserving nature, including by converting to green energy.

To help develop their plans for greening their school facilities, students interviewed district officials who walked the group through a school building so students could gain insights into the challenges of renovating and greening our facilities, which average 82 years old.<sup>21</sup> To prepare for this walkthrough, students read a *Chicago Tribune* article stating that 70 percent of schools had at least one water fountain that tested positive for lead.<sup>22</sup> They used that information to ask the district officials pointed questions.

Our 2023 Freedom School was just a proof of concept. In the summer of 2024, we'd like to expand from two weeks to six weeks of youth programming so students can engage in deeper explorations, such as doing assessments of their school buildings and comparing communities with newer infrastructure to those that have been allowed to deteriorate. We'd like students to gain hands-on skills in infrastructure by examining HVAC systems, paint (especially peeling lead paint), and plumbing. Equally important, we'd like them to gain skills in meeting with community organizations, especially those that have been doing this work for a long time in frontline communities like Altgeld Gardens.

Ultimately, our Freedom School will be a strong pipeline for youth leaders who can build coalitions, conduct needed research,

and be advocates for the green, anti-racist vision we share. And the more I reflect on what our initial Freedom School accomplished, the more I think back to that AP economics class in Granite City. Those students are facing the same fundamental economic and environmental crises playing out in Chicago's most polluted areas. For the CTU, our experience with the Freedom School was transformational because it gave us insights into how we could build CTE pipelines and fortify our labor tables. It also served as a model for building regional solidarity across rural and urban counties. Imagine not just a Freedom School in Chicago each summer, but Freedom Schools all across Illinois sharing the goal of creating green, healthy, sustainable, anti-racist schools that prepare youth for good green jobs and community activism. Fortunately, our state offers a Freedom School grant<sup>23</sup> that's fairly easy to win. So while this is just a vision at the moment, it's one that many of our locals could realize.

### Imagining a Brighter Future for Granite City

It's not an exaggeration to suggest that the health of democracy and the planet itself may depend on our ability to bridge the urban-rural divides within our states and across the country for the sake of winning green, sustainable community schools and infrastructure.

The combined threats to Granite City's economy and environment present a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to form a coalition-based effort to convert to green schools, clean up polluted areas, and look ahead to a just transition to greener, cleaner jobs. But Granite City can't form the type of strong coalition needed without being able to build across communities—including across unions and racial divides, and across longtime and new residents—and to see past our differences.

In Chicago, the CTU's base of strength is the incredible relationships with our students and their parents and other caregivers, relatives, and neighbors. When there are challenges in a community—like Granite City's steel mill announcing plans to transfer 1,000 jobs out of state—that's an opportunity for us as the teachers union to expand our base by connecting to the affected students, families, and unions. It's also an opportunity to expand our thinking. When we form new coalitions, we anchor them in new, shared conceptions of improved conditions. Keeping what we have is not inspirational or adequate.

Educators in Granite City could accomplish a great deal by adopting this mindset. With climate change dominating young people's concerns in national polls,<sup>24</sup> with community health in Granite City at risk from industrial pollution, and with the threat of losing 1,000 good-paying union jobs, the only path forward may be to develop a new vision for a just transition to greener, cleaner, good-paying union jobs. Imagine partnering with US Steel. Instead of letting it transfer jobs and pollute another community, a broad, strong Granite City coalition could make offers that are appealing. For example, it might be hard to quickly reduce the mill's direct environmental impact, but US Steel could sponsor or help apply for a government grant for new electric school buses. That's a win for the community that makes US Steel a great community partner. But that's just one idea from an outsider.

As we build bridges across locals, it's important to focus on sharing strategies and tactics—like building diverse coalitions to rally around shared goals—and keeping the goal setting local.

Learning more about Granite City, and nearby Madison, in the months after my visit, I saw more and more opportunities for coalition-based progress.

### Getting to Know Madison County

Madison County, which includes Granite City, trends conservative in its voting history; Trump won by 15 points in 2020. In 2022, Madison County voters gave Republican candidates a clean sweep of the seven key offices at the state level.<sup>25</sup> However, an amendment of the state constitution on the ballot to establish the right to collective bargaining and union organizing, the Workers' Rights Amendment, passed the county by a solid 55 percent majority.<sup>26</sup>

This support for unionization shows an opportunity to turn the tide politically. The Workers' Rights Amendment's success suggests that there is an alternate path to motivating the Democratic base while simultaneously providing movement infrastructure to grow it.



In contrast to Granite City, neighboring Madison (a small town of about 3,000 people split between Madison and St. Clair counties) has a majority Black population and is also a much more reliable base of support for Democrats. Imagine if both communities joined forces with the steelworkers who are fighting to stop deindustrialization in the area. This could be a broad, diverse coalition of all union members in the region—including educators—and their networks, such as students whose family members fear deindustrialization and restaurant owners and workers who depend on customers with good-paying jobs.

Whereas manufacturing jobs are often associated with urban America, they constitute 15 percent of rural earnings—far more than the 9 percent of urban earnings nationally.<sup>27</sup> As one labor scholar explains, “there are more factory workers than farmers in rural America. And many of these rural factories employ a racially diverse workforce.”<sup>28</sup> That's true in Granite City—and it gives Granite City another strength to build on. According to Dan Simmons, president of United Steelworkers Local 1899 in Granite City, 60 percent of his members are white men, 25 percent are Black men, and the remaining 15 represent other groups. (There are very few women of any race working in the mill.) Simmons described steelwork as providing a standard of living that is a “little better off than the surrounding industry.”<sup>29</sup>

When coalitions are large, diverse, and determined, they win.

Wanting to better understand the challenges and opportunities in Granite City, I spoke to him at length, listened to his ideas, and tossed out ideas based on the CTU's coalition-based work. While he did not think the US Steel Corporation could easily get away with capital flight and idling the local plant (in fact, he seemed fairly confident that the 1,000 jobs could be saved), he welcomed the possibility of a teacher and steelworker coalition to hold the company—and the state—accountable to the needs of the larger community. And he started to imagine with me what it would mean to fight for more than just keeping the jobs.

As I got to know Madison County, one factor that could inhibit such a diverse coalition stood out: where diverse communities had, and had not, formed. My initial experience in the disproportionately white AP economics class alerted me to this concern, then other indicators soon came into view.



When Noud, the Granite City Federation of Teachers president, grew up in Granite City, it was an overwhelmingly white working-class community with a wide range of high-paying unionized jobs. Now he and his fellow teachers are facing a rapidly changing student body who are living and learning in a very different context, both economically and culturally. The school system is projected to be over 40 percent students of color in the next year, while over 98 percent of the teachers are white.<sup>30</sup> This is concerning given the well-established research showing the benefits of a diverse teaching force, and particularly of students having teachers who share their racial and cultural background.<sup>31</sup> And, the climate and culture of the high school has received low marks by students and staff in the state's school climate surveys.<sup>32</sup>

According to a new study by the *Chicago Tribune* and ProPublica, Granite City has a significant number of students ticketed and fined in the state for disciplinary violations, 70 in all.<sup>33</sup> The district has not released data to the media breaking down those numbers based on racial demographics. However, it's likely to follow school suspension and expulsion data. The percentage of students of color in the district has gone from 29 in 2018 to 36 in 2022,<sup>34</sup> whereas the percentage of students with in- or out-of-school suspensions who are of color has risen from 44 percent in 2015 to 55 percent in the 2021–22 school year, according to the Illinois State Board of Education.<sup>35</sup> So, as Granite City has become more diverse, the percentage of disciplinary infractions has fallen even more disproportionately on students of color.

But the situation is far from bleak. As Noud and I discussed these challenges, he emphasized that the community has become

resilient from prior periods of plant closures, though he also fears they may share the fate of other rust-belt communities, such as loss of tax revenue, property values, and population. Still, he said, “These are difficulties at times, but ... our faculty and staff are focused [on] and geared towards giving our students the best education we can.”<sup>36</sup>

### Imagining a Way Forward

Reflecting on this conversation, I came back to one of the CTU's key lessons from coalition building in Chicago: keeping what we have is not inspirational. Imagine diversifying Granite City's educators, ensuring they reflect the student body and their diverse families—many of whom make up the workforce at the steel mill and surrounding retail stores. This would greatly strengthen the potential for developing a strong coalition across Madison County and, in my opinion, is the only way to achieve a shared goal, whether that goal is merely to save 1,000 jobs or to make a just transition to green schools, green jobs, reduced pollution, and a healthier, more connected community.

Fortunately, I didn't have to look far to find local expertise in diversifying the educator workforce. Madison, the small, predominantly Black town, is succeeding in this work. According to Madison Federation of Teachers President Joshua Webster, his local has undertaken an effort to diversify the teacher ranks of their schools through partnerships. And the district has been very supportive because four out of five administrators are African American. Webster's local has partnered with several of the local teacher preparation programs, including Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Harris-Stowe State University, and McKendree University. They also work directly with a statewide program, Grow Your Own, to increase the number of Black and Latine student graduates pursuing careers in education. As one of the few Black teacher union presidents in the state, this is one of his top priorities—though he still has a long way to go. Currently, 90 percent of the students are Black and only 35 percent of the teachers are Black.<sup>37</sup> But crucially, students do see themselves among their teachers, making Webster's efforts to grow the number of Black teachers in their districts so critical.

Thankfully, Webster says, “These administrators know that students' environment and home life goes hand in hand with education.”<sup>38</sup> That's why they supported having white educators participate in the IFT's trauma training; it helped them better understand, communicate with, and empathize with Madison's students. Imagine what this training could do for Granite City. And imagine the goodwill Granite City educators could build if they proposed a diversification plan that focused on the changing student body while respecting the hard work of the existing teachers. For instance, they could demand a diverse teacher training pipeline, showing the forward thinking necessary to build trust and confidence with future coalition partners while allowing the change to happen through normal vacancies.<sup>39</sup>

Given how I've seen work with partners grow and expand in Chicago, I was not surprised to learn that Webster's local has also been actively involved in shifting the political landscape of the county. “By working with local clergy and civil rights organizations, ... our local has been instrumental in registering voters, canvassing, and getting out the vote,” Webster said.<sup>40</sup> He has also developed strong relationships with statewide legislators and

local politicians through our IFT field service director (a staffer who supports local leaders with contract negotiations, grievances, and community partnerships). Webster sees this activity as central to building a diverse educator workforce in the future, along with maintaining and growing pro-labor policies for the region. Such coalition forces will be increasingly necessary to combat existential threats that face unions and the larger community on the horizon—like those that face steelworkers in the area.<sup>41</sup>

Webster's work in Madison is a great foundation for a much larger regional coalition. Imagine Webster, Noud, and Simmons mapping out which communities they can each bring to the table—not just their members, families, neighbors, and students but also everyone who voted for the Workers' Rights Amendment. And imagine that broad, diverse, strong table negotiating its own new vision for their region. Now that's inspirational.

**T**here are times when this work feels impossible, and there are setbacks. But the CTU's work over the last decade has shown me that when coalitions are large, diverse, and determined, they win.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes quickly, sometimes with protracted struggle. They win.

This is true in rural areas too. Consider McDowell County, West Virginia. In the early 2000s, the loss of unionized coal jobs upended a solidly middle-class standard of living. Families faced sky-high unemployment, crushing drug abuse, and diminished life expectancy. In 2011, AFT President Randi Weingarten and former West Virginia first lady Gayle Manchin developed a project called Reconnecting McDowell to address economic dislocation and poverty through a broad coalition of alliances and policies. Today, over 125 national, state, and local partners have helped establish free broadband for all schools, dental care for families, enhanced clinical interventions for students, and affordable housing for teachers. As a result, high school graduation rates and academic outcomes have improved.<sup>43</sup> McDowell demonstrates that places like Granite City, according to Weingarten, "can thrive again, that all children regardless of demography or geography can thrive."<sup>44</sup>

As in Chicago and Granite City, McDowell County has a history of industrial pollution. For McDowell, a critical problem is water quality after decades of coal mine operators neglecting their obligation to protect waterways.<sup>45</sup> But now, thanks to a partnership between Reconnecting McDowell and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's Project Water Education Today, fourth-graders in McDowell are learning about how to be good stewards of their local waterways. Visiting a riverside park, they studied aquatic life under microscopes and went into a soil tunnel to see the water's impact.<sup>46</sup> This is not (yet) as elaborate as the CTU's Freedom School—but it's a start, and one that Granite City could readily adapt.

While Reconnecting McDowell is a particularly ambitious project, much can be accomplished with just a handful of partners. For example, when the AFT learned that the semiconductor manufacturer Micron is building a new plant in Syracuse, New York, it spurred a partnership with local school systems and teachers unions. Now, there's a collaborative effort underway to prepare students for engineering and technical careers at Micron—and to offer professional development to teachers to teach this innovative content. With the Biden administration passing the CHIPS

and Science Act,<sup>47</sup> the Inflation Reduction Act,<sup>48</sup> and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act,<sup>49</sup> these opportunities will grow exponentially if we take advantage of them.

Teachers in Granite City and Madison, and steelworkers in both towns, are facing crises that they can turn into opportunities. Demographic changes, deindustrialization, and generations of pollution can become the catalyst for people to band together and fight for a just transition to green schools and green jobs for all.

This work begins with us.

By living next to, growing up with, and developing deep relationships with students and families their entire careers, teachers occupy a key intersection for hope and transformation. Solidarity may not be enough to surmount the considerable obstacles on the horizon, but nothing short of a multiracial coalition can address the current challenges.

I was raised by labor lawyers who were active in the union movement, working to make a more just society. I don't believe that any progress will be made in isolation. To address racial and economic inequities, to ensure LGBTQIA+ students and families feel safe and have equal rights, to offer opportunity to all, we have to work together. We have to form coalitions and launch campaigns that stretch beyond our comfort zones and our traditional communities. That's how movements grow.

There is a longstanding critique of teachers unions as being more concerned about adults than students. That's not true. We bargain for the common good. We're trying to advance the interests of young people, from securing basic classroom supplies to expanding CTE for green jobs. Still, if we're not explicitly doing things as unions alongside young people, it will be easier for anti-union extremists to separate us from our base—to separate educators from their students and communities.

In Madison County, if it's just the teachers union presidents of two locals fighting a giant industrial behemoth, they'll lose. If it's every member of those teachers unions and the young people in their classrooms and their families, then they'll have a large community that feels empowered and understands their agency—and they'll win.

I can't think of a single movement that was able to reach its heights without student involvement. We saw that with the civil rights movement, and now we're seeing it with efforts to win more environmental justice. I think young people are the conscience of the country. And I think Dr. King put it best regarding the Children's March in 1963: young people are not just receptacles that are influenced by adults; children have their own beliefs, ideas, and needs.<sup>50</sup> Like King, we must have the courage to let them lead. □

The health of  
democracy and the  
planet may depend  
on our ability to  
bridge urban-rural  
divides and win  
green, sustainable  
infrastructure.

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/potter](https://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/potter).

# How to Bring Antiracism to Life in Teachers Unions and Beyond



Fostering educational justice coalitions, with parents and community organizations deeply embedded in Black, Latine, and Indigenous communities, has been central to the Chicago Teachers Union's success, so I was highly motivated to help the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) develop its 2021 *Antiracism Organizing Guide* (available for free at [go.aft.org/ixj](http://go.aft.org/ixj)). Occasionally, union members who are new to coalition building will ask why we have to focus on antiracism. While the civics teacher in me prefers to challenge white supremacy and our roots as a settler colonist society—from stealing Indigenous lands to enslaving people to redlining—the IFT's guide is easy to use and direct. As it explains:

[Antiracist work] is imperative to us winning. Race baiting has always been used as a strategy to divide workers and push anti-labor, corporate interests. Racial solidarity is our strategy to build power and dismantle oppressive systems that exploit working people.<sup>1</sup>

I hope everyone will embrace antiracist work in order to, as the guide says, “create a world where we can all live fully in our humanity.”<sup>2</sup> The union movement was built upon the need for “Black and white to unite and fight,”<sup>3</sup> and it can only grow through a similar approach.

Along with offering examples of how several IFT locals—including the Chicago Teachers Union and Granite City Federation of Teachers—are advancing antiracism, the guide shares several ways to bring antiracism into standard union processes and practices. The box below provides excerpts from page 5 of the guide to show some of the ways that all teachers unions could engage in this work.

Antiracist work starts with examining the many systems, policies, and practices of a workplace and union. Are they producing racist outcomes? Do they center the needs of the most marginalized, excluded, and exploited?

- **Recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion**

What processes are used to recruit and hire candidates? Is the candidate pool diverse? Are there internal systems to ensure that there is intentional outreach to historically marginalized groups? Are there support systems in place for diverse candidates to succeed and thrive in your workplace? Are BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] members disproportionately assigned to less desirable work that is compensated at a lower rate?

- **Union leadership**

Does the leadership of your local/council/chapter reflect the diversity of your membership? The community you serve? Are there opportunities for engagement and participation for all members? Are the contributions and participation of all members welcomed and valued? How does the local/council/chapter encourage or discourage the engagement and participation of underrepresented groups?

- **Curricula**

Do students see themselves in positive and affirming ways within the curricula? Do they have an opportunity to “see” and learn about other cultures and their

contributions to society? Do the curricula encourage students to critique and challenge systems? Does it encourage students to ask questions or just answer questions?

- **Discipline policies and procedures**

- » **Students:** Are Black students, students with disabilities, or queer students disciplined more frequently or more harshly than their peers? Do students have more access to police than to social workers, counselors, or psychologists? What about dress codes: Does the district discourage certain hairstyles and styles of dress that are commonly associated with nonwhite cultures?
- » **Members:** Are folks of color or LGBTQIA+ folks disciplined more frequently/harshly? Does the code of “professional dress” adhere to white standards? Do certain rules impact marginalized staff more than others? Are rules fairly applied?

- **Class/student assignments**

Are Black and brown teachers more often assigned “those kids”? Do Black and brown teachers have less access to teaching higher-level courses (i.e., Advanced Placement and honors)? Are Black and brown students underrepresented in Advanced Placement and honors courses and overrepresented in remedial courses? How is student placement in these courses determined?

Teachers unions that engage and act upon these ideas—as well as the others that are offered in the IFT's guide—will be well prepared to help build the broad, diverse, and antiracist coalitions that are necessary to meet our students' needs.

—J. P.

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/potter\\_sb](http://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/potter_sb).

# Climate Justice for All

Pursuing a Just Transition in the Education Sector



By Todd E. Vachon

On Sunday, October 28, 2012, teachers across the Northeast were glued to their television sets to watch the latest weather forecast about the approaching hurricane. Schools would be closed Monday. Emergencies were declared, line crews were summoned, shelters were prepared, and command centers were opened. New York City made the unprecedented decision to stop all subway service.

As feared, Superstorm Sandy arrived with a vengeance the next evening, knocking out power for eight million people across 17 states, destroying countless homes, rendering the NYC subway system nonoperational, and closing all 1,750 of the city's schools for a week. Dozens of damaged schools remained shuttered even longer, forcing students to share buildings with other schools, sometimes in distant boroughs of the city. Over 100 deaths were attributed to the storm, including at least one teacher. As with previous extreme storms such as Hurricane Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005 or later storms like Hurricane Maria that ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017, it was the working class and poor—the frontline communities—who were hit first and worst.

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Nine years later, New York and New Jersey were devastated again by Hurricane Ida while still continuing to shore up infrastructure ruined by Sandy. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration places the total cost of Superstorm Sandy at over \$70 billion<sup>1</sup>—possibly the costliest to ever hit the region, making it the most economically devastating event to hit New York City since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

While individual weather events like Sandy cannot be directly attributed to climate change, their likelihood, frequency, and intensity are all increased by climate change. As the Earth warms, storms that used to happen once a century are now happening more frequently, and the impacts on students, teachers, and communities are devastating.<sup>2</sup> This article explores some of the causes of the climate crisis, including its relationship to social and economic inequality, and what educators can do—and many already are doing—through their unions to promote climate justice and equity in their schools and communities. Perhaps your local union will be the next to take bold climate action and become a part of the solution by helping to forge your own local Green New Deal and joining the national effort.

## The Problem: Dual Crises of Ecology and Inequality

The world is in the midst of two simultaneous and interconnected crises: a crisis of ecology and a crisis of inequality. Climate change is negatively affecting human health and quality of life and is dis-

proportionately impacting marginalized populations. At the same time, socioeconomic inequality has increased dramatically. The top 1 percent of earners now take home 22 percent of all income in the United States, the top 10 percent own 70 percent of all wealth, and real wages for American workers have been stagnant for decades.<sup>3</sup> These economic disparities are amplified along the lines of race, gender, and citizenship status.

Climate change is caused predominantly by the burning of fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal, which emit greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, causing the planet to warm.<sup>4</sup> As the planet warms, local climates are altered, leading to more frequent and intense storms, more wildfires and droughts, accelerated melting of arctic ice, rising sea levels, and the mass extinction of species that cannot adapt rapidly enough to the rate of climatic change.

Rising economic inequality is due to a variety of factors, including declining unionization; tax cuts for the super-rich; labor market deregulation; the replacement of full-time, permanent jobs with part-time and temporary work; a weak social safety net for working families; and the increased financialization of the US economy.<sup>5</sup> All of these factors accelerated around 1980 with the rise of free market fundamentalist (aka neoliberal) leadership in the federal government.<sup>6</sup> Rising inequality\* has been associated with increased social and health problems, lower life expectancies, decreased child well-being, a decline in trust in public institutions—including schools and governments—and an erosion of support for democracy itself.<sup>7</sup>

The figure below illustrates the simultaneous rise of GHG emissions and income inequality between 1950 and 2018. Global emissions increased more than sixfold during this period, from just under 6,000 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (MMT $\text{CO}_2$ ) in 1950 to 36,000 MMT $\text{CO}_2$  in 2018.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the share of all income earned by the top 1 percent of earners in the United States more than doubled from a low of 9 percent in 1978 to over 22 percent in 2018.<sup>9</sup> According to Oxfam, the world's top 26 billionaires now own as much as the poorest 3.8 billion people on Earth, and the richest 10 percent of humans are responsible for nearly half of all carbon emissions caused by consumption.<sup>10</sup>

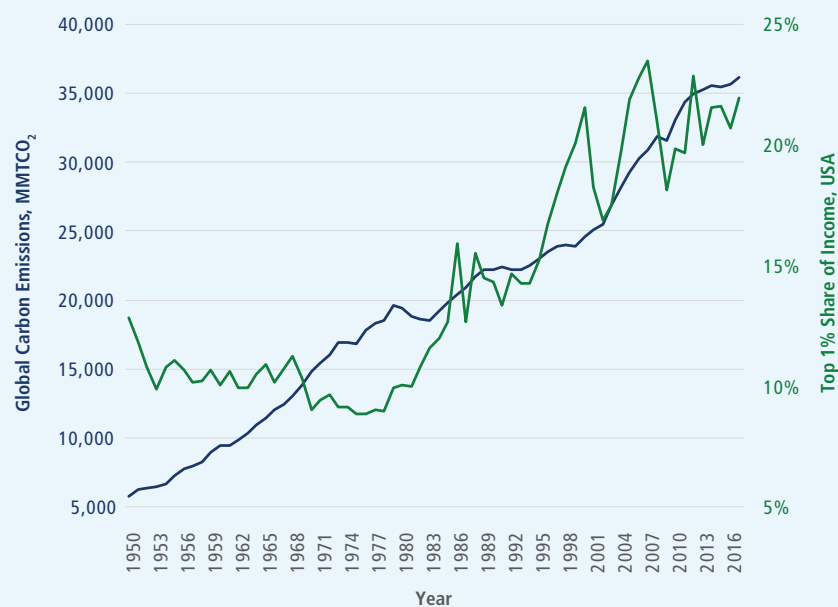
In addition to consuming considerably more than the average person, many billionaires derive their wealth directly from owning fossil fuel corporations, many of which have funded climate change denialism to prop up their corporate profits.<sup>11</sup> Billionaires of all backgrounds also invest heavily in financial instruments that promote the extraction, production, transportation,

and consumption of fossil fuels. A 2022 report from Oxfam finds the investments of just 125 billionaires produce 393 MMT $\text{CO}_2$  emissions every year.<sup>12</sup> That's equal to the total emissions generated by the country of France. On average, one billionaire's investments' annual emissions are a million times higher than a person in the poorest 90 percent of the world's population.<sup>13</sup>

Many of these same billionaires have also spent large sums of money combating union drives as well as influencing politics to weaken labor protections. In other words, many of the top contributors to the climate crisis are also the strongest anti-union forces and promoters of policies such as "right-to-work" laws, which reduce worker power, suppress wages, and increase income inequality.<sup>14</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, just 10.1 percent of US workers are currently represented by a union—down from a high of 35 percent in 1953. The number is even lower when looking at the private sector, which has a unionization rate of just 6.1 percent.<sup>15</sup> Much of the decline has been due to the erosion of jobs in the once highly unionized manufacturing industry and the massive increase of employment in industries that are not highly unionized due to weak labor laws and vigorous anti-union campaigns by hostile employers, as we have seen with Amazon and Starbucks.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, as a result of the legacy of racism and discriminatory hiring practices, workers from historically marginalized communities, particularly Black and Latinx workers, have been systematically deprived of opportunities to share in the prosperity generated by the fossil fuel economy. Adding insult to injury, these same workers have disproportionately borne the burden of the pollution created by the fossil fuel and other toxic industries.<sup>17</sup> For example, a recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* finds that air pollution exposure in

## Rising Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Income Inequality, 1950–2018



SOURCE: FIGURE CREATED BY TODD E. VACHON BASED ON DATA FROM "CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS" BY HANNAH RITCHIE AND MAX ROSER AND "STRIKING IT RICHER" BY EMMANUEL SAEZ. SEE ENDNOTE 8 FOR DETAILS.

\*To learn more about the societal costs of rising inequality, see "Greater Equality: The Hidden Key to Better Health and Higher Scores" in the Spring 2011 issue of *American Educator*: [go.aft.org/sck](http://go.aft.org/sck).

## Climate disasters cumulatively increase inequality in schools and communities.

the United States is disproportionately caused by the non-Hispanic white majority but disproportionately inhaled by Black and Hispanic minorities.<sup>18</sup> On average, non-Hispanic white people experience a “pollution advantage” of about 17 percent less air pollution exposure than is caused by their consumption, while Black and Hispanic people, on average, bear a “pollution burden” of 56 percent and 63 percent excess exposure, respectively.

Students, educators, schools, and universities are not immune to the consequences of unchecked climate change and runaway inequality. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that a 1-degree-Fahrenheit hotter school year reduces that year’s learning by 1 percent and that hot school days disproportionately impact students of color, accounting for roughly 5 percent of the racial achievement gap.<sup>19</sup> Each fall, during the height of hurricane season, extreme weather increasingly disrupts back-to-school plans across the country, with closures affecting more than 1.1 million students in 2021.<sup>20</sup> In 2022, the US Government Accountability Office released a report on the impacts of weather and climate disasters on schools, finding that over one-half of public school districts—representing over two-thirds of all students across the country—are in counties that experienced presidentially declared major disasters from 2017 to 2019. Recent research in the journal *Scientific Reports* finds that school closures due to wildfires in California generate significant negative impacts on academic performance among students.<sup>21</sup> The connection between the increasing number of hot days and disaster-related school closures and lost learning are just two examples of how climate change is already affecting education.<sup>22</sup>

The impacts of unmitigated climate change also cause severe damage to educational infrastructure. A 2017 report by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that nearly 6,500 public schools are in counties with a high risk of flooding, and a study in the journal *Nature* found that the nation’s flood risk will jump 26 percent in the next 30 years.<sup>23</sup> An assessment by the Center for Integrative Environmental Research at the University of Maryland finds that extreme weather events, such as flooding and wildfires, place immense strain on public sector budgets at the state and local levels.<sup>24</sup> Such budgetary constraints put considerable stress on school budgets and create significant challenges for unions going into bargaining over wages, hours, and working conditions for their members.

Between Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the West Coast wildfires of 2022, there were over 200 “billion-dollar weather and climate disasters,” totaling over \$1.8 trillion in damages.<sup>25</sup> As disasters become more frequent and more forceful, there is an increased understanding that the impacts are unequal. Schools and communities across America have testified to the ways disasters compound, cumulatively increasing inequality and disadvantage. The good news is that there is an important role that students, educators, our local unions, and community allies can play in addressing the dual crises of climate change and inequality.

### The Solution: A Just Transition

The extreme inequality and poverty in our very wealthy society are morally reprehensible. They are also the result of decades of intentional policy decisions that have concentrated income, wealth, and power in the hands of fewer and fewer people, who then use that money and power to further expand their money and power. In short, the current rules of the game are not designed to ensure

the greatest good for the greatest number of Americans, but rather to ensure the greatest profits for the wealthiest and most powerful Americans. Reversing this trend and centering the common good—putting all people’s economic, social, mental, and physical health before corporate profits—will require significant changes to the way our economy operates. Confronting the climate crisis offers a potential pathway for making some of the important changes in our economy that are needed to recenter the lives and well-being of people. We can right economic wrongs and create good jobs with fair wages and benefits while “going green,” but only if we now make intentional policy decisions that focus on equity, inclusion, and justice.

The concept of a “just transition” attempts to do just that by reducing fossil fuel dependence while simultaneously investing in communities and people by creating good job opportunities that offer living wages, health and retirement benefits, opportunities for promotion, and union representation for displaced and historically marginalized workers. The idea originates from the work of the late American labor and environmental health and safety activist Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union.<sup>26</sup> Broken into its constituent parts, “transition” refers to “the passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another,” and “just,” in this usage, is the root word for “justice,” meaning “acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, a just transition combines the often-conflicting projects of economic transition and the pursuit of social justice into one unified endeavor.

When confronting the problem of climate change, the potential for injustice is great, particularly if decisions are made solely by economic elites and grounded in the logic of neoliberal capitalism. This logic of unregulated free markets has led to the accumulation of wealth at the top while working- and middle-class families struggle, and it is at the root of the false choice between having good jobs or having a healthy environment that many blue-collar workers are confronted with.<sup>28</sup> The same logic has led to the construction and operation of polluting facilities in poor and predominantly nonwhite communities across the United States, while historically excluding the very same populations from access to the job opportunities within or only offering the most dangerous occupations to local workers of color.

The very notion of a just transition challenges the powerful neoliberal ideology that has dominated US governance since the late 1970s. It instead offers a vision of economic democracy, including public investments to account for the full social costs and benefits of environmental and economic policies to create the most just—not necessarily the most profitable—outcome for all. Instead of offering a false choice between good jobs and a healthy environment, a just transition puts people before profits by pursuing both clean air and good jobs at the same time. The education sector has a large role to play in creating a just transition, not only through teaching and learning but also by

## Confronting the climate crisis offers a pathway to recenter the lives and well-being of people.

transforming our facilities and operations to address climate change and in the process creating good career pipelines and reducing inequalities.

As educators, we have a responsibility as the stewards of the next generation to help ensure that we pass along a livable climate with a fair economy to our students and all future generations. It is for this reason that the AFT has adopted several resolutions on climate change in recent years, including “A Just

Transition to a Peaceful and Sustainable Economy” (2017),<sup>29</sup> “In Support of Green New Deal” (2020),<sup>30</sup> and “Divest from Fossil Fuels and Reinvest in Workers and Communities” (2022).<sup>31</sup> Nationally, at the state level, and locally, the AFT, in partnership with student activists and community groups, has been a leader on confronting the climate crisis, but still more can and should be done to promote a truly just transition. I spoke with a dozen educators and students from around the United States who have been engaging in this work through their unions and in their schools and universities. These conversations inform the recommendations outlined below.

### Pursuing a Just Transition in the Education Sector

Like all sectors, public schools, colleges, and universities have played their part in contributing to climate change. According to the Aspen Institute, there are nearly 100,000 public preK–12 schools in the United States. They occupy two million acres of land and emit 78 MMTCO<sub>2</sub> annually<sup>32</sup> at a cost of about \$8 billion per year for energy. Our public school buildings are about 50 years old, on average, and far too many operate outdated and inefficient HVAC equipment, have poor insulation, and have electrical and plumbing systems in desperate need of repair.<sup>33</sup> While the problem is widespread, it is even more pronounced in low-income communities and communities of color.<sup>34</sup> Public schools also operate the largest mass transit fleet in the country with nearly 480,000 school buses on the road.<sup>35</sup> There are an additional 6,000 two-year and four-year public higher education institutions throughout the United States that are also in need of energy efficiency improvements.<sup>36</sup>



Given their environmental impact, schools, colleges, and universities are an excellent place to begin forging a just transition through investments in green schools that would reduce GHG emissions and pollution exposure while creating good jobs that can address systemic inequalities along the lines of race, class, and gender. This involves installing renewable energy generation and storage systems, renovating existing school buildings to improve efficiencies, constructing new green buildings, securing strong labor standards, ensuring an open and democratic process for all stakeholders, and requiring local and preferential hiring to ensure that local communities and displaced workers benefit from the jobs that are created in the process.

### Constructing Healthy Green Schools

So what are the elements of healthy green schools? Green school projects include installation of solar panels or other renewable energy sources; improving heating, cooling, and ventilation systems (e.g., installing heat pumps); constructing new energy efficient buildings or making retrofits to existing buildings (e.g., new doors, windows, and insulation); installing battery storage for renewably generated electricity; creating microgrids that can support communities during power outages; modernizing lighting; switching from diesel to electric vehicle fleets; automating building systems (including smart thermostats and sensors for lights and faucets); and creating more green spaces.<sup>37</sup> These investments not only reduce the carbon footprint of schools but also save money on energy costs and reduce unhealthy pollution.<sup>38</sup>

These sorts of investments are not cheap. To cover the costs of these investments, Representative Jamaal Bowman and Senator Ed Markey have introduced Green New Deal (GND) for Public Schools legislation that would invest \$1.6 trillion over 10 years to fund green upgrades—but that bill is not yet passed.<sup>39</sup> Thankfully, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which was passed in 2022, offers many incentives for local schools to make these upgrades now while we continue to fight for GND for education.<sup>40</sup> In particular, the AFT and other nonprofits lobbied for the inclusion of “direct pay” incentives in the bill that allow tax-exempt entities such as local governments, school districts, universities, nonprofits, and unions to receive direct rebates, in lieu of tax credits, from the federal government to cover a significant percent of the cost of green school projects.

The IRA incentives are like grants equal to at least 6 percent and up to 60 percent of any renewable energy project’s cost. However, unlike regular grants, there is no competitive application process. If a school district makes an appropriate investment, the IRS will wire them money. The credits are applicable to the cost for fuel cells, solar systems, small windmills, qualified offshore wind, geothermal heat pumps, and energy storage. Projects that pay the local prevailing wage and hire apprentices from locally approved apprenticeship programs qualify for a 30 percent credit. Projects that meet the domestic content requirement earn an additional 10 percent credit. Projects in energy communities<sup>41</sup> or low-income communities can earn up to an additional 10 percent credit each.<sup>42</sup>

With direct pay, schools, colleges, and universities can own their clean power and maximize their cost benefits in the long run by keeping 100 percent of the savings. The rebate can be used to pay off huge portions of the project immediately, and the utility

cost savings from self-generation of electricity in the long run can be used to pay off the balance.

The important thing to note about green school projects is that they must be initiated locally, through local budgeting processes, including bonding discussions, municipal capital budgets, and referenda. Education unions are strategically positioned to lead in this effort. In many cases, they already are—as we’ll see below.

### Confronting Social and Economic Inequality

Combating the dual crises of ecology and inequality requires prioritizing environmental and climate justice to secure an equitable distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. For example, lead in public water supplies is a tremendous health hazard to students and residents in frontline communities from Newark, New Jersey, to Flint, Michigan, and beyond.<sup>43</sup> In these communities, workers and community activists can together advocate for the repair or replacement of poisoned water pipelines and demand the cleanup of the groundwater and aquifers that feed those pipelines. Education unions and community members can also demand the electrification of vehicles to reduce student and worker exposure to asthma-causing particulate matter pollution and reduce GHG emissions.

Creating more green spaces in urban communities or constructing bike paths or walking trails can reduce auto traffic around schools, colleges, and universities. Community-owned solar, microgrids, battery storage, and resilience hubs are key ingredients to equitable climate resilience. When the regional power company’s grid goes down, schools, colleges, and universities, as local anchor institutions, can provide a safe space—known as a resilience hub—for the provision of potable water, electricity for charging medical and communication devices, refrigeration for medications, and other vital services needed to save lives during climate catastrophes such as hurricanes. These facilities are most effective when the solar power is “islanded” within a microgrid, meaning it can be stored and used locally rather than being transmitted onto the regular electrical grid (which is how net-metering works in many states and localities).<sup>44</sup>

Climate equity also means pursuing labor justice and ensuring that the new jobs created are good jobs, providing opportunities not only for workers from historically marginalized communities but also for those displaced from the fossil fuel industry.

As noted above, the IRA promotes strong labor standards by providing additional incentives for projects that offer prevailing wages, take apprentices from qualified apprenticeship programs, and use domestically manufactured materials. Prevailing wages take labor costs out of competition in the construction bidding process, giving high-road union employers a better chance of securing contracts to retrofit old schools or build new green schools. Apprenticeships create a career pathway into well-paying jobs without the burden of debt that most students accrue pursuing college degrees. Sourcing building materials from domestic manufacturers also helps to support local manufacturing job opportunities. AFT locals, in partnership with construction and manufacturing unions and other community partners, can use all of these tools to ensure good jobs are created in the process of greening our nation’s schools.

Perhaps most importantly, to truly advance equity and justice through a just transition plan, all voices must be equally included

in decision-making. Social and economic justice campaigners operate under the simple principle that “Nothing about us, without us, is for us.” It means that decisions that significantly impact people’s lives cannot be fair and just without first listening to those people and empowering them to participate in the decision-making process.

### Teaching Climate Justice

As teachers, we know the power of education. Through our lessons in preK–12 schools, colleges, and universities, we are uniquely positioned to develop, engage, and prepare the next generation to be equipped to address climate change and to succeed in the green economy of the future. As the Aspen Institute’s K12 Climate Action Plan states, “Educators across subject areas in school and in out-of-school programs can support teaching and learning on sustainability, the environment, green jobs, and climate change and empower students with agency to advance solutions.”<sup>45</sup> However, as Betsy Drinan of the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) climate justice committee said to me, “It’s not just that greenhouse gases warm the planet and that causes these changes. It’s also the history of energy use that caused all this inequality and the impacts of climate change cause further inequality.”<sup>46</sup>

That is why developing and teaching climate justice curriculum, as opposed to just climate change curriculum, is an important piece of a just transition. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) has already begun developing content with a strong focus on climate justice and equity.<sup>47</sup> The BTU is considering doing the same. As Betsy told me, how we address climate change can either reduce or exacerbate inequality. Some key questions for educators and students, she

said, are: “Who has the power in these decisions? How are they using that power? And who are they keeping out of those decisions? That is what will determine the outcome.”<sup>48</sup> Ayesha Qazi-Lampert from the CTU climate justice committee agreed and added that “climate literacy is also an organizing tool; the education reveals inequities that inspire efforts for change—it’s kind of a cycle.”<sup>49</sup>

A good starting point for interested teachers is Aaron Karp’s “Educating for Climate Activism, Autonomy, and System Change,” which lays out a curriculum model that contains five content areas that aim to analyze the major forces that give rise to today’s existential problems and their solutions: ecological systems, energy sources and technology, economic institutions, power structures and politics, and social movement-driven societal change.<sup>50</sup> The model envisions the development of literacy in each area, including their interconnections, and could be used to guide curriculum development for educators as well as courses in teacher education.

### Investing in Career and Technical Education

A just transition to a more sustainable and equitable future is going to require a massive influx of skilled workers to do all of

A just transition  
puts people before  
profits by pursuing  
both clean air  
and good jobs at  
the same time.

the new jobs, especially in the skilled trades initially, but in other technical occupations thereafter. An investment in career and technical education (CTE) is an investment in the future, especially when it is infused throughout the entire school curriculum, dismantling the false disconnect that has often existed between academic learning and skills training. Incorporating CTE into all areas of the curriculum can create an important link between the world of school and the world of work that can motivate students to continue their education while giving them the knowledge and flexible skills that will make it possible for them to adapt to the jobs of the future.

## Education unions are strategically positioned to lead in green school efforts.

A great example of this approach can be seen in the Peoria Public Schools system in Illinois. In 2015, the Peoria Federation of Teachers and the Greater Peoria Works campaign utilized funds from the Illinois Federation of Teachers and from an AFT Innovation Fund grant supporting the Promising Pathways initiative to modernize CTE programs.<sup>51</sup> Among the

dozen new CTE programs offering industry-recognized credentials, Peoria created a two-year renewable energy training program. And when the school installed solar panels on the roof of the building, the program worked closely with the installers to integrate the process into the curriculum with students learning everything from solar installation techniques to the monitoring of energy use and generation.

Investing in CTE like Peoria and other school districts have done allows students to learn and prepare for good jobs. Scaling successful programs so as many students as possible can take advantage of them, and move on to success in careers and life, is an important step in ensuring a just transition.

### Making It All Happen

Forging a just transition in education with healthy green schools and social and economic justice requires grassroots organizing and power building. Some important steps include forming local union climate justice committees, building strong partnerships with students and community groups, bargaining for the common good, and holding decision makers accountable. These local efforts can also be coordinated nationally for maximum impact across the entirety of the education sector.

### Form Local Union Climate Justice Committees

As democratic organizations, unions rely on membership resolutions to lay out positions on issues and on committees to push forward plans of action on those issues. The same is true with climate justice work. In my own research, I have found that most teacher-initiated climate action currently underway around the country is being led by members of unions that have adopted climate resolutions and formed local union climate justice committees to advance the unions' work on the issue.<sup>52</sup> Forming a climate justice committee does two things. First, it ensures that the issue of climate justice remains on the union's agenda. Second, it

creates a space for interested members to engage with the issue within their union and help to drive the union's climate work at the grassroots level. It is difficult to overstate how important a climate justice committee is for any union that wants to begin engaging in climate justice work. The more such local committees that exist, the more local unions there will be pushing a climate justice agenda within their school district, college, or university, amplifying the positive impact.

### Partner with Students, Community Allies, and Other Unions to Push for Change

To win a just transition for education, our local unions must forge deep partnerships with student activists, environmentalists, environmental and climate justice groups, parent/caregiver organizations, and other unions in different industries. Many education unions have already been engaging in this work, including United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which has more than a dozen community partners with whom it is making climate justice demands at school board meetings and in bargaining.

College and university professors from local unions around the country have joined with students in climate strikes demanding an end to fossil fuel use by universities. In the summer and fall of 2019, after passing a local union Green New Deal resolution, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)-AFT local at Rutgers University in New Jersey worked closely with student groups and community partners to organize a massive climate strike. As James Boyle, a student who helped organize the strike, said, "We need to acknowledge that climate change involves limits," especially when it comes to energy consumption and waste generation.<sup>53</sup> On September 20, 2019, faculty, staff, students, and community members rallied and marched together, demanded, and ultimately won commitments from the university in the following months to divest from fossil fuels and develop a strong climate action plan with timelines and targets for phasing out fossil fuel use. The coalition also emphasized the importance of using local union labor to do the construction work involved in the transition. Three years later, faculty, students, and community members came together again for a second climate action, demanding the university move more rapidly to transitioning away from fossil fuels and installing community solar and resilience hubs. Following the action, student leader Alexa Haris said of the coalition, "We need to talk about what other actions we can



pursue, such as camping out on university property, holding sit-ins, and attending city council meetings and university board of governors meetings.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to helping to organize the climate strikes and winning fossil fuel divestment, members of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT climate justice committee were also involved in designing the university’s climate action plan, which calls for achieving carbon neutrality by 2040. To help achieve this goal, union members have been organizing with environmental justice and community groups in Newark, Camden, and New Brunswick to educate the public about the benefits of community solar and advocating for the university to open up its rooftops and parking lots to accommodate it. Other members of the climate justice committee have partnered with environmental organizations to oppose dangerous and polluting fossil fuel projects such as the proposed liquid natural gas export terminal in Gibbstown. As climate justice committee member Jovanna Rosen said in an op-ed opposing the project: “Our faculty and graduate worker union at Rutgers believes in ‘bargaining for the common good,’ [which is] a labor strategy that builds community-union partnerships to achieve a more equitable and sustainable future.”<sup>55</sup>

Other unions, especially in the building trades, are vital partners when pursuing green school initiatives. Recently, educators in Washington state worked with the local building trades unions to successfully win support for increased funding for school retrofits.<sup>56</sup> Nationally, through the Climate Jobs National Resource Center (CJNRC), and in many states, educators and construction trades unions have been working together to win support for green infrastructure projects, including schools. For example, Climate Jobs Illinois, a state affiliate of the CJNRC with 14 member unions, has a community-driven Carbon Free Healthy Schools campaign to invest in Illinois’s public schools through energy efficiency upgrades and solar power systems. These healthy schools will save school districts millions in energy costs, decrease emissions that contribute to climate change, offer opportunities for more CTE programs in green energy, and create thousands of union jobs.<sup>57</sup>

At the national level, the AFT and the United Auto Workers are calling on school districts to electrify the nation’s school bus fleet.<sup>58</sup> Cities and counties can use seed money provided by the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to accelerate the rollout of union-built electric school buses. There are about half a million yellow school buses operating across the United States, generating more than five million tons of GHG emissions every year<sup>59</sup> and emitting pollutants that increase the likelihood of asthma and other respiratory conditions among students, drivers, and community members—especially in low-income communities that have suffered disproportionately from environmental injustice.<sup>60</sup> At a press conference about the effort, AFT President Randi Weingarten set forth a vision of children riding on union-built and union-driven electric buses, arriving safely at union-taught schools.

The key to strong partnerships like these is trust, and building trust takes time. It doesn’t happen overnight or after just one meeting. Local unions pursuing climate justice that do not already have existing relationships with community partners should begin to open up dialogue as soon as possible. And while forming a coalition in itself can lead to tangible gains, winning

truly transformative changes requires transformative coalitions that involve radical power sharing and democracy, as is the case in bargaining-for-the-common-good campaigns.

### **Bargain for the Common Good**

Bargaining for the common good is an innovative way of building community-labor alignments to jointly shape bargaining campaigns that advance the mutual interests of workers and communities alike. At their heart, these campaigns seek to confront structural inequalities—not simply to agree on a union contract. A bargaining-for-the-common-good approach starts with teachers unions, students, and local community groups working together to develop and articulate a set of demands that serve the interests of students, workers, and the communities where they live and work. Importantly, all stakeholders should have an equal voice in proposing and developing common good proposals.

Some possible demands could be emissions reduction targets, energy efficiency investments, solar panel installations, and the creation of resilience hubs at public universities, colleges, and preK–12 schools. Other demands include divestment of public pensions and endowments from fossil fuel companies and reinvestment of those funds into socially responsible investments, as the AFT has resolved to do nationally.<sup>61</sup> Expansion of public transportation options, including the free provision of mass transit to students or employees, and monetary or other incentives for workers who walk, bike, or use public transportation to commute to and from school are also possible demands. Public school teachers can also fight for climate justice to become a core part of the public school curriculum, as the Chicago Teachers Union has been doing, and for green energy CTE programs to be available to all high school students.

Hitting on many of these demands, UTLA, in partnership with students and several community organizations, developed and successfully negotiated a memorandum of understanding (as part of its contract bargaining) titled “Healthy, Green Public Schools.”<sup>62</sup> The memorandum, Arlene Inouye (then UTLA’s bargaining co-chair and secretary, now retired) told me, includes climate literacy curricula; a green jobs study; a green school plan, including conversion to union-made electric buses and union-installed renewable energy systems; and clean water, free from lead and other toxins. Reflecting on the process and proposals that came from it, Arlene said, “it’s been very important that we continue to grow the coalition and continue to expand our common good demands.... We’re finding different angles to keep pushing the envelope.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Hold Decision Makers Accountable**

Without clearly defined targets and an enforcement mechanism, green school plans are simply promises that can be broken when economic or political structures shift. To ensure that educational institutions are following through on their goals, unions can demand the formation of joint labor-management-

Winning  
transformative  
changes requires  
transformative  
coalitions.

## We can win a just transition that addresses the climate and inequality crises.

community committees on reducing GHG emissions.<sup>64</sup> Such committees can be tasked with assessing the employer's emissions profile and developing climate action plans to reduce GHG emissions and promote climate justice, including the creation of resilience hubs and career opportunities for local community members. Instead of relying on politicians who may be too fear-

ful to establish enforceable targets or take bold action, workers and community partners can persuade or, if need be, force their employers to do so.

Along these lines, the Boston Teachers Union has begun discussions with the city's school board and City Hall regarding Mayor Michelle Wu's plan for a Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools. "Our main focus," Betsy Drinan of the BTU told me, "is to get the union a seat at the table and involved in the planning for what the Green New Deal for Boston Public Schools is about, what it looks like, and to make sure that school communities have input into that planning."<sup>65</sup> The goal, she said, is to have regular monthly meetings. Local education unions around the country can take similar steps to spearhead the process of greening our nation's schools now.

### Coordinate Efforts Across Localities

The impact of local efforts can be amplified when undertaken in concert with other localities making similar demands. One way to help coordinate local efforts is to become involved with the national AFT climate and environmental justice caucus.\* Just as climate justice committees create a space within local unions for members to work on climate justice issues, the national caucus provides a space within the national union for local union climate justice committee members to share information—including best practices, challenges, and wins—and to potentially coordinate their efforts across political jurisdictions, learning from each oth-

\*Get involved with the AFT's national climate and environmental justice caucus through this form: [go.aft.org/b6z](https://go.aft.org/b6z).



er's efforts. The caucus also helps advance the work of the national AFT climate task force by offering creative ideas and solutions and organizing horizontally across locals.

The Labor Network for Sustainability (LNS) has also been convening a cross-union Educators Climate Action Network with AFT and National Education Association members participating. The network emerged after conversations by education union activists at both the Labor Notes Conference and the national AFT convention in the summer of 2022. The network of over 100 union educators from across the country convenes monthly and is open to all education union members interested in tackling climate change and promoting climate justice.<sup>†</sup>

### Conclusion

In my experience, most educators, students, and school employees fully understand and are very concerned about the threat of climate catastrophe. As David Hughes, a member of the AFT national climate task force, said, "We as teachers represent truth, and we have to act in accordance with the truth.... We have knowledge, we're teaching knowledge, and we're generating knowledge about a catastrophe that's incredibly important for everyone. We've got to use whatever mechanism we can to implement the logical change that follows from that knowledge."<sup>66</sup>

Together with students and community partners, education unions can fight for and win a just transition that addresses not only the climate crisis, but also the inequality crisis. As anchor institutions in their communities, with large swaths of public land, buildings, parking lots, and roof space, educational institutions are ideal sites for renewable energy generation and resilience hubs. The good jobs that are created in the process, with strong labor standards and local hiring provisions, will contribute to forging a just transition to a more sustainable and equitable future. And the expansion of CTE and the incorporation of climate justice curriculum into schools will equip future workers as well as citizens with the skills and knowledge needed for a green sustainable economy. As with all major societal change, it begins by organizing and building power, then exerting influence on decision makers to advance an agenda that promotes equity.

Many education unions are already beginning this work, starting at the local level and coordinating nationally, but the potential for transformative change has only just begun to be tapped. The Inflation Reduction Act has an unlimited pot of money for investing in green schools, but it is only possible if we initiate the efforts locally and take advantage of the federal incentives. Passage of Bowman and Markey's Green New Deal for Public Schools legislation would further supercharge these investments. As Ayesha Qazi-Lampert from the CTU climate justice committee told me, "It's at the national level. It's originating from below, too. If it's just one without the other, it may or may not succeed. But if you've got both ends of the spectrum pushing in, you got a lot better chance of succeeding."<sup>67</sup>

Will your local union be the next to join the effort and help advance a Green New Deal for education from below? ☐

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/vachon](https://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/vachon).

<sup>†</sup>Learn more, including how to get involved, by contacting the LNS at [labor4sustainability.org/contact-us](https://labor4sustainability.org/contact-us).

# BMore Me and Inquiry

## Engaging Students in Social Studies



By Sidney Thomas

Growing up, my social studies experiences were not great. To be frank, the subject was boring. We read dense chapters in textbooks, we answered a set of questions at the end of each of those dense chapters, we listened to droning lectures about historical topics, we temporarily memorized dates and facts the teacher deemed important, we took a test, and then we repeated this same cycle. Absent were peer-to-peer collaboration, making connections, discussions, and genuine engagement and interest. If you ask what I remember learning in those classes throughout the years, I guess it would be that I got a perfect score on a state-mandated eleventh-grade US history test, but I don't remember much of anything about the content I learned or why it mattered.

So it's no surprise that I didn't understand the value of social studies. I didn't see any purpose for my history classes other than as a means to move on to the next grade and eventually graduate from high school. I didn't feel any personal connection to the social studies content or see my identity as a Black child included much in those classes.

*Sidney Thomas (she/her) is an educator in Baltimore City Public Schools. She was a BMore Me fellow who developed and wrote equitable social studies units for her own classroom and for BMore Me. She was the 2021 Baltimore City Schools Teacher of the Year and a finalist for Maryland Teacher of the Year.*

When I started teaching in 2008 in Jackson, Mississippi, I chose to be a middle school English teacher. In my mind, English was one of the more interesting subjects because it was filled with reading texts from different time periods and genres; plus, it meant I got to be engaged in teaching students how to write and discuss their ideas. Fast forward 10 years: I was teaching in Baltimore City Public Schools when, due to some staff changes at my school, I had to teach both seventh- and eighth-grade English and eighth-grade US history. I was terrified. I didn't know what I was doing, and I had flashbacks to how bored and disconnected I'd felt in my history classes.

Once I started teaching that social studies class, I dug into various historical topics through research and reading. I finally saw the deep layers and perspectives that went well beyond the cookie-cutter approach to teaching history from a Eurocentric perspective. Not only that, students had so many questions and connections that they wanted to make. There was this big shift within me. I never thought I would see the day, but I actually preferred teaching history over English. In 2019, I decided to teach only sixth- through eighth-grade social studies. And in 2022, I transitioned into a teacher leadership role as an educational associate for kindergarten through eighth-grade social studies at my school so that I could strengthen the social studies program.

It's amazing to see the students at my school and throughout my district have very different experiences with social studies than

I had. Recently, while walking down the hall on my way to a meeting space, a fourth-grader saw me and smiled big: “Mrs. Thomas, let’s go! We have you for social studies today!” I was happy to hear that student’s excitement for social studies class, and it made me consider what it was about the way I taught social studies that made students excited to learn about the past.

It’s clear to me that recalling dates and events hasn’t inspired students to learn about or enjoy history. Neither has omitting difficult historical topics such as slavery and land theft or having the teacher sit up front imparting information that must be copied down. It wasn’t until I began teaching social studies that I saw the valuable gift it is. To me, that enthusiasm for and internalization of social studies happens when students are given the chance to use their natural curiosity to learn by questioning, discovering, finding answers, and making connections—especially to their lives. I avoid recall and drill tasks; instead, I look for ways students can experience and use social studies to make meaning of the world around them and discover the value of history in their lives.

Xavier, a student at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, captured that value. In a news article about the new Advanced Placement African American Studies course—which has been attacked by those who see teaching facts about race and racism as controversial—Xavier showed that such courses are essential, saying, “I don’t think you can go through life without knowing your history. You wind up feeling lost or unsure of yourself. It’s harder to form an identity.”<sup>1</sup> That quote really connected with me because it captured why I never really liked my social studies classes throughout my school years. I wasn’t given the chance to know my history as a Black kid and how that fit into the fabric of American history. Knowing your history and understanding your identity are key to being invested in social studies. This is why there is a need for culturally diverse, inquiry-driven history lessons in which certain voices aren’t omitted or ignored. This allows all students to see themselves and learn about others—and leads to deeper connections and understandings.

## Launching BMore Me

Wanting to ensure that all students in Baltimore City Public Schools become invested in social studies, the district brought together a coalition of teachers to create a new curriculum called BMore Me. BMore Me immerses students in inquiry-based learning about their history and strengthens their understanding of their identities and power. It has students grappling with history topics that are state mandated but also specific to Baltimore and the state of Maryland. The ultimate goal is for students to feel sure about their identities and their history locally, statewide, and nationally.

Baltimore City Public Schools introduced BMore Me for sixth- through eleventh-grade students in 2019. The BMore Me curriculum started off with three weeks of social studies lessons designed to immerse students in learning about the rich history of Baltimore, as well as the state of Maryland, so that students

could tell their stories and become leaders and thinkers in their schools and communities.

The creation and launch of BMore Me didn’t happen magically. A key factor was that Baltimore City Public Schools made sure that a former Baltimore teacher, Christina Ross, managed the program so that it stayed true to the original vision. Another was that instead of hiring people who were not in the classroom, BMore Me hired teachers as paid summer fellows to be trained about the process and to write the curriculum units. At the time, the district’s goal was to create one two-week-long, optional BMore Me unit for each sixth- through eleventh-grade band that could easily be integrated into social studies classes at least once in the year.

Along with nine other teachers, I became one of the inaugural BMore Me summer fellows. Together, we started with training about the Inquiry Design Model, which focuses on using questioning to

better understand and critically analyze historical sources. After training, we were split into teams of two and assigned a grade-level BMore Me unit to work on. My team was responsible for creating a ninth-grade BMore Me unit. We carefully looked at the grade-level Maryland State Standards and Frameworks in Social Studies<sup>2</sup> so that we understood what topics needed to be covered for the various units. One of the topics we had to cover in our unit was Reconstruction, which required that students understand what that era in history meant for Black people, as well as the United States as a whole, and Reconstruction’s connection to modern-day racial issues. We decided that we would infuse elements of Baltimore’s history, Maryland’s history, and modern-day topics. Once we had our focused topic, we came up with an essential question: How did we get here, and where are we going?

Next, we worked on finding sources and building the ninth-grade curriculum unit from scratch. In the end, we created a unit that taught how the strategic, systemic oppression of Black people during Reconstruction has a direct correlation with and impact on modern-day racial disparities such as mass incarceration and redlining. Most importantly, throughout the unit we included resources showing how Black communities have formed, stood strong, and fought for their rights. For example, to make a connection to our students’ lived experiences, we selected photos of the 2015 Baltimore Uprising (after the death of Freddie Gray in police custody) taken by nationally renowned Baltimore photographer Devin Allen.

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included.**



**Photo by Devin Allen of Baltimore during the 2015 uprising on the cover of *TIME*.**

While we were creating these lessons, which we had divided up among team members, we got feedback from each other as well as from Ross, the BMore Me lead. After some revisions, the units were completed and approved. Once our written curriculum was finalized, we also had to lead the professional development in the fall for the district's high school social studies teachers so that they had a firm understanding about BMore Me, as well as how to implement it in their classrooms. After that first year, there was so much excitement from teachers and students across schools (and staff at the district office) about the BMore Me curriculum that Baltimore City Public Schools wanted to expand its reach.

In the midst of the pandemic in 2020, I was able to work with a team of teachers to write parts of a new eighth-grade BMore Me yearlong curriculum from scratch as part of a yearlong fellowship program. After that, other Baltimore teachers created two BMore Me units for grades three through five. And in the summer of 2023, the district wanted to expand BMore Me in grades three through five even further by adding two more BMore Me curriculum units; I was assigned to a team to create one of the two additional fourth-grade units. BMore Me continues to grow, as the district's end goal is to eventually have full-year BMore Me curricula for grades three through eleven.

## BMore Me in the Classroom

Not only did I get to create some of the BMore Me curriculum for my district, I also got a chance to pilot it in my classroom. One of the first things I had to do was get used to students questioning me. Constantly. Questioning is an essential part of using inquiry in social studies, but it can sometimes feel uncomfortable to have students ask questions like, "Why are we learning this?," "Why does this even matter?," and "How do you know this stuff even happened?" It definitely feels like students are resisting, but the bigger picture is that those are fair questions to ask. As an adult, if I'm in a professional development session, I'm asking these same questions in my head (and frankly, sometimes out loud) that students like to ask about content. Students, much like us, want to know the purpose of it all. So instead of shutting down those types of questions or taking them as a personal affront, I let students know that their questions are amazing. I ask them, "Why might we have to learn this?" or "Why might this matter?" I reframe their questions and invite them to join the journey of a deeper dive into social studies so that we all can try to find possible answers to their very relevant and key questions. Those types of questions are amazing because students are already using their inquiry-driven minds to try to find answers. It shows their capacity to really get into BMore Me and other related lessons.



There is a need for culturally diverse, inquiry-driven history lessons in which certain voices aren't omitted.

Questioning is at the root of good inquiry. Therefore, when starting off my social studies classes, I let my students know I'm there to support them in thinking critically by analyzing and comparing sources and historical events and asking questions to get a broader understanding of a topic. One of the best ways I have found to support students in questioning is the Stanford History Education Group's Historical Thinking Chart (which is available for free at [go.aft.org/d31](https://go.aft.org/d31)). It includes questions that spur students' thinking, such as "What is the author's perspective?," "How might the circumstances in which the document was created affect its content?," and "What claims does the author make?" Using these questions helps students look more closely at sources, consider authors' intentions, and

look across documents for differing perspectives—all of which are crucial for coming up with a strong argument.

Once we dig into the BMore Me curriculum, students quickly learn that the social studies classroom is a place to engage in research, question everything, discover multiple perspectives, and make connections to different topics, the world around them, and themselves. For example, one BMore Me unit from the eighth-grade full-year BMore Me curriculum has students looking at the American Revolution and its impact on Black people. In order to discover and understand the impact of the American Revolution, students have to closely examine and compare many sources, such as a broadside by enslaved Black people in Massachusetts,<sup>3</sup> "Lord Dunmore's Proclamation,"<sup>4</sup> the Virginia Declaration of Rights,<sup>5</sup> and the "Book of Negroes"<sup>6</sup> to come up with their arguments regarding how the American Revolution impacted Black people.

Using both primary and secondary sources, students examine the conflicts between the British and the white colonists and the democratic ideals of liberty and individual rights embedded in

the Declaration of Independence. They look at the impact of the American Revolution on Baltimore and Maryland. Students also examine sources that show the perspectives of Black and Native people during this period. I'll never forget that at the end of this BMore Me unit, one of my students commented, "They're [white colonists] fighting for their freedom from Britain, but they're preventing Black people from being free. Everybody deserves to be free. Not just certain people."

With this BMore Me unit, students discover the contributions, bravery, and triumphs of Black people who were part of the American Revolution. They get to see Black people fighting for and being involved in the American Revolution because they were also seeking life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. By reading and analyzing various sources, questioning those sources, and collaborating and discussing with peers, students can see a broader, more complex picture of the American Revolution.

In addition to classroom-based lessons, BMore Me encourages teachers to have students use community resources and experience field trips to more fully grasp the classroom content and make deeper connections to their city and state. I made sure that students got to connect their learning outside of the classroom as much as possible. One trip that sticks out is when I took students to tour the Maryland General Assembly in Annapolis as we were learning about how a new government was set up as a result of the American Revolution. We made connections to our state government and the process of a bill becoming a law. Once in Annapolis, students met their district representatives and asked them spontaneous questions. They saw firsthand how these Maryland government officials work for and represent them. They saw bills being debated. They made connections to what we learned and saw in real time in Maryland's legislative process. This field trip

was such an awesome experience. Just reading a textbook, recalling specific vocabulary, or hearing me drone on and on about how the state government works would not have given the students that desire to learn more—but seeing their government in action sparked questions and spurred them to find answers.

With the BMore Me curriculum and lessons, students strengthen their natural ability to question and use it to think critically and analyze sources to understand other connected topics. For example, our study of Black people and the Revolution led students to wonder about the impact of American chattel slavery on Black people and the United States. They continued the inquiry process by reading local pre-Civil War newspaper ads announcing arrivals of ships with, and auctions of, enslaved people as well as post-Civil War newspaper ads from formerly enslaved people seeking loved ones stolen from them through slavery. Delving into critiques of the institution of slavery, we read excerpts from books by formerly enslaved people: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*,<sup>8</sup> and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*.<sup>9</sup> Those excerpts from formerly enslaved people showed how they cherished their literacy—and that it was a form of resistance (since literacy for enslaved people had been outlawed). We also examined a large swath of related primary and secondary sources on the topic, including Maryland slave laws and Maryland newspaper ads announcing slave auctions. This constant inquiry gave students the chance to fully analyze sources, discuss what they found, and ask questions to better understand the impact of slavery on people and our country.

BMore Me inquiry lessons are effective with younger students too. Sometimes, people express their hesitation about teaching inquiry-based social studies to elementary school students. They say that students are too young to understand primary and secondary sources or to formulate independent arguments based on their analyses of sources and collaboration with peers. Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding of elementary students' abilities.

In my current position, I get to see firsthand how the BMore Me fourth-grade units help develop students' historical thinking and document-analysis skills. During a BMore Me unit in the spring of 2023, these amazing fourth-grade students were able to learn about the legacy of Indigenous people. We didn't tell them what the legacy was. Instead, we let them explore by grappling with primary and

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secondary sources and discussing with each other as they tried to understand the impact of colonization and the resilience of Native people. I witnessed students

- examining artifacts to see how various Indigenous groups in Maryland lived, communicated, and survived;
- analyzing primary sources such as maps from John Smith and other colonists of the time to see what clues they could gather about Indigenous groups since their perspectives were not in those primary sources;
- reviewing several sources to determine how Indigenous people's lives were impacted by the arrival of Europeans and the subsequent loss of things like their land; and
- looking at examples of Indigenous people in modern society who maintain the legacies of their ancestors.

As students were learning about the impacts of European exploration, in particular a lesson related to Christopher Columbus, one student took it upon himself to Google Columbus to learn more. Because the student had seen that the social studies classroom was a space for observing and questioning, he was willing to risk asking questions he was mulling over in his mind. While doing his independent research, the student came across some information about people not respecting Columbus or his legacy. Immediately he asked me, "Why don't they like him?" It was the perfect opportunity for the student to continue using his inquiry skills to find an answer to his question. I said, "I don't know," and asked a follow-up question: "Maybe you can go back to the many sources you've looked at over the past few days. Based on those, why might they not like Christopher Columbus?" He thought about it and answered, "Maybe because he took people's land. He also killed people and made them slaves."

I continued this conversation because it was great seeing the student take this interest and try to make sense of his questions and the various sources he read. "So, what about in Baltimore? Do people in Baltimore have different views of Christopher Columbus?" The student continued his research during class and found a local news station video clip about a Columbus statue being tossed in the Baltimore Harbor by protestors.<sup>10</sup> He asked more questions, and I had him go back to the sources we used in class, as well as the sources he found himself. He was able to come up with his own understanding of why some people did not like Columbus, based on his close analysis and questioning of sources. I didn't shield him from finding answers or simply give him an answer. Why? Because that inquiry was so important for him to make meaning for him-



**BMore Me**  
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to freely be  
critical thinkers  
as they try to  
make sense of  
the world.

self. He was empowered with his learning to know that he can ask questions and that he has the capacity to research and find his own answers.

Historical inquiry and analysis need to be developed over time. Embedding inquiry and document analysis experiences in elementary social studies classes is a good way to start. Not giving elementary students the space to use inquiry in their social studies classes is a missed opportunity for students to thrive in their understanding of historical topics generally covered in elementary grades, such as slavery, the Civil War, and the establishment of the 13 colonies. When students in lower grades experience BMore Me inquiry lessons, they gain key foundational understanding of historical events and related skills needed to excel in their middle school and high school courses, as

well as to be generally prepared for life after graduation. Even better, they experience social studies as a fascinating subject open to multiple perspectives and debates—not as a dry series of facts.

The success of the BMore Me curriculum is that it invites students to grapple with and make meaning of these various sources. Because they're making meaning and trying to make sense of things, they excitedly engage in rich discussions so that they can eventually express their own ideas.

### **BMore Me Outside of the Classroom**

One of the amazing things about the BMore Me curriculum is that it's not confined to the classroom or a school building. Baltimore City Public Schools holds annual BMore Me events with guest speakers from the Baltimore area, as well as an end of the school year BMore Me Student Conference in which students get to mingle with other kids from around the district and take part in student-led sessions meant to empower them, expose them to new ways of advocating, and help them develop new skills.

For example, in the fall of 2022, there was a BMore Me student event at Coppin State University where students met contributors to *Homegrown*, a youth-focused book with writings and creations by Baltimore leaders.<sup>11</sup> (Published by CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth, *Homegrown* was curated by the 20 middle and high school students who make up CHARM's editorial board.) While at the event, students heard Brittany Young, founder of B-360, talk about the beauty of being from Baltimore and embracing that unapologetically, as well as how she used her skills and expertise to create her nationally recognized STEM-based program that uses dirt bikes (a part of Baltimore's culture) to engage kids across the city.

Also, the 2023 BMore Me Student Conference at Morgan State University allowed students to choose sessions that related most to them and their interests. One session that stood out to me was "I Am Because We Are: Where Poetry Meets Identity." It was a workshop taught by Unique Robinson, a native Baltimore poet and professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Students created self-portraits through poetry so that they could continue understanding their own identities. Another session was "Youth Advocacy," in which students learned what it meant to be an advocate and how to be student advocates in their schools and communities. And a final great session was "A Breakdown of Black Butterfly and White L." This session focused on helping students understand decadeslong redlining in Baltimore and track the wealth of one Black family and one white family from the 1970s to 2020 to see how redlining has impacted Black and brown communities throughout Baltimore, as well as the city as a whole. The goals of all the sessions were for students to understand and define their own identities, better understand the reasons behind problems in the city, and gather some of the tools needed to become the next generation of leaders. (To learn more, see page 24 for a Q&A with Kameran Rogers, one of the students who planned and led the 2023 conference.) These BMore Me events give students an amazing opportunity to apply and expand their learning of social studies into their own lives and surrounding communities.

## The Value of Inquiry-Based Curriculum Like BMore Me

My students are definitely better thinkers and writers than I ever was at their age. They have these amazing social studies skills because they do inquiry in their social studies classes with the BMore Me curriculum. They are exposed to various topics and multiple perspectives, and they are encouraged to question sources and collaborate with other students through discussions and presentations so that they can come to their own fuller understanding of historical topics. They're constantly tasked with taking risks in their thinking and questions so that they can make greater connections to history, themselves, and their community.

When thinking about the immense value of inquiry, I am reminded of the bell hooks quote, "Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them."<sup>12</sup> Inquiry-based curriculum like BMore Me allows students to freely be critical thinkers as they try to make sense of the world, the historical past, and their opportunities to impact the present.

### Suggestions for Creating Inquiry Lessons in Social Studies

**1. Begin with teacher collaboration:** While teachers can develop inquiry-based units individually, the work is much more

rewarding—and manageable—when done collaboratively. Consider using your school community of teachers to build these lessons. You can partner with your content and grade-level team members to see how to align lessons with what students are learning in other classes.

- 2. Center students:** When creating social studies inquiry lessons that suit your community and region, keep the students in mind. The focus is not teacher-centered instruction, where the teacher stands in front of the class imparting information for students to summarize, memorize, and recall on a test. Instead, the focus is on using students' natural curiosity and exploration, as well as their identities, to engage them and connect them to the historical topics discussed in class.
- 3. Provide essential questions:** BMore Me inquiry lessons are rooted in a big open-ended question for each unit and one or two specific supporting questions for each lesson. These questions are meant for students to critically think about sources and historical events before coming up with their own arguments. An abundance of questioning leads to deeper student understanding about various topics so that they can make connections to themselves and our larger society.
- 4. Foster meaningful student-to-student collaboration and discussion:** BMore Me inquiry lessons are meant to have students collaborate as a classroom community. Lessons should include space for students to discuss sources together, answer each other's questions, and make sense of historical topics.
- 5. Use local primary and secondary sources:** One of the things that makes BMore Me special is its focus on local history in Baltimore and in Maryland. As you plan units, it's important to find and use primary and secondary sources from and about your community and region to enrich students' understanding of historical topics. For example, your area may have similar resources like the Maryland Center for History and Culture ([mdhistory.org](http://mdhistory.org)), which has an abundance of primary sources related to our region. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/thomas](http://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/thomas).

## Helpful, Free Resources

- **Inquiry Design Model:** [c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model](http://c3teachers.org/inquiry-design-model)  
This website has teaching tools for using the Inquiry Design Model in your lessons. It also includes some inquiry lessons.
- **National Council for the Social Studies:** [socialstudies.org/tps](http://socialstudies.org/tps)  
The Inquiry and Teaching section of the council's website has in-depth information about inquiry in social studies and gives different methods for creating your own effective and engaging inquiry lessons.
- **Stanford History Education Group:** [sheg.stanford.edu](http://sheg.stanford.edu)  
This great website has a variety of primary-source lessons that are rooted in inquiry and argument writing.
- **Zinn Education Project:** [zinnedproject.org](http://zinnedproject.org)  
This website has many great free inquiry-based lessons that are culturally relevant and responsive.

—S. T.

# "Be Safe, Be Free, Be Me"

Since BMore Me began in 2019, it has expanded to include afterschool clubs, a quarterly speaker series, and an annual student-run conference. We sat down with one of the 2023 student design team leaders, 10th-grader Kameran Rogers, to learn about what the conference meant to him. —EDITORS

**EDITORS:** How and why did you get involved with BMore Me's student-run conference?

**KAMERAN ROGERS:** I got involved with BMore Me through an organization called CHARM: Voices of Baltimore Youth. CHARM's goal is to uplift youth voices through our poetry. While I was in middle school, I joined CHARM's student editorial board and published two poems\* and an article.<sup>†</sup> As an editorial board member, I also helped CHARM contribute to a BMore Me event in 2022 focused on *Homegrown*, a book published by CHARM about the beauty of Baltimore. At the event, students heard from many of the contributors to *Homegrown*, who were Baltimore leaders, artists, educators, and activists.

BMore Me's program manager wanted to expand upon that event<sup>‡</sup> and have a conference in 2023 that gave more students the opportunity to express themselves. She believed it should be student led, so she invited me and several other students to plan it. I was really happy for the opportunity because I think that youth voices are and will always be important.

For weeks prior to the conference, the group of student leaders met once a week to plan. We chose the theme and name of the conference: "A Place to Just Be: Be Safe, Be Free, Be Me." Then we made a list of artists all over Baltimore, especially Black artists because Baltimore is predominantly Black and we felt it was important for a lot of the students to see themselves in the presenters. We had a very long list of presenters we wanted, so we voted on which artists we felt best reached students all over Baltimore to narrow down the list. We also embedded an LGBTQIA+/intersexuality mini-conference targeted to youth

of Baltimore who felt like they didn't have a space to be open about themselves. We wanted to be as inclusive as possible.

Having the other student leaders with me throughout the journey made it 10 times easier. I couldn't plan and run a conference like this by myself at this moment. Having such a diverse group, with people of all ethnicities and different backgrounds, brought in our overall message and goal.

**EDITORS:** High school students have lots of options for how to spend their time. Why do you choose to spend so much time on BMore Me?

**KAMERAN:** Adults run the show a lot of the time, so it's a relief that I have been given opportunities to say what I want to say. That's why I'm passionate about writing; it gives me an outlet to speak my mind. Having the opportunity to speak to other students, and to give them the opportunity to choose who they want to be and to speak their minds through our BMore Me conference, put a smile on my face.

Students should definitely have the opportunity to speak their minds and ask outside-the-box questions about what they're learning. Before BMore Me, I didn't feel like I could ask questions about what I was learning—I didn't think it was my place to ask. Now, I feel like I can ask questions.

In planning the conference, we wanted students to ask questions. When we planned the student panel for one of the plenary sessions, we intentionally made it diverse, and we tailored the panel to our audience. We knew we would have students in the audience who were interested in artistry, who were queer, who were in middle school, and so on, so we picked student leaders to be on the panel who reflected that. I was definitely an unexpected questioner when I was a little bit younger. So, we planned for it: any unexpected question that would come up, we wanted to have somebody on the panel able to answer that question or to expand on the questioner's words.

**EDITORS:** What were the highlights of the conference for you?

**KAMERAN:** I was jittery on stage. I'd never spoken in front of so many students before. But when I went to the workshop rooms, I met a lot of people I still follow today on social media. I appreciate learning about their journeys and still seeing them progress.



"Before BMore Me, I didn't feel like I could ask questions about what I was learning.... Now, I feel like I can ask questions."

—Kameran Rogers

The highlight of the day for me was a workshop on artistry. We made a big circle and talked about where we come from. There were students from Baltimore and many who had moved here recently. Then we talked about the type of art that we wanted to make, the point that we were trying to convey. We were encouraged to express ourselves, like venting through art. It could be about our parents or friends or a decision we made—whatever was on our minds. We talked about it in the circle, then expressed it through art.

I had never done anything like that, and I was really excited about it. I think that's what art is: an expression or extension of ourselves. Learning about that gave me a bigger understanding of myself. Ever since that conference, I have been doing art to get my mind off of whatever's going on.

Looking back, I wish I had experienced something like our student conference in middle school. I wish I had seen students like me being given a microphone and speaking their minds—and having fun in the process. It makes me a little jealous looking at it from that perspective, but as someone who is part of BMore Me, it makes me really happy to give other students that opportunity. □

\*To read Kameran's poems, "Queer as Folk" and "Was it Love?," go to [go.aft.org/8wy](https://go.aft.org/8wy).

†To read Kameran's article, "Parents and Kids Explain What It Means to Be LGBTQ or Have a LGBTQ Child in Baltimore," go to [go.aft.org/tam](https://go.aft.org/tam).

‡CHARM's executive director, Whitney Birenbaum, has served on BMore Me's Community Advisory Council for several years, as has *American Educator's* chief publications editor, Lisa Hansel.

# Food Insecurity

A Hidden Barrier to Higher Education



By Daniel A. Collier and Brittany E. Perez

**T**eachers, school staff, and families have long been concerned about children in the K–12 education system going hungry, and for good reason. In addition to obvious struggles, children who go hungry tend to experience a range of adverse effects in their behaviors, thoughts, and academic outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Worse, these effects are found for “food insecurity,” which represents a broader scope of need than actually going hungry. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”<sup>2</sup>

Shouldn’t the same adverse effects be expected among college students?

Borrowing from various college student retention theories and models, we believe that negative outcomes related to students’ academic performance and persistence are not primarily related to the students themselves but to a series of systemic barriers and challenges—including food insecurity—that institutions may not be

fully equipped to meet.<sup>3</sup> While food insecurity is a broad systemic socioeconomic issue that no institution will solve alone, there are steps that institutions and policymakers can take to understand it better and to help meet students’ basic needs, which can result in better academic performance and a stronger chance to persist.<sup>4</sup>

## Food Security of College Students

For years, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice conducted a national survey to examine the prevalence of college student food insecurity. In 2020, the Hope Center reported the results of data collected over five years (2015–2019). The data suggested that 43 percent of college students experienced some degree of food insecurity and that a higher percentage of students who attended two-year institutions were food insecure (about 50 percent) compared to those who attended four-year institutions (about 38 percent).<sup>5</sup> Further highlighting the issue’s importance, a recent meta-analysis including 51 studies found that an estimated 41 percent of college students experienced some level of food insecurity.<sup>6</sup> And in July 2023, data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study were released, showing that early in the pandemic, 23 percent of undergraduate students were food insecure. Some sector differences were found, with the highest rates of food insecurity at for-profit colleges (33 percent) followed

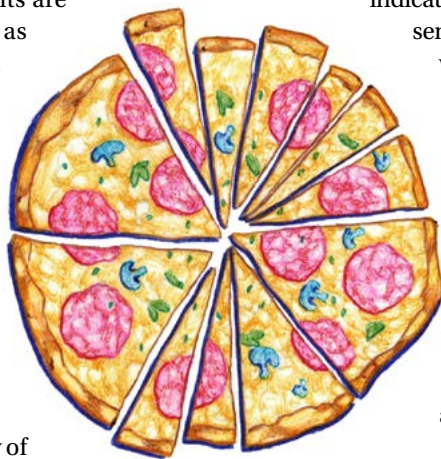
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*Daniel A. Collier is an assistant professor of Higher and Adult Education at the University of Memphis, where Brittany E. Perez is a graduate research assistant. Collier is also a research fellow with the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College and the University of California–Irvine Law School via the Student Loan Law Initiative.*

by community colleges (23 percent), four-year public institutions (21 percent), and four-year private institutions (19 percent).<sup>7</sup>

Many researchers, staff, and administrators have recognized the importance of better understanding college student food insecurity and of figuring out which students are likely to be food insecure. Unsurprisingly, there is a consistent relationship between being less socioeconomically advantaged and being food insecure. Research also suggests that first-generation status<sup>8</sup> and Pell eligibility<sup>9</sup> are regularly linked with college student food insecurity. Studies have also established relationships between race and food security. For instance, students who report being a racial or ethnic minority and who come from food-insecure households are more likely to experience food insecurity.<sup>10</sup> And various studies have documented a relationship between gender, race, and students' food insecurity.<sup>11</sup>

Recent studies have moved the conversation toward other factors that need more attention. For example, several have identified that LGBTQIA+ students are also more likely to be food insecure,<sup>12</sup> as are international students.<sup>13</sup> The field now has a good foundation to help researchers and practitioners better understand which students are likely to be food insecure—but more detailed research would enable more targeted interventions to help meet students' basic needs. Research should be intentional in bringing increased clarity on not only who is food insecure but also the degree to which students are likely to be food insecure. Simply said, the intensity of food insecurity matters.<sup>14</sup>



### College Students' Experiences

Researchers are beginning to understand how food security may be related to students' distress, motivation, and engagement.<sup>15</sup> Consistently, food-insecure students report higher levels of distress,<sup>16</sup> which can result in a lack of motivation,<sup>17</sup> may hinder the development of social relationships,<sup>18</sup> and is related to lower academic performance and persistence.<sup>19</sup>

College student food security has also been linked with social development. Food-insecure students have indicated a lower sense of belonging on college campuses<sup>20</sup> and have suggested a lowered ability to generate friend groups.<sup>21</sup> As with psychological distress, social development and elements of a sense of belonging are related to students' satisfaction with their institutions<sup>22</sup> and to academic performance and persistence.<sup>23</sup> Below, we detail some innovative interventions that address the intersections of food security and basic needs supports, and nonacademic and academic outcomes.

### Academic Performance and Persistence

One of the earliest questions surrounding college student food insecurity has been about the impact on academic performance and persistence. Often, research has found that food-insecure students have significantly lower cumulative GPAs than food-secure students,<sup>24</sup> and unsurprisingly, college GPA is a critical

factor in college persistence.<sup>25</sup> Independently, persistence is also correlated with food insecurity.<sup>26</sup>

However, few studies have attended to temporal sequencing, instead capturing a cross-section of students. Doing so presents issues with survival bias; if there is a relationship between food security and academic performance (and persistence), those who come to college food insecure during their first year are likely to have lower first-year GPAs and are less likely to persist into later years.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, studies capturing data beyond the first year without attending to temporal sequencing primarily capture the information of those who "survived."

Some recent studies have begun to account for temporal sequencing.<sup>28</sup> One gauged first-time incoming students' food security within two weeks of the start of the fall semester.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, this study did not collapse food insecurity into a binary; it generated a continuous scale so that these relationships are a measure of outcomes as related to the intensity of food insecurity. The results indicated that food insecurity was negatively related to first-semester GPA and first-semester credits earned, and it was marginally significantly related to a lower chance of fall-to-spring persistence.

### Interventions

Clearly, interventions to meet students' basic needs are critical. While most of the interventions we describe below are policy and institution focused, we want to start with a crucial message: professionals like you can help make a difference for individual students. Since real and perceived stigmas against receiving food assistance are barriers for students,<sup>30</sup> educators and

## What Is Food (In)Security?

Roughly half of all studies on college student food security use the USDA's six-item food security scale.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the field's definition of food security is closely aligned with the USDA's expectations: "Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life."<sup>2</sup> To supplement this broad definition, the USDA has four classifications of food security: high, marginal, low, and very low. The first two categorizations are considered "food secure," where people do not have much trouble accessing food and worry little about food shortages or changing dietary behaviors. The last two categorizations are considered "food insecure," where people must reduce food quality, reduce food intake, or disrupt eating patterns due to food scarcity.<sup>3</sup> These four categorizations can be extremely helpful in better understanding the magnitudes of college student food insecurity. But it can be problematic when studies condense students into the two wider groups of food secure and food insecure because we lose sight of how many students are experiencing hunger.<sup>4</sup>

For the endnotes, see  
[aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/collier\\_perez](https://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/collier_perez).

I was a first-generation, Pell-eligible student who was kicked out of community college in my first attempt. At the age of 24, I returned to community college and progressed through my PhD. Because of systemic barriers and how we finance college, my story is relatively rare—but it should not be. I come from a working-class, blue-collar background that strongly informs my research on students' basic needs and my attitude toward the current model of funding college. Students who do not come from well-resourced families should not be automatically disadvantaged in college because our society adheres to the notion that those who are less advantaged should just work harder or take out more student loans (or a combination of both). Every year, brilliant students do not attain their intended postsecondary certificates or degrees simply because they were not born in the correct zip codes or to more resourced families. Knowing this angers me, drives me, and is a seminal reason why I work toward addressing college student hunger and changing the current loan-heavy financial aid structure.

—Daniel A. Collier, Assistant Professor,  
Higher and Adult Education, University of Memphis

I was a first-generation, working-class college student from a very low-income background. When I attended college, I had little extra money and I experienced food insecurity—but I did not have a name for it. I relied heavily on a 10-meals-a-week meal plan from the dining halls (the only meal plan I could afford), lived in a food desert (lacking a vehicle, and the closest source of food was a gas station), and had no other way of purchasing food. Knowing firsthand the negative effects of food insecurity, I strive to help higher education practitioners, faculty, administrators, and policymakers understand students who are most likely to experience food insecurity and the effects of food insecurity on students' outcomes.

—Krista M. Soria, Assistant Professor, Leadership and  
Counseling, University of Idaho

counselors in high schools and colleges should start normalizing uptake of community and college supports aimed at easing food insecurity. Furthermore, high school counselors could identify which postsecondary campuses students are most likely to attend and invite representatives to provide information to students and teachers about campus supports. Given that precollege behaviors often predict college behaviors, helping students understand the value of engagement in supports to ease food insecurity precollege could result in more students having a positive college experience and attaining certificates or degrees.

### The Promising Power of SNAP

In 2021, Congress temporarily amended the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to increase access for college students.<sup>31</sup> Despite calls to make these parameters permanent,<sup>32</sup> the Republican-led US House of Representatives has been eyeing

rollbacks in a future Farm Bill.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the recent infighting in the House has stymied these efforts and the future of SNAP benefits remains unclear.<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, states can independently expand SNAP eligibility—as Massachusetts and Pennsylvania have done for community college students and as California has done for students attending any higher education institution at least half time.

Before the pandemic-related SNAP modifications, roughly 31 percent of SNAP-eligible students (two million students) were enrolled.<sup>35</sup> This low uptake rate stems from changes in the 1980s when Congress modified the rules to make students enrolled in college at least half time ineligible unless they qualified for exemptions. Under these changes, 80 percent of formerly eligible college students lost access to SNAP benefits.<sup>36</sup>

As with many social welfare programs, SNAP has been crafted or modified around conversations of “deservingness.” Moralistic values are generally placed upon individuals perceived to access the social benefit. A famous example of deservingness that has lasted since the 1980s is “welfare queen” rhetoric, which uniquely

combined false ideations of women, particularly Black women.<sup>37</sup> Pertaining to college students, in the 1980s US Secretary of Education William Bennett levied public accusations that students were wasteful with government grants by using the funds to buy cars and to go on three-week vacations at the beach. As a result, the US government dramatically scaled back federal grants to students.<sup>38</sup> The politics of deservingness still maintains barriers to college students' ability to access SNAP and restricts policymakers' interest in expanding eligibility.<sup>39</sup>

The lack of uptake due to intentional features makes researching the effects of SNAP on college students' academic performance and persistence difficult. However, recent evidence suggests that when university students in California engaged in SNAP (a.k.a. CalFresh), students' food security increased, and SNAP engagement was related to increased college GPAs.<sup>40</sup> Supporting these findings, another study showed that food insecurity was eased for California college students participating in SNAP.<sup>41</sup> Research is limited, but given that SNAP seems to ease college student food insecurity, conclusions from non-SNAP studies suggest that students who access SNAP are likely to experience lower psychological distress, stronger measures of sense of belonging, and increased academic performance and persistence.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the promising power of SNAP to ease college students' food insecurity, it is painfully obvious that this program will continue to be a political football. With any regime change, the SNAP program could see changes at the federal or state level. Therefore, campuses and their partners must continually think about how to better measure who may be food insecure and implement



interventions divorced from SNAP. Next, we discuss some examples of campus-level interventions.

### Promising Campus-Based Interventions

When campuses either do not address or provide inadequate supports to ease food insecurity, students may feel dissatisfied with their campuses or disenfranchised.<sup>43</sup> The lack of support may lead students to feel hopeless.<sup>44</sup> Wanting to address these problems, researchers and practitioners have tried a variety of interventions. In this section, we focus on interventions that have generated measurable impacts, from low-touch and low-cost interventions to more invasive and expensive examples.<sup>45</sup>

One of the most common interventions is aimed at encouraging students to enroll in SNAP or engage with food pantries.<sup>46</sup> One way to encourage students to remember or engage with supports is through nudging. Nudging often includes a series of communications (via email or text) to remind students of resources like a food pantry and to encourage uptake. While nudging may not be effective at large scale,<sup>47</sup> it remains possible that nudges are well suited to narrowly targeted audiences or to very specific behaviors.

Research suggests nudging could help students better identify and engage with the basic needs supports on campus. For example, at Amarillo College students who were nudged to engage with basic supports did so to a much higher degree (56 percent) than those who did not receive the messages (26 percent). However, this intervention was not related to student performance or persistence.<sup>48</sup> Other research suggests that if nudges can assist with easing students' food insecurity, doing so may translate to better first-year retention. For example, a study in which a very narrowly targeted sample of students who were most likely to leave Western Michigan University was randomly assigned to a nudging intervention (in which students were emailed) found a 12-percentage-point increase in retention.<sup>49</sup> The authors theorized that this outcome was partly related to emailed students reporting an increase in food security.\* The estimated total cost for this program was under \$5 per intended student treated. Future nudging interventions should consider keeping the sample, messaging scope, and intended behaviors narrow.

Another popular intervention has been providing food-insecure students with meal vouchers.<sup>50</sup> Recently, a community college program provided food-insecure students with a debit card that could be used at the campus cafeteria or café through an initiative called the MVP program. The debit cards were loaded with \$300 for the fall semester and \$400 for the spring semester. Additionally, the debit cards were reloaded with \$400 for each semester of the students' second year of enrollment. A study found that, compared with the control group, students in the MVP program had earned 2.23 more credits, and attempted 1.48 more, by the end of the first semester—and the same trend persisted into the second year. Of particular interest, a higher share of MVP-treated students (5 percent) earned a credential after two



Taking steps to understand food insecurity and help meet students' basic needs can result in improved academic performance.

I study food insecurity because of my experiences as a college athlete and as a professional in higher education. As a college athlete and college coach, I saw several college athletes managing food scarcity. As college athletes, we would share housing and split bills to save money, but there were still limited food options for some college athletes. After finishing my master's degree, I began working as an Upward Bound academic advisor, which exposed me to how food insecurity affects student success. I wanted to learn more about food insecurity, but I was unsure how. As a doctoral student, I had the opportunity to collaborate with food insecurity researchers. This led to me studying food insecurity in college athletics to help raise awareness and develop interventions.

—Wayne Black, Assistant Professor,  
Sport Administration, University of Cincinnati

My research into basic needs insecurity in higher education stems from a profound belief in equitable education's power to break the cycle of poverty. This conviction led me to pursue a doctoral degree in education abroad, where my challenges as an international student in the United States inspired my advocacy and research. My dissertation focused on the often-overlooked experiences of students who are not US citizens facing basic needs challenges. My work centers on the principle that basic needs like food and housing are fundamental rights for all students, contributing to their academic success and well-being. Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to cultivating an inclusive and equitable educational environment that provides optimal support for all students to thrive.

—Elmira Jangjou, Analyst, Ithaka S+R

When I returned to college to get my master's 10 years after my first trip through higher ed, I didn't really have a plan for what I wanted to do. My only motivating force was to find a way to become the type of support system that I had as a student, knowing there are students today facing greater challenges than I did with fewer resources and less privileged identities. Eventually, I found a sense of direction by looking into student food insecurity. As a practitioner-researcher, I strive to catalog any and all information about basic needs work taking place on campuses around the country so that I can identify opportunities for us to learn from and collaborate with the ever-growing number of incredible people doing this vital work.

—David Thompson, Practitioner-Researcher,  
Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice

\*The authors highlight various issues with their design due to limitations related to not being able to track whether students opened or read emails and text messages and various barriers kept in place by administrators.

years, as opposed to the group who did not receive a debit card (1 percent).<sup>51</sup> While the evidence is currently limited, directly providing students with meal vouchers seems to produce beneficial academic outcomes.

On the more expensive side, some institutions have identified issues of food insecurity at the intersection of student behavior and engagement—and despite limited budgets, they have engaged in creative solutions. For example, Imperial Valley College (IVC) surveyed its students and identified over 200 students who required basic needs assistance. IVC then bought 12 RVs to shelter students and help develop a stronger sense of belonging. After this pilot intervention, which showed average GPAs moved from 1.9 to 2.6, IVC invested in creating a tiny-home community to address basic student needs. Now, future expansions are expected, along with multiple million-dollar investments.<sup>52</sup> IVC is a clear example of what could happen when institutions work toward understanding who has unmet basic needs (beyond food insecurity) and seek innovative solutions. However, without the help of local and state partners, as IVC has, most institutions are unable to meet students' basic needs in this manner.

## Remaining Gaps

One glaring gap in our understanding is that we have limited information on what interventions work, with which students they may work, in what contexts they may work, and if outcomes would be relatively consistent across settings and programs. Therefore, once institutions better understand who is food insecure, we encourage campuses to design interventions that may have worked in other contexts (when it makes sense).

Another gap in our understanding is based on sequencing. The field needs to be more intentional in understanding who is arriving at college food insecure and to what degree. As detailed above, com-

ing to college hungry relates to students' experiences and academic outcomes, even first-semester outcomes.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, identifying food-insecure students should be an immediate concern. Consider how much better prepared institutions would be if they included the six-item USDA scale with financial aid packages. If campuses identified who was food insecure, they could be *immediately* more intentional in nudging students to participate in SNAP and engage with on-campus supports; they could also provide meal vouchers, especially for the most food-insecure students.

Identifying food-insecure students can help campuses be *immediately* intentional in nudging students to engage with supports.



Lastly, many college campuses have realized the importance of addressing students' mental distress and have placed an increased emphasis on both in-person and remote mental health supports<sup>54</sup>—but they may be doing so without knowing about or attending to food insecurity as a cause of mental distress. Likewise, many campuses have become more intentional in better understanding sense of belonging (and related social aspects) and in developing interventions—but are food-insecure students served just as well by these interventions and supports as food-secure students? Or does a fundamental lack of understanding of the intersection of sense of belonging and food insecurity help produce differential outcomes as students' basic needs are not addressed? Such knowledge gaps require more narrowed research examining whether food-insecure students are equally benefiting from available supports as food-secure students, or if food-insecure students are still slipping through the cracks as their basic physical, psychological, and social needs remain unmet.

Overall, food insecurity among college students is widespread. Recently, many researchers and decision makers have become increasingly interested in this topic; we expect the field will soon have a stronger sense of the issue—including a stronger understanding of what interventions may or may not work as intended. While the field catches up to testing interventions that may produce intended effects, we must be more proactive in identifying which students are food insecure as they transition to college so that we can immediately guide them toward the resources that exist to help make their lives better and improve their opportunities for academic success. □

Since childhood, food has played a central role in how I spend time with loved ones and build community. In college, however, I realized this was not the reality for everyone. This led me to co-found my college's food bank, and through that work, I engaged closely with and learned from food-insecure students. Those experiences drive my current work on college students' basic needs and the structural barriers that limit institutional supports for students. For example, my research on college food pantries indicates that some institutions rely on unpaid student labor to create and maintain these resources, bringing into question institutions' commitment to alleviating food insecurity—key to helping students not only survive but thrive in college.

—Christine Dickason, Recent Doctoral Graduate,  
Vanderbilt University

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/collier\\_perez](https://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/collier_perez).

# Emergency Support, with a Human Touch

## How FAST Funds Meet Students' Needs

*Faculty and Students Together (FAST) Funds offer emergency aid to students. From bus passes and groceries to textbooks and rent, FAST Funds jump in to help keep students on track. The first FAST Fund was started seven years ago by AFT Local 212 at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC). That first year, the fund helped about 26 students with around \$7,000 of emergency aid. Growth has been tremendous, especially in the last few years. In July and August 2023 alone, MATC's FAST Fund helped 433 students with \$105,000 in aid. (For a short case study describing how the Local 212/MATC FAST Fund got started and how quickly it has grown, see [go.aft.org/30a](https://go.aft.org/30a).)*

*We sat down with Liz Franczyk, director of the Local 212/MATC FAST Fund, to learn how the fund meets students' needs and how more AFT unions can start their own FAST Funds.*

—EDITORS

### EDITORS: What's unique about FAST Funds—and about your Local 212/MATC FAST Fund?

**LIZ FRANCZYK:** The premise is that faculty are on the frontlines. I teach at MATC; my colleagues and I see our students not being able to complete their work because they are hungry, don't have a stable roof over their head, or don't have transportation—whatever it may be. The need is immense, and our fund is growing every year at a rate that I don't think is sustainable. Frankly, we need legislation to make college free; short of that, we need to increase higher education funding and student aid.

At MATC, the FAST Fund brings faculty and students together and bypasses all the bureaucracy that comes with big institutions. We purposefully don't have many requirements for assistance. In contrast, MATC has several forms of assistance, including scholarships and an emergency fund, but they have requirements like completing a certain number of semesters or maintaining a 2.0 GPA (some of those requirements are the result of federal financial aid rules or other federal mandates). We don't put up those barriers, and we help with books, fees, rent, groceries, gas—whatever is threatening to throw the student off track.

We also help students connect with other resources. For example, we don't run the campus food pantry—the student resource center does—but to support the pantry, our FAST Fund secured a partnership with a local organization that distributes diapers. Every month, I pick up 5,000 diapers and 100 boxes of wipes, plus period products, and drop them off at the food pantry. Those are typically gone in two weeks.

We pride ourselves on the fact that even as we're growing so quickly and have so many applications to get through, we try our hardest to talk to every student who applies for aid. Other institutions that offer aid have everything automated. If a student doesn't meet a criterion like having a 2.0 GPA, they get an automatic rejection email. But we talk with students and find out why their GPA has slipped—then we figure out if we can help and how to best do that. When we need to make referrals, we stay involved; we make introductions and walk students through applications.

Given their other experiences with trying to find aid, students are genuinely surprised that we answer the phone. But for us, these conversations are crucial. As we get to know students, we're able to make connections to other supports and determine how much aid we can offer. And when students come to us two or three times in a semester, we're able to explain to them that we're an emergency fund and try to connect them with other resources that may offer longer-term assistance.

One important part of our application is an instructor referral, but not everybody can provide that. When they can, it's helpful to have confirmation that this person is an amazing student who needs a little help. (The instructor referral is also a good way for adjuncts and others who are spread too thin to learn about the union and the FAST Fund. I know of many instructors who have joined the union after seeing what the FAST Fund does.)

When students can't provide an instructor referral, our simple screening process helps us make decisions and act quickly. We consider: What is our impression of that person? Are they responsive? Are they respectful? Are they clear on what's expected of them? Are they clear on what we can provide? Do they have a clear plan moving forward?

Our goal is to be a one-time source of emergency assistance, but we are very aware that poverty is an ongoing emergency. So, our method is mixed; it's a little bit of art, a little bit of science. We have parameters, but we make aid decisions mainly through our conversations with each student. Unlike many other organizations, we do not make students prove their poverty.

### EDITORS: How did you decide to get involved in this, and what keeps you going?

**LIZ:** I am from Milwaukee. After getting my master's in Spanish literature, I spent about a decade as the business manager at a coffee-

roasting company during the day while teaching at MATC at night. My day job was fun, but not challenging. In January of 2020, I quit to try to teach full time. I knew there were very few full-time positions, but I thought I could be an adjunct at a few campuses.

In February of 2020, a friend invited me to the FAST Fund fundraising gala. I had never heard of the organization and was blown away by what they were doing. At the gala, MATC student Bria Burris shared how the FAST Fund had helped her remove a felony conviction from her record so she could receive federal financial aid. She had been homeless with her two kids. Bria graduated in 2020, and now she works for the Milwaukee Housing Authority and is on MATC's board. At the end of the gala, I met her and offered to volunteer.

I started by taking student cases. After about six months, we experienced a surge in need, driven by the pandemic. We recognized that with more organized financials and procedures, we could apply for more grants. So, my volunteering expanded to bookkeeping and grant writing. Our FAST Fund was entirely volunteer-based until 2021, when I became the first paid employee. That was possible because we were given a \$2 million endowment from the children of an MATC employee who had passed away. Without that, we would still be all-volunteer—and able to help far fewer students.

I cry almost every day out of stress or sadness, or sometimes joy. I got a text recently from a student I helped months ago. She was escaping domestic violence, and she took her children without anywhere to go. I'd gotten her into a hotel for a week, and then hadn't heard from her. It was such a relief when she wrote to me: "Hey, I just want to let you know I'm back on my feet. I have an apartment, school's going well, my kids are happy." I started crying in my car. That's why we do this.

I also appreciate that the FAST Fund gave me a way to get involved with my union. I don't know much about contract negotiations and other traditional union work. But I know a lot about my students. As a faculty member and union member, it has been easy for me to become an advocate for my students and all MATC students.

I don't have an official role in the union, but with the FAST Fund I've become the voice for students—the person going between students and the college administration. At our institution, like most large institutions, many decisions are made without student input. I speak up for and with students. For example, I bring students

to MATC board meetings so they can describe issues they're facing. I think it's powerful for them to be there and to say things in their own words. Having the union at my back allows me to engage with the board like this with confidence. If I didn't know I had the union's support, I would be a much quieter person.

**EDITORS: What advice do you have for AFT locals that would like to start their own FAST Fund?**

**LIZ:** The first step is to find a group of people who have the drive and capacity to do this. One person cannot do this on their own. Then, contact Believe in Students ([go.aft.org/7xw](http://go.aft.org/7xw)), which is the umbrella nonprofit for many FAST Funds (though some have grown, like ours, to become their own nonprofit). Believe in Students has developed awesome tools to help with initial seed funding and to guide setting up a fund. And the AFT has worked closely with Believe in Students, including giving it a \$100,000 grant in 2021 to help 19 AFT locals launch or grow their FAST Funds.

The next steps are relatively uncomplicated. Obviously, you need funding; that can be intimidating, but it's doable. Most of my fundraising happens through networking. You need to understand your audience and develop relationships with people at each organization that could become a donor. Faculty and retirees have been a reliable source of support.

While you're fundraising, you need to develop your application. Believe in Students emphasizes keeping it simple and getting aid to students quickly. Once you have some funding, spread the word. Our on-campus FAST Fund advertising has been almost exclusively word of mouth—but we have essential partners like the campus food pantry. We've also been successful having faculty include us in their syllabi. Also, toot your own horn by issuing press releases. An English or communications teacher could help you with that. This helps inform the community about your work and potentially generates more funds.

The last, and most important, thing is to be open, compassionate, and empathetic—and be prepared to hear some really sad stories. You will hear some awful stuff, but it can also be uplifting. I often think, "Wow, you're going to school through all of this? You're still trying to better your life?" Students' resilience is astounding.

One thing that's been integral to our growth and to educating the community is elevating students' voices as we help them. So, for example, after we send the check to their landlord, we email the student a memo for their records and ask, "If you have a chance, could you send us a short testimony of how we

are helping you in your life, in your education, and what this means to you?" Sharing those stories with our donors and our community to show what it's like to be a college student today is so important.

**EDITORS: We'd like to understand students' experiences and needs better. Could you share a few more stories of students you've helped recently?**

**LIZ:** One of the main needs we help students with is debt to the college. There's nowhere else to turn to get that paid so that they can enroll. A woman called me in September who is 52 and trying to get back into school. She's been teaching at a private Catholic school where there isn't strict credentialing, and she needs to go through our teacher education program to get her associate degree. When she tried to sign up, she discovered that she has a \$2,000 balance on her account from 1991 when she enrolled after high school but never attended. For this unusual situation, I contacted MATC's president directly, then began working with the head of Student Accounts. We're working toward forgiving this old balance. In this case, the FAST Fund's contribution is not monetary—it's my connections on campus.

We've also found that English as a second language (ESL) and GED students who need aid tend to fall through the cracks. They often don't qualify for federal financial aid, and there's very little grant or scholarship funding for them. Not long ago, an ESL student named Apexa needed help with a bus pass. As with so many supports at MATC, students can only get bus passes after they earn a certain number of credits or if they are in specific programs. Apexa didn't qualify.

I have a great contact at the Milwaukee County Transit System who understands the FAST Fund. He gave me a bus pass for her. Apexa later wrote me a long thank-you note. Here's a portion of it:

The generous support in the shape of a bus pass may appear to others to be a tiny gesture, but it has been a lifeline for me.... I was able to attend classes on a regular basis and participate in educational activities and seminars because of the bus pass's ease. This priceless guidance has not only kept my grades up, but also increased my self-confidence and drive for success. Sincerely, I think the FAST Fund's assistance to students like me is proof of the influence of kindness and the positive changes it can bring about.

In August, I received an application from an ESL student from Afghanistan. He had

been here for five months, and he needed a bicycle. Outside the United States, in almost every other part of the world, bicycles are an integral part of getting around—and they mean freedom since the cost to maintain them is minimal.

I'm a cyclist, and I used to work at a local bike shop. I called my old boss, and he said to bring the student in. When we arrived, the owner sold us a bike for \$150 (the FAST Fund paid), which is about a third of the retail price. Although the student barely speaks English, he gave us an enthusiastic thumbs up and was so grateful to be able to get around the city and campus. It's easy to underestimate what freedom of movement means to people.

**EDITORS: What are your plans for the future?**

**LIZ:** We're hoping to build on the work we started last spring to develop the Great Lakes FAST Fund Consortium. We started last year with a \$150,000 grant from the AFT's Powerful Partnerships Institute (PPI). Our short-term goal is to help funds throughout the region grow, so that all the FAST Funds in our consortium are as large as our Local 212/MATC fund. Long term, we're aiming for systemic changes in higher education. The consortium developed an advocacy agenda identifying the most urgent needs facing our students and specifying the actions we can take at the campus, community, state, and federal levels to address these issues.

As we were establishing the consortium, one of our first activities was asking students what issues they wanted to address. Independently, groups of students on each campus chose food-pantry-related issues. The top request was for expanded pantry hours, followed closely by more personal hygiene products. Many people wouldn't think personal hygiene is related to educational success, but being able to brush your teeth—having dignity—is crucial. Several of our student activists reached out to local grocery stores to get boxes of hygiene products.

It was really hard to get a lot of traction with the consortium work in just one semester. I'm excited to see what our consortium will accomplish this academic year. In October, we won another grant from the AFT, allowing consortium members to support each other as they build relationships with students, educators, and community members and continue developing local campaigns for collectively identified campus issues—including expanding our pantries' hours and products. I think having this PPI support for the whole academic year will help lead to adjustments on our individual campuses regarding basic needs insecurity and to regional organizing that will result in lasting systemic change. □

# Tearing Down Invisible Walls

## Ending Economic Housing Discrimination



By Richard D. Kahlenberg

**J**anet Williams, a Black single mother of two, works at a community health center and frequently faces a tough dilemma when her meager paycheck arrives. On several occasions, it's gotten "to the point," she says, "where I had to choose to pay for groceries, pay rent, pay gas and electric or ... pay childcare."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes her hand is forced. "I've had times where, if I didn't pay my rent, the next day I was going to have eviction filed." On those occasions, "the whole check goes to my rent," and while she waits for the next paycheck to arrive, she may have to tell her kids, we will "not have hot water and not have the electric working."<sup>2</sup>

With a college education, Williams didn't expect to be in this position. She grew up on the north and west sides of Columbus, Ohio, as the youngest, and the only girl, in a large family. After graduating from Groveport Madison Public Schools, she attended community college and then earned a bachelor's degree in human services from Ohio Christian University in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

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With two kids and loans from college, Williams says her job as a community mental health worker and substance abuse case manager for a nonprofit doesn't provide enough. She lives on the east side of Columbus in a neighborhood with a fair amount of police activity, and she often has trouble making ends meet. "I've never been homeless," she says, but she is often "behind on my rent."<sup>4</sup>

Williams did what society asked her to do by working hard and getting a college degree. But she took on \$70,000 of debt in the process. Her income is just above what would qualify for food stamps, she says, so "it's on me to put groceries in the house." She hates owing money, so when she gets a windfall, like a COVID-19 stimulus check, she uses it to pay down her credit card debt. But she's frustrated that high housing costs mean she is constrained to a neighborhood where her kids don't feel safe. "I can't tell you how many times we've seen the police outside of our window," she says. To avoid dangers in the neighborhood, she says, "we pretty much keep to ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

### Why Is Housing So Expensive?

The solution, when many people think about Williams's dilemma, involves finding ways to raise wages or increase government housing subsidies. Both approaches make good sense and are necessary.<sup>6</sup> But equally, perhaps more, important is doing something about the "supply side" and addressing the question: What is

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELA BUTTIGNOL

driving housing prices so high? To what degree do hidden government policies, such as exclusionary zoning, help create the housing affordability crisis in the first place?

There is near-universal agreement among economists that since the 1970s, the rise of zoning laws that forbid the construction of multifamily housing has prevented housing supply from keeping up with demand. The 1970s were a turning point, in part because they were an era of growing inflation, and home equity became an increasing proportion of the financial portfolio of most families.<sup>7</sup> The share of owner-occupied housing as a proportion of net worth rose from an average of 21 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1979.<sup>8</sup> Capital income from housing sales tripled as a share of total capital income between 1950 and 2010.<sup>9</sup> As homeownership was transformed from a consumer commodity to an investment, homeowners became increasingly anxious about how new development might affect their property values—and demanded new zoning constraints.<sup>10</sup>

## Residential segregation, not gerrymandered school boundary lines, is the fundamental driver of school segregation.

Government policies that forbade multifamily housing generated and continue to perpetuate a housing shortage. If homeowners were allowed to subdivide their houses into duplexes or triplexes, or if more multifamily housing could be built near transit, for example, a community would be able to increase the supply of housing available. But single-family exclusive zoning prohibits that possibility. The fundamental problem is that local government policies are preventing builders from creating the housing people need where they need it.<sup>11</sup> One recent study found that between 2012 and 2019, the shortfall in housing nationally doubled in size.<sup>12</sup> In 2021, economists estimated that we need to build another 3.8 million homes to satisfy demand.<sup>13</sup>

Economists point out that zoning laws that limit development artificially drive up prices.<sup>14</sup> “Imagine,” one writer says, “if there were a law that only 1,000 cars could be sold per year in all of New York. Those 1,000 cars would go to whoever could pay the most money for them, and chances are you and everyone you know would be out of luck.”<sup>15</sup> This doesn’t happen, as one expert observes, because “Ford and General Motors don’t have to ask government permission to increase the number of cars or SUVs that their factories produce.” By contrast, “all changes to housing supply require explicit approval from local governments.”<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, purchasing a home has become more difficult. US homeownership in late 2017 was near a 50-year low.<sup>17</sup> Whereas in 1970, the typical American home cost 1.7 times the median household income, by 2020, that typical American home

cost 4.4 times the median income.<sup>18</sup> Taking homeowners and renters together, nearly 38 million Americans are “cost burdened,” meaning they pay more than 30 percent of their income for mortgages or rent.<sup>19</sup> Vulnerable people, like Janet Williams, are hit particularly hard and endure tremendous stress in deciding which expenses to prioritize and in facing the possibility of eviction and homelessness.

When government zoning policies curtail housing supply in a metropolitan area and increase competition for housing, including in trailer parks, rents rise and millions of Americans suffer. Researchers found that, “Nearly 4 in 10 nonelderly adults reported that in 2018, their families had trouble paying or were unable to pay for housing, utilities, food, or medical care at some point during the year.”<sup>20</sup> And in 2017, a year of relatively low unemployment, “one in eight” Americans said “they must turn to high interest rate payday loans, auto title loans, or pawn shops to tide them over.”<sup>21</sup> In 2020, one survey found that 17 percent of Americans missed or delayed paying major bills to ensure a household member had enough to eat, and 16 percent reported having serious problems affording food. Some 19 percent reported serious problems paying the mortgage or rent, and 18 percent reported serious problems paying utilities.<sup>22</sup> A 2021 report, vividly titled *The Rent Eats First*, found that “nearly a quarter of renter households were spending more than half of their incomes on rent each month, leaving little income to cover other expenses.”<sup>23</sup> A September 2020 study found that 23 million Americans (about 10 percent of all adults) “reported that their household sometimes or often had ‘not enough to eat’ in the last seven days.”<sup>24</sup> Making housing more affordable, one author writes, “is literally a lifesaver. People who spend less on housing costs have more money to spend on food and medical care.”<sup>25</sup>

## How Neighborhoods and Schools Are Connected

Where you live in the United States matters greatly to your quality of life and the life chances of your children. It determines your odds of being safe, of getting a job, of accessing good healthcare, and of enrolling your children in strong public schools. Poor families who live (often because of government zoning) in low-opportunity neighborhoods with struggling schools and high crime rates face very different odds than poor families who live in higher-opportunity neighborhoods where schools are stronger and streets safer.<sup>26</sup>

Adults in high-poverty neighborhoods are often cut off from transportation and jobs, which can have a crushing effect on families. If a parent does not live in a neighborhood with good transportation options, commutes can become hours long. That can mean less time to help nurture a child when home after work.<sup>27</sup> Miss one bus exchange, and a worker can get fired for showing up late, with devastating effects on the whole family.

Families in poor neighborhoods are also often cut off from healthcare. To take one example, Bethesda, Maryland, an affluent suburb of Washington, DC, has one pediatrician for every 400 children, compared to poor and predominantly Black Southeast DC, where there is one pediatrician for every 3,700 children.<sup>28</sup> Poor neighborhoods are also more likely to have environmental hazards such as lead paint that can lead to lower IQ for children.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, the cumulative lifetime impact of neighborhood on opportunity can be enormous. A 2014 study estimated that “the lifetime household income would be \$910,000 greater if people born into the bottom quartile of the neighborhood income distribution had instead grown up in a top-quartile neighborhood.”<sup>30</sup>

Education has long been viewed in American society as “the great equalizer.” But in practice, American schools are highly segregated by race and socioeconomic status, which defeats the equality goal. Research dating back five decades shows one of the most powerful ways to improve the life chances of disadvantaged students is giving them the opportunity to attend high-quality schools that educate rich and poor students under a single roof.<sup>31</sup>

Residential segregation, not gerrymandered school boundary lines, is the fundamental driver of school segregation.<sup>32</sup> Policymakers, researchers, and advocates have long noted that it is important to pursue housing strategies that, if successful, could help integrate neighborhood schools. For example, one study that controlled carefully for students’ family background found that students in mixed-income schools showed 30 percent more growth in test scores over their four years in high school than peers with similar socioeconomic backgrounds in schools with concentrated poverty.<sup>33</sup>

A number of local programs have demonstrated the importance of where children grow up and go to school. In 1974, for example, Montgomery County, Maryland, adopted a groundbreaking inclusionary zoning program that years later was shown to have dramatic effects on the academic achievement of low-income students. Under the policy, when a developer builds more than a certain number of units, 12.5 to 15 percent of the new housing stock must be affordable for low-income and working-class families. Between 1976 and 2010, the program produced more than 12,000 moderately priced homes, of which the housing authority had the right to purchase one-third for public housing.<sup>34</sup> Children in a subset of these units had the chance to attend middle-class schools.

More recently, Montgomery County implemented a second intervention: the school board allocated an additional \$2,000 per pupil to schools in higher-poverty areas to allow for reduced class size in the early grades, extended learning time, and better teacher development.

In 2010, a researcher compared the effects of the inclusionary zoning and the compensatory spending programs on the academic outcomes of elementary school students.<sup>35</sup> She examined 858 children who had been randomly assigned to subsidized housing units scattered throughout Montgomery County and who were enrolled in Montgomery County public elementary schools between 2001 and 2007 and asked: Who performed better—subsidized housing students in higher-poverty neighborhoods where schools have extra financial resources or similar students in lower-poverty schools that spend less? Over time, the effects of neighborhood and the poverty level of classmates trumped per-pupil spending. Low-income public housing students in low-poverty (“green zone”) schools performed far better in math than low-income public housing students in higher-poverty (“red zone”) schools with more resources. Low-income students in green zone schools cut their large initial math gap with middle-class students in half. The reading gap was cut by one-third. She estimated that most of the effect (two-thirds) was due to attending low-poverty



schools, and some (one-third) was due to living in low-poverty neighborhoods.

New Jersey provides another example. In 1975, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in *Southern Burlington County NAACP v. Mount Laurel* that zoning laws that have the effect of excluding low-income families violate the state constitution. The court ruled that localities have an affirmative obligation to provide their “fair share” of moderate and low-income housing.<sup>36</sup> Although implementation of the *Mount Laurel* decision has often proven difficult because of political opposition, thousands of low-income families have been able to move to low-poverty neighborhoods as a result of the decision.<sup>37</sup>

Researchers set out to compare the outcomes of families in subsidized housing who moved to Mount Laurel with those who applied but could not be accommodated because of space constraints.<sup>38</sup> They found “significant improvements in mental health, economic independence, and children’s educational outcomes as a result of moving into the project.”<sup>39</sup>

The impact on families was very large. The people who moved, the study found, saw “a 428 percent increase in economic independence (e.g., working for pay, share of income from work),” and “a 303 percent increase in school quality (as assessed by class size, test scores, attendance rates, etc.).”<sup>40</sup> Children who moved to Mount Laurel “study twice as many hours and spend more time reading. That extra effort is paying off—even though their schools are more academically rigorous, they earn slightly better grades.”<sup>41</sup> (The researchers did not have access to test scores.)

At the end of the day, zoning laws, coupled with school attendance boundaries, conspire to shut millions of working-class families out of high-performing public schools. Under one set of housing laws, it is illegal to build multifamily housing, and under another set of school rules, it is illegal to travel from outside the district to attend schools that are in theory “public.” As one author wryly notes, the Palo Alto Unified School District in California is “free and open to the public. All the public has to do is buy a home in a neighborhood where the median home value was \$2.8 million in 2020.”<sup>42</sup>

## Fighting Back

The costs of the housing affordability crisis are manifold: it adds unnecessary stress and anguish to the lives of working people like Janet Williams; it causes overcrowding and its attendant health problems; it curbs the internal migration that has provided oppor-

tunities for families for generations; and it pushes people out to the periphery of metropolitan areas, where their long commutes damage the planet. All in all, the toll on America is terrible. The crisis is made profoundly worse by the government's own zoning laws that make it illegal for builders to provide the housing that Americans need. But as members of a democracy, we can fight back. As I explain below, a broad coalition came together to defeat exclusionary zoning in Minneapolis, and momentum is building for federal legislation to end economic housing discrimination.

### Neighbors for More Neighbors

Janne Flisrand, a white middle-class liberal activist in Minneapolis, came to the issue of housing through her work in education. In the late 1990s, she was running an after-school program tutoring kids from low-opportunity neighborhoods. She was frustrated that “the kids that we were working with and hanging out with kept disappearing.” When she’d investigate, she says, the children invariably had “some sort of housing instability story.” So Flisrand shifted her focus from education to work supporting subsidized housing for low-income families. After a decade, however, she felt, “we were continuing to lose ground.” She began to investigate “these deeper root economic rules” and zoning laws that at the time many “people didn’t know about” and that “nobody was talking about.”<sup>43</sup>

The toll of the housing affordability crisis on America is terrible. But as members of a democracy, we can fight back.

A community of like-minded individuals in Minneapolis began forming to slowly chip away at exclusionary zoning policies that kept housing scarce and less affordable. In 2014, Minneapolis City Council member Lisa Bender backed a successful plan to allow residents in single-family-zoned communities to add small in-law flats or accessory dwelling units (ADUs).<sup>44</sup> At the time, one council member raised the specter of ADUs becoming houses of prostitution.<sup>45</sup> But when some 140 ADUs were added and fears were not borne out, Bender was ready for more reform.<sup>46</sup>

So were Flisrand and other activists. In February 2017, a couple of Flisrand’s friends, John Edwards and Ryan Johnson, started an art campaign and an associated Twitter account to raise awareness of the ways in which exclusionary zoning hurt people. They called their Twitter account “Neighbors for More Neighbors.”<sup>47</sup> Momentum for reform built when Jacob Frey, a young candidate for mayor of Minneapolis and himself a renter, made affordable housing “one of the centerpieces of his campaign.”<sup>48</sup> In November 2017, activists were thrilled when Frey was elected mayor. Five new members were elected to the city council. The council as a whole now had 12 Democrats and one member of the Green

Party.<sup>49</sup> In January 2018, the council elevated Lisa Bender to council president.

In March 2018, word leaked to the media that the city council was considering allowing duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes in areas previously zoned exclusively for single-family homes.<sup>50</sup> “Quite a few council members reacted negatively,” Flisrand recalls, but the flip side was that advocates were also energized.<sup>51</sup> She teamed up with Edwards and Johnson to create a new grassroots umbrella organization, taking the name of the Neighbors for More Neighbors Twitter account, to support Frey and Bender to do something no major city had ever accomplished: legalize duplexes and triplexes throughout an entire city in one fell swoop.<sup>52</sup> Usually reforms to relax zoning laws are fought community by community. But Minneapolis wanted to legalize “missing middle”<sup>\*</sup> homes throughout the city.

People were beginning to wake up to the idea, Flisrand says, that “there aren’t enough homes for all the people who want to live in a growing city and that that is harmful in a whole host of different ways.”<sup>53</sup> While in the past, council and zoning meetings had been dominated by folks saying “I love my neighborhood and I don’t want it to change,” suddenly new voices were calling for housing that was more abundant and affordable. “That made it feel possible,” she says.<sup>54</sup>

But the odds were still very long, and there was plenty of reason to be skeptical. The proposal represented a big political lift and would require a major culture change. A city of 425,000 residents, Minneapolis had at the time one of the most stringent zoning policies, having banned duplexes, triplexes, and larger apartment buildings from 70 percent of its residential land.

Supporters of reform knew that in order to be successful, they needed to push a suite of comprehensive changes to supplement the signature issue of eliminating single-family exclusive zoning. Accordingly, the proposal also created the possibility of more housing density near transit stops by allowing new three- to six-story buildings. It proposed eliminating off-street minimum parking requirements, which can make development too costly. To minimize fears of displacement, it provided for inclusionary zoning by requiring that new apartment developments set aside 10 percent of units for moderate-income households. And it proposed increasing funding for affordable housing from \$15 million to \$40 million to combat homelessness and provide immediate relief to low-income renters.<sup>55</sup>

Neighbors for More Neighbors and its allies capitalized on the fact that Minneapolis, by law, was required every 10 years to go through a major planning process. In the larger framework, known as “Minneapolis 2040,” the city articulated several goals, but three in particular stood out: making the city’s housing more affordable by building more of it, making the city fairer by reducing racial and economic segregation, and combating climate change by reducing commutes and making housing more environmentally friendly.

In the campaign for change, Flisrand and others put racial and economic justice front and center. Of 14 goals outlined by supporters

\*Small homes (including duplexes, triplexes, and garden apartments) that are neither government subsidized nor expensive single-family houses are often called the “missing middle.”

of the 2040 plan, eliminating racial, ethnic, and economic disparities was goal number one.<sup>56</sup> Proponents of 2040 pointed directly to the role of single-family zoning in fostering segregation.<sup>57</sup> Reformers explicitly pointed out the connection between local zoning and redlining.<sup>†</sup> “Today’s zoning is built on those old redlining maps,” said the city’s long-range planning director Heather Worthington.<sup>58</sup> “That history,” said Councilman Cam Gordon, “helped people realize that the way the city is set up right now is based on the government-endorsed and sanctioned racist system.”<sup>59</sup>

Flisrand and other activists knew that good arguments for zoning reform had been around forever. To get the proposal across the finish line, they needed to build a new coalition that included new voices not normally heard in fights over zoning. It was natural to ally with civil rights groups in Minneapolis given that civil rights groups nationally had been in the fight against exclusionary zoning for decades. The NAACP had been the key plaintiff in the 1975 *Mount Laurel* case in New Jersey. And the NAACP Legal Defense Fund had been a leader in “disparate impact” litigation, under which exclusionary zoning can be struck down when it has the effect of discriminating by race, even if intent is not shown.<sup>60</sup>

Supporters of the 2040 plan also put a major emphasis on gathering authentic input from community groups in the engagement process. The issue-based organization African Career, Education, and Resource supported the plan with extensive community engagement, at church and community meetings, on the basis of the philosophy, says the group’s program director Denise Butler, that “community members are the stakeholders, and they are the true experts of their environment.”<sup>61</sup> Activists wanted to reach out to constituencies in Minneapolis who could tell the story of how they were personally hurt by exclusionary zoning.

Activists knew that wealthy white homeowners were going to make their voices heard.<sup>62</sup> It was critical that lower-income communities, immigrant communities, and communities of color have a seat at the table too. And so, says Flisrand, “The city made a point of creating an engagement pathway” for marginalized communities.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, if there was a secret ingredient in Minneapolis’s success, it was community engagement, Flisrand said.<sup>64</sup> Going back to 2016, members of the city’s Long Range Planning Team attended festivals and street fairs. The city also encouraged residents to hold “Meetings in a Box,” whereby individuals were provided forms and surveys to seek input from community members at a time and place that was convenient.<sup>65</sup>

Running parallel to this process, Neighbors for More Neighbors helped community members attend the council meetings, heavily covered by the media, and encouraged people to wear purple so that supporters could find one another and feel comfortable.<sup>66</sup> The group also created purple lawn signs that sent a positive signal that we “want a city that is growing and welcoming.” In the end, says Flisrand, “Instead of hearing the same old powerful perspectives, we got to hear diverse perspectives.”<sup>67</sup>

Neighbors for More Neighbors also worked closely with organized labor and tenant groups that were deeply affected by the ways in which single-family exclusive zoning drives up prices of housing for everyone in a community. Many environmental and faith groups also joined in.



And many young people also supported the 2040 plan as a way of making Minneapolis neighborhoods more affordable, diverse, and walkable.<sup>68</sup> Millennials are less economically secure than their parents or grandparents were when they were the same ages, and they feel the housing affordability pinch acutely.<sup>69</sup>

Paradoxically, some older Minneapolis residents also supported reform, often for very different reasons. Of course some older, wealthier residents resisted Minneapolis 2040, but others supported it, as did the AARP. The group has pushed for more flexibility to build backyard cottages or to subdivide a home into multiple units as a way for elderly residents to “age in place” while bringing in extra income from tenants.<sup>70</sup>

On December 7, 2018, this diverse coalition prevailed as the Minneapolis City Council ended single-family exclusive zoning citywide.<sup>71</sup> By a 12–1 vote, the city council legalized duplexes and triplexes on what had been single-family lots, which “effectively triples the housing capacity” in many neighborhoods.<sup>72</sup> (The one holdout was a council member from the wealthy southwestern section of Minneapolis, where schools are mostly white.<sup>73</sup>) The accomplishment was unprecedented. “No municipality has taken a more dramatic response to the housing gap than Minneapolis,” one observer noted.<sup>74</sup>

Supporters of the 2040 plan say its bold, sweeping scope may have made it easier to pass than more incremental reform. Traditionally, reformers have sought to “upzone” neighborhoods piece by piece, in part based on the theory that upzoning an entire city would consolidate opposition from disparate neighborhoods. But Worthington says going big—citywide—turned out to be a political advantage. “If we were going to pick and choose, the fight I think would have been even bloodier.”<sup>75</sup> When only some neighborhoods are chosen for change, locals can feel singled out.<sup>76</sup>

Of course, the best way to ensure individual neighborhoods don’t feel singled out is through federal legislation.

### An Economic Fair Housing Act

In August 2017, I proposed the idea of creating an Economic Fair Housing Act to make it illegal for government zoning to discriminate on the basis of income, just as the 1968 Fair Housing Act makes it illegal for parties to discriminate on the basis of race.<sup>77</sup> It is time, a century after the Supreme Court struck down racial zoning, to outlaw unjustified economically discriminatory zoning.<sup>78</sup> Although the private housing market would continue to function

<sup>†</sup>To learn about redlining, see “Suppressed History” in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/spring2021/rothstein](http://aft.org/ae/spring2021/rothstein).

based on a consumer's ability to pay, the idea behind an Economic Fair Housing Act is that local governments (and homeowners' associations) should not themselves engage in economic discrimination by erecting artificial barriers to working-class people who wish to move with their families to higher-opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>79</sup> When local governments adopt exclusionary zoning laws, which telegraph that less-advantaged families are unwelcome in a community, that government-sponsored income discrimination should be illegal.

Under an Economic Fair Housing Act, remedies for plaintiffs who prevail in court would include those available under the Fair Housing Act: covering monetary losses to the victims, the cost associated with the work of attorneys to bring the lawsuit, and injunctions that would prevent municipalities from continuing to discriminate.<sup>80</sup> In addition, an Economic Fair Housing Act would ban source-of-income discrimination—the ability of landlords to discriminate against those using Section 8 housing vouchers, a practice that is currently legal in most states.<sup>81</sup>

## It is time, a century after the Supreme Court struck down racial zoning, to outlaw unjustified economically discriminatory zoning.

Although many different proposals have been made for addressing exclusionary zoning and the housing crisis, a few key advantages of an Economic Fair Housing Act stand out. First, it would provide a comprehensive approach to exclusionary zoning. It would apply in every town and state in the country—not just those that want to participate in certain federal funding programs. Second, by giving plaintiffs the power to sue in federal court, an Economic Fair Housing Act seeks to minimize the ability of powerful political interests to neuter reforms. Third, it would put power in the hands of people who need it most: the direct victims of exclusionary zoning.

An Economic Fair Housing Act could be even more effective than the Fair Housing Act in curbing the disparate impact of government-sponsored discrimination.<sup>82</sup> Not all discrimination is racial in nature, and an Economic Fair Housing Act would be broader and more inclusive by going after economic discrimination against poor and working-class people, including those who are white. And an Economic Fair Housing Act would also make it easier for low-income people of color to sue. Proving a disparate impact of exclusionary zoning on poor and working-class families should be easier than showing disparate impact on people of color because exclusionary zoning that bars more affordable types of housing from being built discriminates very directly on the basis of income and only indirectly on the basis of race. By their very nature, policies that drive up housing costs constitute government-sponsored income discrimination.

At a time when consumers are facing the highest rates of inflation seen in four decades, and policymakers are racking their brains about how to control costs for families, it makes no sense that state and local governments are employing practices that actively inflate housing costs.

Imagine how life would be different if we began to tear down the invisible walls that local governments erect to keep people apart. Imagine if the supply of housing weren't artificially capped by zoning rules, and people like Janet Williams didn't have to worry so much about whether to pay rent or buy groceries. If more affordable housing prices meant less homelessness. If people who wanted to move to coastal areas for a wage boost could do so because housing prices were not astronomical. If workers had less stress because they didn't have to live on the outskirts of metropolitan areas and take two buses to work. If housing were built where people needed it so that auto emissions declined and we had fewer severe weather events.

Imagine if, because walls were coming down, metropolitan areas were less racially segregated and people met more neighbors who came from different racial and ethnic backgrounds—and as a result (according to 94 percent of studies) this interracial contact resulted in less racial prejudice.<sup>83</sup> Imagine also what life would be like if more African Americans experienced the higher employment and higher wages that result from reduced segregation.

Imagine a United States in which low-wage workers of all races had the legal tools to fight government-sponsored economic discrimination in zoning; if people could fight back against humiliating policies that tell them they are unwanted in entire communities. If, as Richard Reeves observes, “a geography gap can become an empathy gap,” imagine a reversal of that reality: that as barriers came down, and we returned to an earlier time when people of different classes rubbed shoulders more often, understanding and empathy slowly grew and feelings of superiority began to ebb.<sup>84</sup> In this type of society, tearing down the walls of separation is a form of patriotism because it helps us see other Americans as fellow citizens to be honored and cherished.<sup>85</sup>

Imagine, finally, the possibility of a more cohesive, less polarized democracy. As state-sponsored walls that divide Americans by race and class began to come down, imagine that people of different backgrounds—who currently live apart and easily demonize one another as political enemies—were more likely to converse and come to know one another as more than just members of an opposing political party.<sup>86</sup> In this world, strong political differences would likely endure, as they do between extended family members, but if people had the chance to talk about sports, or their kids, it would become more difficult to see people from different political parties as just antagonists, and the chances of political compromise might increase.

The government-sponsored walls that divide us do enormous harm—blunting opportunity, making housing unaffordable, damaging the environment, segregating us by race and class, and doing significant injury to our fragile democracy. It is time to recognize the walls that separate us, and then proceed to tear them down. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/kahlenberg](https://aft.org/ae/winter2023-2024/kahlenberg).

# The PBL Journey Is Rocky—But Here Is Why It Is Worth It

*In project-based learning (PBL) activities, students investigate, ask questions about, and design hands-on solutions to real-world problems and challenges. These opportunities to “learn by doing” and connect classroom concepts to their experiences help students acquire deep knowledge and skills that enhance their academic achievement. That’s why experiential learning is one of the key transformative learning strategies addressed through the AFT’s Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign to help children recover and thrive. (Learn more at [aft.org/realsolutions](https://aft.org/realsolutions).)*

Share My Lesson has dozens of resources—including lesson plans and activities, blog posts, webinars, and more—to help educators develop meaningful PBL activities for the classroom. Here, Amber Chandler, a regular Share My Lesson contributor and presenter, describes how PBL can accommodate students’ differing needs. (To read this blog post on SML, visit [sharemylesson.com/blog/pbl-journey](https://sharemylesson.com/blog/pbl-journey).)

To learn more about PBL lesson plans and projects that you can adapt for your classroom, visit the Share My Lesson collection “Growth Mindset and Project-Based Learning Lesson Plans” at [go.aft.org/vws](https://go.aft.org/vws).

—EDITORS

## BY AMBER CHANDLER

I’m just going to rip off the Band-Aid and say this part up front: as a result of the pandemic, many students are not equipped to do project-based learning (PBL) like they may have been in 2019. This is not because of some “learning loss” or failure of their families or teachers to keep them moving in the right direction. Instead, students will struggle with PBL because they don’t have the social skills scaffolding in place right now. What do I mean by this, exactly? Take, for example, the collaborative project from 2019 that my students did after reading *The Giver*.<sup>\*</sup> This project required students to plan out a utopia—working in groups, on

<sup>\*</sup>To view the collaborative project, visit [go.aft.org/uzw](https://go.aft.org/uzw).

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a single document, from multiple computers—after brainstorming with each other and me. If I had tried to do this project when we returned to school, in masks, six feet apart, it would never have worked, for obvious reasons. So, like so many others, I sacrificed PBL to work with students on regaining some of the other stunted “school skills,” particularly helping them with social and emotional skills and helping them to regain stamina for academic work and interpersonal interactions.<sup>†</sup> My lesson “Using Biography to Build Community” (available at [go.aft.org/w2i](https://go.aft.org/w2i)) is one example of how I tried to help students reacclimate to school and to build stamina.

This year, however, I’m ready to head back to PBL, and so were a dozen other teachers who were members of my recent class, “Project-Based Learning Post-Pandemic.” My slide overview (available at [go.aft.org/hm8](https://go.aft.org/hm8)) provides an explanation of the philosophy I’ll be taking with my students. I’ll share how PBL helps four “types”

<sup>†</sup>To learn how book clubs can help develop students’ interpersonal and academic skills, visit [go.aft.org/w19](https://go.aft.org/w19).

of students: Suzy, Bryan, Jane, and Ollie. They are an amalgamation of students I’ve had over the years, and the goal is to make sure I offer them project-based learning opportunities that allow them all to have the same “view from the top.” They will each need different scaffolding, perhaps a variety of modalities, lots of encouragement and understanding, but always a strong belief that though their paths may be different, they will experience a rigorous and worthwhile educational journey. Here’s what that will look like:

## Suzy

Suzy is creative and funny, but she has some learning difficulties that, if left unsupported, might prevent her from reaching the learning target. She may have a 504 plan, an individualized education plan, or some mental health issues, or she may be learning a new language. Though there are nuances that are impossible to capture in an individual example, it is safe to say that students who have any or all of these characteristics often need to have simplified directions with fewer steps. Also,

there are times when the anticipatory set is unnecessary and can sidetrack students who might have difficulty cognitively grasping the scope and the sequence of a project. Suzy will benefit from choice, support, and encouragement. Rigor isn't sacrificed, but rigidity isn't necessary either.

## Bryan

Bryan is the type of student who wants to do it his way, and we can encourage that attitude while also checking in with him along the way to make sure he is meeting the requirements. It is important to support students like Bryan, who are capable but perhaps a tad rebellious or bored with their current learning opportunities, to expand their skills and experiences. Bryan may have had things come easily to him before, but his grade might have suffered because he rushed through them. By using a checklist and detailed rubric, teachers can help students like Bryan be successful. Another key component with all students, but in my opinion particularly those not meeting their potential, is to elicit help from family and even coaches. Students like Bryan often need a team around them to make sure they don't check out. Bryan is often a student who knows the material but just doesn't know how to let their guard down enough to experience academic success, often because it doesn't go with the rest of their persona. Make sure the Bryans have

choices that make sense to them, but don't sacrifice rigor.

## Jane

Jane is the stereotypical overachiever. Instead of simply letting her do the basics and coasting through, the teacher can offer her extension activities and/or the potential to circle back and help others. As a former "Jane," I was often forced to help those who were struggling, and it negatively impacted my opinion of group work. Instead of assigning a student like Jane another student to help, it is better to allow her to decide if she wants to offer her skills to anyone who might need them. For example, if Jane is a great artist, she can be allowed to set up a section of the classroom to help any student who needs guidance in that area. This isn't simply for the Janes of the world, either—Bryan might have some skills he can offer the class as well, and students learn to check with their learning community for help. I have all students create a "business card" of their skills and tack it to our bulletin board if they are willing to work with other students. We discuss talents that are useful to school, and I'm always so proud of the students who are willing to share themselves for the betterment of the whole class. It is especially heartwarming to have the Suzys of the world recognize that though some parts of academia are hard, they still have things to offer overall. This

way, when students need help, I'm able to direct them to check the bulletin board first in order to help create interdependence.

## Ollie

Ollie is the kiddo who doesn't like school. These students can be smart, talented, and polite, and have all the other "school" qualities we love, but they find the whole thing a bit pointless. They can often solve a Rubik's Cube, play an instrument, or be a really successful athlete. Some are shy and loners. School, though, is not interesting to them (maybe due to anxiety or depression, or maybe just as a part of their experience). Just because you say that the journey is worthwhile to meet a learning target doesn't mean they will believe you. The structure of school is the issue. Ollies may need more choices than other students, and they will thrive if their creativity is validated and valued instead of squashed. School is meant to create copies, and Ollies are more interested in being original—not as a counter activity, but because they are only comfortable when allowed to pursue their interests as they relate to the larger context.

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Of course, there are multitudes of other "types" of students, and these are only to serve as examples. No one wants to be reduced to a paragraph descriptor, but the takeaway is simple: all learning doesn't have to look the same with the same steps, pathway, or even number of assignments. What is important is for educators to offer all students rigorous, worthwhile paths that all lead to a "view at the top" of a learning goal. That learning goal, whatever it may be, must be scaffolded in a way that it is accessible to all types of learners; and educators need to value the learning journey and honor it for all students by recognizing that they learn things along the way that were not planned explicitly by the teacher. That learning is crucial too!

My "Project-Based Learning Post-Pandemic" slideshow visualizes what these students' project-based learning experiences might look like. The beauty of PBL is that all of these learning styles and needs can be accommodated through a well-designed project. Follow the "BAM" method: help students create Burning questions, incorporate Authentic audiences into the experience, and make sure that Millennial skills are front and center to the project. Check out the plethora of materials found at [pblworks.org](http://pblworks.org), and use the slideshow from my class to create something you and your students will learn from. Reach out to me at [amberrainchandler@gmail.com](mailto:amberrainchandler@gmail.com) with any questions you might have, and please share the learning!



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