

Creating joyful and confident readers

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After several difficult years, I know I'm not the only one thinking about how to address students' learning loss and accelerate their learning as they return to school. This is especially true when it comes to reading. Reading is the foundation for all other learning and is necessary for virtually everything we do, but there has never been adequate support for evidence-based reading instruction in the United States. The American Federation of Teachers is trying to change that as part of our new [Real Solutions for Kids and Communities](#) campaign. Our goal is nothing short of seeing all our young people become joyful and confident readers.

[Teaching reading is rocket science](#), as literacy expert Louisa Moats puts it. Fortunately, it's a science that has been extensively researched and made accessible to educators and families. Hundreds of studies demonstrate the effectiveness of a [structured approach](#) that includes phonics instruction along with giving students lots of opportunities to read high-quality books, develop their background knowledge and build their vocabulary. The AFT has advocated for decades for these principles to be included in teacher preparation, curriculums and professional development so teachers have opportunities to learn, practice and be mentored in evidence-based approaches to reading instruction.

But the reality is that, regardless of whether they have had this comprehensive support, teachers help students with reading—and reading struggles—every day. So the AFT has invested in an exciting new project, [Reading Universe](#), led by one of our longtime partners, WETA, to boost teachers' expertise.

Reading Universe is an online, step-by-step pathway for teachers, paraprofessionals and reading coaches to learn more about evidence-based reading instruction and then use it in their classrooms to complement any curriculum. It offers tutorials and videos filmed in real classrooms, with real students, in diverse settings around the country. There will be a focus on serving English learners, students with dyslexia or other learning issues, and students from marginalized communities.

Reading Universe offers educators everywhere access to the strategies and skills that will enable them to help kids become capable readers, regardless of the curriculum a district or school requires. And it's been built from the start with a cadre of skilled teachers and researchers. Reading Universe is available online to

everyone, for free, because all students need and deserve high-quality literacy instruction.

That is not all we are doing. Developing strong readers happens both at home and at school. The AFT has published a special issue of our quarterly journal, *American Educator*, devoted to family literacy, covering evidence-based strategies for parents and teachers to help develop kids' reading skills. The journal, which is [available online](#) now and will be distributed in print over the next several weeks, features short, family-friendly articles from reading teachers and researchers offering concrete ways families can help their children. It tackles reading from many angles, from "[Helping Children with Significant Reading Problems](#)," to "[10 Tips for Taking Your Child to the Library](#)," to "[Learning to Read and Write in Two—or More—Languages](#)," to my favorite, "[Seven Questions You Always Wanted to Ask a Reading Teacher](#)."

Reading is the foundation for all other learning.

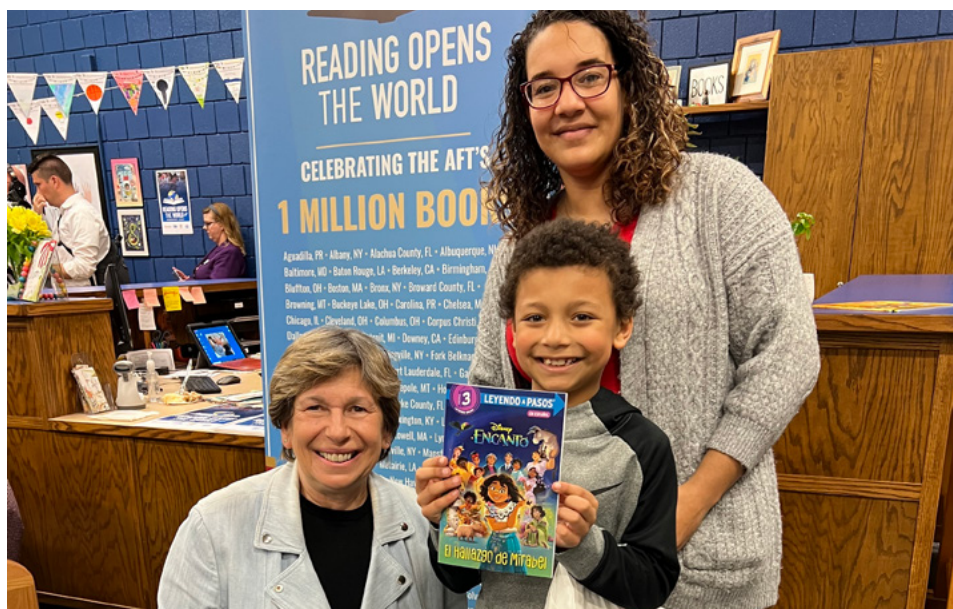
This special issue of *American Educator* will go to all AFT members who work in education, and we're providing 100,000 additional copies for pediatricians' offices, PTA meetings and other places families can access them. Several articles also will be printed in Spanish.

Beyond helping children learn how to read, we are working to spark their love of reading.

Sadly, one-third of 13-year-olds said they "never or hardly ever" [read for fun](#), according to the National Center for Education Statistics. I never want that to be because kids don't have access to books, especially books they are drawn to. That's why we launched [Reading Opens the World](#).

The AFT is giving away books that are both mirrors and windows—titles that reflect students' own identities and experiences, introduce them to the experiences of others, and inspire them with compelling stories and characters. As others ban books, the [AFT is committed to giving books away](#). In partnership with [First Book](#), we have given away 9 million books, and we are on track to distribute 1 million more by next summer. From reading fairs with bouncy houses in Albany, N.Y., to last week's back-to-school festival in Scranton, Pa., to working with NAACP youth and college members to set up Freedom Libraries full of acclaimed books that have been banned in [Florida](#), where there have been more book bans than in almost any other state—our goal is for all students to be confident and joyful readers.

The ability to read is a fundamental right, and teaching children to read is the most fundamental responsibility of schooling. The disruptions due to the pandemic make focusing on literacy both at school and at home even more important. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, teacher or bus driver, or you just love kids, check out go.aft.org/8a8. Together let's help young people read, and read well, so they can reach their full potential—and achieve their dreams.



Weingarten, left, visits Cloud Elementary in Wichita, Kan., on April 20 to highlight the AFT's Reading Opens the World campaign.

Photo: AFT

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