



Education
Healthcare
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VOL. 49, NO. 3 | FALL 2025
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AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

Fighting for Our Democracy

As Authoritarianism Rises,

WE RISE UP



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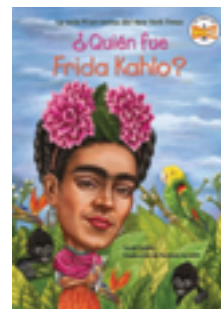
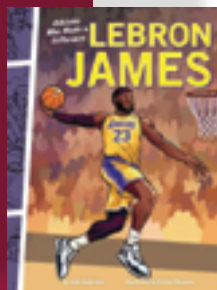


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Strengthen, Don't Abandon, Public Schools

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

THE ROUTE TO the American dream goes through our public schools, where educators dedicate themselves to helping every student reach their unique potential. But public education is in peril—from devastating funding cuts and extremists stoking culture wars to efforts to divert funding from students in public schools to private voucher programs.

Attacks on public education are not new. The difference today is that the attacks are intended to destroy it. And President Donald Trump is trying to hasten its demise. Trump and his allies aren't just abolishing the US Department of Education; they're gutting funding for key personnel and programs so public schools cannot function properly.

The Trump administration tried to pull federal funding—specifically for low-income students and students with disabilities—from schools where they thought there was a whiff of support for equity, diversity, or inclusion. An AFT lawsuit stopped that. And the administration had illegally withheld more than \$7 billion in K-12 education funds for this school year—funding that Congress authorized and that schools obligated. Thanks to our lobbying, lawsuits, and advocacy, the administration backed down.

But Trump and his congressional majority have gone for the jugular: Their big, ugly budget bill includes a nationwide voucher program, even though we know vouchers harm students (see page 38). This unprecedented and uncapped tax credit will hurt students in public schools and could cost taxpayers more than \$50 billion a year—nearly double what the federal government spends on helping poor kids and kids with disabilities. This administration has abandoned the nearly 90 percent of American students who attend public schools.

I laid out a blueprint for America's public schools in a speech to thousands of educators at the AFT's TEACH conference in July. Educators, students, and families

across the country have told me that they want schools to be safe, welcoming, relevant, and engaging. We can follow that blueprint in every community—red, blue, or purple. (And you can watch the speech at go.aft.org/lyz.)

One of the most effective ways educators and school staff create safe and welcoming spaces is through community schools, which bring the supports students and their families need under one roof. Community schools can offer everything from food assistance to medical care to academic enrichment. The common thread is that they help students and families learn and thrive. But Trump's budget zeroes out funding for community schools.

In education, the basics are the big thing. What's more fundamental than reading? The AFT has given away more than 10 million books in partnership with First Book. We have vast literacy resources for educators and families—from evidence-based reading instruction to deep dives into how to help students with dyslexia. (Check out our professional development at aftpd.org/courses.)

Artificial intelligence (AI) is altering our world, bringing both peril and promise. Educators must be in the driver's seat so they can maximize the good and minimize the bad—and use it safely, wisely, and ethically. That's why the AFT launched the National Academy for AI Instruction. We are working with the United Federation of Teachers and Microsoft as leading partners, and with OpenAI and Anthropic, to build a training facility in New York City available to every AFT member. Together, we will make sure educators are not just users of technology but leaders in shaping how it is developed and implemented in real classrooms.

The AFT is working to expand high-quality career and technical education (CTE) programs to prepare

students for in-demand careers in health-care, information technology, advanced manufacturing, and traditional trades. This engaging and relevant approach works—95 percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 70 percent go to college.

Americans want safe, welcoming, relevant, and engaging schools in every community.

The strategies in this blueprint help kids succeed. They need to be scaled and resourced.

Americans support public schools and want them strengthened, not defunded or dismantled. We must stand up for them. Extremists are starving public schools of the funds they need to succeed. They are attacking the teaching of reason, of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism. Public education is on a precipice.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington championed public education as a public good. As imperfect as they are, our public schools are where we create opportunity and community—for all, not just for some. We must not let the likes of Donald Trump end public education as we know it. □



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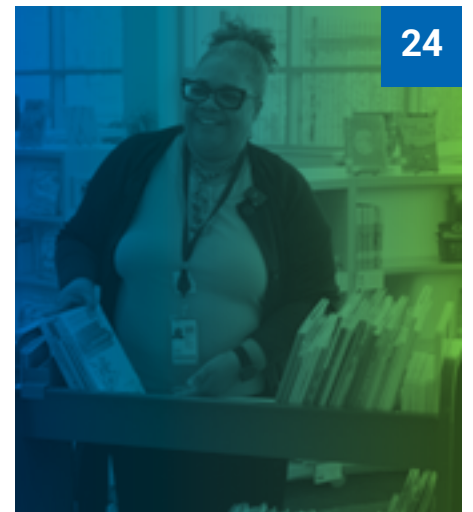
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OUR MISSION

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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

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

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

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

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

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Cover photo:
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RESOLVED TO FIGHT FOR A BETTER LIFE

At its May 2025 meeting, the AFT Executive Council passed more than two dozen resolutions on a range of issues aimed at creating a better life for students, families, and educators. Here, we highlight several resolutions that address defending democracy, strengthening public education, and fighting for justice, equity, and safety for all.

Defending Democracy

Two resolutions specifically focus on defending democracy and the right to vote. “Mobilizing to Defend Democracy, Expand Opportunity, and Build Power” details the AFT’s commitment to fighting back against democratic, educational, and economic attacks by condemning the Trump administration’s cuts to Medicare and Medicaid and critical federal services, prioritizing

the 2026 elections and getting out the vote, and engaging in nonviolent action to make members’ voices heard. It declares that “the AFT will lead with the clarity, courage and commitment that this moment demands—organizing not only to resist authoritarianism, but also to build a stronger, more just future for everyone in this country.”

“In Support of Statehood for Washington, DC,” establishes that defending democracy means ensuring the right to vote for all US citizens and resolves to support the movement for DC statehood, fighting for the autonomy of a location that has not had a vote in the US Congress for 200 years.

Strengthening Public Schools and Higher Education

Nine resolutions highlight the need to strengthen public schools and higher education and make sure these spaces are safe, welcoming, engaging, and relevant. “Defending and Strengthening Public Schools and a Better Life for All” asserts that it is not enough to ward off the attempted dismantling of public education by the Trump administration and right-wing extremists, who are gutting the US Department of Education, funneling funds from public schools through vouchers, and “leading a war on knowledge.” The AFT resolves to “fight for America’s kids and their schools in the courts and in the court of public opinion.... We will lift up the stories of the promise and purpose of public education and the actions our members undertake to honorably serve their students despite the significant challenges they are up against.”

“Protecting Public Education from Right-Wing Extremism” and “Supporting the Freedom to Read in Public Schools and Protecting Our School Librarians from Harassment” further resolve that the AFT will stand in solidarity against forces that seek to destroy public education. The AFT will advocate for teaching accurate and complete US history and the rights of all students to be free of harassment in public schools and to see themselves reflected in school curricula and reading materials.

The AFT’s fight to make public education more welcoming for all students also includes commitments to

1. advocate for hiring more Black teachers, for implementing restorative school discipline practices, and for funding more school counseling positions (“Black Lives Matter at School Month”);
2. promote rigorous state and national protections for LGBTQIA+ youth and their families, along with educators and others who support them (“Support for the LGBTQIA+ Community”);
3. identify policy changes to better support the nation’s growing neurodivergent student population, including the requirement of self-advocacy skills and post-school transition programs (“Neurodiversity Initiative”); and
4. advocate for meaningful support of students needing special education services, including ongoing educator training and administrative support and the establishment of an expert-led task force to address issues at the national level (“Continuum of Special Education Services Through Identification of Academically Appropriate Placement and Support”).

Higher education institutions are common targets of authoritarian efforts to weaken democracy by attacking knowledge and silencing debate and dissent. Thus, AFT resolutions specific to higher education decry attempts to repress free speech and deploy state-sanctioned violence against those exercising their democratic rights on higher education campuses. “AFT Stands in Solidarity with Campus Protesters, Demands Their Rights to Protest and Free Speech Be Respected” calls on campus administrators to “cease their campaign of threats, suspensions and expulsions against peaceful protesters and cease using law enforcement agencies to disrupt and attack them. AFT further calls on campus administrations to refuse to assist ICE with unlawful actions on campus or in campus-owned properties. Academic freedom, free speech, the right to assemble and the right to protest are fundamental rights, and they must be respected on campuses and across the country.”



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COURTESY OF UNITED EDUCATORS OF SAN FRANCISCO



MICHAEL NIGRO / SIPA USA VIA AP IMAGES

A related resolution, “Opposition to Detainments, Deportations and Visa Revocations in Higher Education,” condemns threats to revoke citizenship, visa, or residency statuses of students who exercise the freedoms of speech, expression, or association, which are foundational to a democratic society. The resolution also establishes the AFT’s commitment to “fight for the humanity and dignity of all, and vigorously defend intellectual freedom and foundational democratic First Amendment freedoms, including the rights to assemble and protest,” and to provide legal resources, training, and guidance to higher education members in this effort.

Fighting for Equity and Safety for Families

Five resolutions detail the AFT’s championing of the health, safety, dignity, and well-being of working families, particularly the most vulnerable. “AFT Supports Cutting Taxes on Working Class and Raising Taxes on Millionaires” calls for comprehensive strategies, including a more effective taxation system and a more just society with “fair wages, benefits and working conditions for working-class people” to address systemic inequities that unfairly advantage the wealthy and burden the working class. In “Fighting Child Poverty,” the AFT resolves to support policies that promote affordable housing and healthcare options, increased access to early childhood and community schools programs,

an increased living wage, and economic opportunities to help families break the cycle of poverty. Specific to rural communities, where the rise in authoritarianism is increasing isolation and economic stress, “Rural Connection and Engagement” commits the AFT to fostering greater visibility and connection by amplifying the work of members in rural areas and building support for increased funding for education, healthcare, and public services in those communities.

Because safety is essential to well-being, two resolutions focus on increasing protections for families impacted by inhumane immigration policies and by law enforcement aggression. “Support for New Families” pledges that AFT locals will volunteer to help immigrants displaced by right-wing governors like Texas’s Greg Abbott and offer educators training on the rights of immigrant and unhoused students. The resolution calls for robust bilingual and interpretation services and housing assistance, in addition to preparing more educators and staff to offer appropriate educational programming to newcomer students.

Finally, “In Support of Just, Respectful and Safe Public Safety Practices for All” acknowledges that some communities have a history of experiencing aggression or violence perpetrated by law enforcement, which can be traumatic for students and families. The resolution condemns police violence and calls for (1) a US Department of Justice investigation into the proliferation of local police anti-crime tactical units and (2) efforts to increase awareness in schools about police violence and to “work together to build a more just and equitable society for all.”

For more on these and all recently adopted resolutions, see aft.org/about/resolutions.



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QUICK LINKS

Mobilizing to Defend Democracy, Expand Opportunity, and Build Power: go.aft.org/7he

In Support of Statehood for Washington, DC: go.aft.org/9go

Defending and Strengthening Public Schools and a Better Life for All: go.aft.org/7oh

Protecting Public Education from Right-Wing Extremism: go.aft.org/l9l

Supporting the Freedom to Read in Public Schools and Protecting Our School Librarians from Harassment: go.aft.org/moh

Black Lives Matter at School Month: go.aft.org/nkh

Support for the LGBTQIA+ Community: go.aft.org/eaw

Neurodiversity Initiative: go.aft.org/lz9

Continuum of Special Education Services Through Identification of Academically Appropriate Placement and Support: go.aft.org/0es

AFT Stands in Solidarity with Campus Protesters, Demands Their Rights to Protest and Free Speech Be Respected: go.aft.org/yuu

Opposition to Detainments, Deportations and Visa Revocations in Higher Education: go.aft.org/asy

AFT Supports Cutting Taxes on Working Class and Raising Taxes on Millionaires: go.aft.org/nm3

Fighting Child Poverty: go.aft.org/xg3

Rural Connection and Engagement: go.aft.org/58e

Support for New Families: go.aft.org/m78

In Support of Just, Respectful and Safe Public Safety Practices for All: go.aft.org/23p

Why Do Fascists Fear Teachers?

BECAUSE WE TEACH
CRITICAL THINKING



By Randi Weingarten

I decided to write this book for two reasons. First, I wanted to celebrate public school educators—the teachers and paraprofessionals and bus drivers and so many more. They make a difference in children’s lives and the future of our nation every single day and should be revered, not reviled. And second, I wrote this book because the coherent, well-funded strategy behind the vilification of teachers and war on knowledge needs to be exposed.

I am a schoolteacher, a lawyer, and a union leader. I am not an academic, and this is not an academic book. This book is a warning. I want to explain why the attacks on public education are intensifying and how they connect to a concerted strategy. My views reflected herein are informed by a lifetime of work, an analysis of historical and current events, and, importantly, the perspective of teachers—who are some of the most trusted leaders in the United States but never get the support they need or the pay they deserve and are increasingly besieged by baseless smears and attacks. Why? What’s going on? And for those of us who respect teachers and value public education, how can we respond?

A group of anti-government, anti-pluralism, anti-opportunity fascists, oligarchs, and far-right activists are demonizing public school teachers so they can divide the American public and destroy public education as we know it. Teachers aren’t being smeared and undermined because they’re doing anything wrong but because they’re doing something very, very right.

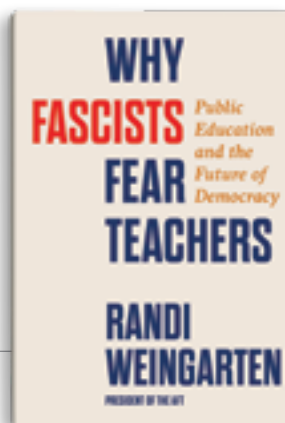
Teachers do four foundational things that are important to the future of our students and the well-being of our nation—but are antithetical

to the fascist anti-government, anti-pluralism, anti-opportunity agenda. Teachers impart knowledge, including critical-thinking skills that prepare our kids for their futures and strengthen our democracy. Teachers work to create welcoming and safe communities so we can meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all children and their families. Teachers create opportunity for every young person to have their shot at the American dream. And teachers are anchors of a labor movement whose purpose is to champion the aspirations of working families.

Fascists fear teachers because education is essential to democracy. And education is essential to broad-based opportunity and empowerment. Yes, we teach reading and math. But we also teach young people to have agency and confidence, to problem solve and be resilient. And we also teach core American values, including patriotism. We teach the fundamental building blocks for a nation

unlike any in human history—a nation founded on the radical idea that we all are created equal, that we all deserve the opportunity to succeed, and that power belongs to the people, and we all must have a voice. And though those ideals have not always been realized, we have prepared generations of young Americans to strive for that vision anew.

—R. W.





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applying civic knowledge to real-world issues and policy debates.¹ And in 1995, after we won the city competition, we raised money to get ourselves to the New York state competition, and when we won first place, we raised money to get ourselves to Washington, DC, for the finals.² They were excited, they worked so hard, and they were so disappointed when they came in fourth. They worked for hours and hours. They stretched themselves and relied on each other. And there were times when they were really mad at me and my co-teacher Dr. Leo Casey because we pushed them so hard.

My students taught me how, with hard work and support, they could do anything. And I knew that by learning civics and critical thinking, they were preparing to be the informed citizens and leaders of the future that our nation needs.

Al Shanker, my mentor and arguably one of the greatest union leaders and civic leaders of the 20th century, said that the essential job of our public schools is “to teach children what it means to be an American.” “One is not born into something that makes you an American. It is not by virtue of birth, but by accepting a common set of values and beliefs that you become an American,” Shanker wrote.³ And the point of schools is to inculcate and safeguard the very important foundational principle and practice in the United States that is democracy. “If we want democracy we have to demand it,” writes historian Timothy Snyder, “and we have to be able to educate children who will make and remake it.”⁴

When I was a civics and history teacher at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, New York, it was my turn to teach my students the skills and knowledge they needed to soar. Whether the lesson was about the Constitution or movements that helped change the Constitution to create even greater justice and freedom, such as the suffrage movement that led to voting rights for women in 1920, I was equipping my students with as much information as possible to form their own ideas and opinions. To teach them how to think critically, how to problem solve, to understand differences, how to engage with others as they navigate the world, and to be resilient and persistent in the face of adversity.

One of the first lessons I would teach my students in my civics class was about the social contract—how individual freedoms and mutual responsibility are inextricably intertwined in our democracy. This is the sacred covenant that underlies our commitment to public schools. It’s the commitment to opportunity for all, in a safe environment, where every child is welcome, and where we work to engage every child so they can meet their God-given potential.

Clara Barton was an underfunded high school filled with kids who were too often underestimated. And the most heartbreaking thing was that they often underestimated themselves. We often competed in the We the People civics competition, a nationwide contest for high school students that tests not only their knowledge of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights but also their skills in

Critical thinking is the heart of democracy, the muscle at the core that keeps democracy healthy and strong.

Critical thinking is the heart of democracy, the muscle at the core that keeps democracy healthy and strong. We don’t tell our students who to vote for; we don’t tell our students what to believe. We teach them how to think for themselves, why democracy is important, and how they’re an important part of making it work and making it better. But rather than help teachers build a stronger America based on knowledge and truth and freedom of thought, fascists use fear, bullying, and culture wars to try to shut down teaching and democracy.

Ironically, there is one thing fascists and teachers agree on—that we cannot create a truly democratic, inclusive nation committed to opportunity for all without public schools. Fascists fight against public education because they want to control our minds, control our ideas, and control the future. And what do teachers do? We teach. It’s that simple. Class after class, year after year, we equip the next generation to think for themselves and preserve our nation’s precious bond between individual liberty, opportunity, and the common good.

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her commendations include being named to Washingtonian’s 2023 Most Influential People in Washington and City & State New York’s 2021 New York City Labor Power 100. This article was excerpted with permission from her new book, Why Fascists Fear Teachers: Public Education and the Future of Democracy, published in September 2025 by Thesis, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. Weingarten is donating half of her proceeds from the book to the AFT’s Disaster Relief Fund and Educational Foundation.

Authoritarians actively attack truth, knowledge, and critical thinking because an uninformed public is easier to control.

We Want Kids to Think—and Read—for Themselves

When he was still a student at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an essay in the student newspaper titled “The Purpose of Education.”⁵ He argued that education has two main purposes: “the one is utility and the other is culture.” Education helps students develop concrete skills and tools and learn how to use them to achieve their goals in life. But that second purpose King wrote about? That purpose is really democracy. “To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.”

“The function of education,” Dr. King went on, “is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.” Critical thinking is vital to accurately understanding societal problems that need to be solved and, together with our civic peers, engaging, analyzing, and innovating as we constantly renew and reinvent our democracy. Critical thinking is the most important muscle in the exercise of democracy. No wonder fascists want to weaken it.

Democracy is being deeply, substantively engaged in the problems and solutions of our society. Which means critical thinking and education are absolutely essential to and intertwined with the practice of democracy. When we think critically, we have our own ideas and opinions, but we simultaneously scrutinize them, weighing other facts and ideas to be as rational as possible. We listen to and really wrestle with ideas and opinions that conflict with our own. And we engage earnestly with people who may think differently from us, exchanging facts and opinions, not taunts and smears.

“Democracies die more often through the ballot box than at gunpoint,” writes historian Heather Cox Richardson in her book *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*.⁶ Fascist leaders may campaign for our votes, but modern democracies more often fall because of autocratic candidates who work within the system to dismantle it, rather than because of coups or military takeovers. Prominent authoritarianism historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat explains that fascist and authoritarian leaders want to “damage or destroy democracy.”⁷ Democracy is people power. But fascists want one leader or a small group of elites to have all the power.

The problem for fascists, then, is that a public with strong critical-thinking muscles is more likely to strengthen democracy and resist authoritarianism. Scholars who study democracy worldwide are incredibly clear on this point: “On the whole, higher

levels of education are associated with stronger democracies—a country with an educated populace is more likely to become or remain a democracy.”⁸ Looking at data from Latin American elections, researchers Amy Erica Smith and Mollie J. Cohen found that “The more education you have, the less likely you are to vote for an authoritarian.”⁹ In fact, some global scholars have gone as far as to suggest that “education causes democracy.”¹⁰

So is the opposite true? Yes, history has shown us that. For instance, in 2017, the *Financial Times* found that among Dutch voters, having attained less education was the greatest predictor of support for the country’s anti-immigrant, far-right political party.¹¹ And after winning a primary election during the 2016 election, Donald Trump bragged how well he did with certain demographics, saying, “We won with poorly educated. I love the poorly educated.”¹² This may or may not have been just another sloppy aside from Trump, but it does reflect a deeper truth. Donald Trump was able to rise to power, yes, because of his keen political instincts and charisma, but also because he routinely says things he thinks voters want to hear, whether he can actually do anything about them or not.

Authoritarians actively attack truth, knowledge, and critical thinking because an uninformed public is easier to control. Degrading public education and critical-thinking skills may only prime more Americans to not recognize disinformation and misinformation and take authoritarian leaders like Trump at their word. Psychologist Bob Altemeyer studied personality traits that make people more receptive to authoritarian leaders. In his 2006 book *The Authoritarians*, Altemeyer documented his “Right-Wing Authoritarianism” scale, writing:

The authoritarian follower makes himself vulnerable to malevolent manipulation by chucking out critical thinking and prudence as the price for maintaining his beliefs. He’s an “easy mark,” custom-built to be snookered. And the very last thing an authoritarian leader wants is for his followers to start using their heads, to start thinking critically and independently about things.¹³

In other words, those inclined to support authoritarianism exhibit a general avoidance of or allergy to critical thinking. And authoritarians like it that way.

What do fascists do when they’re worried that students might learn about the truth on their own? They ban books. Book bans are a very old and deeply disturbing tactic that, frankly, I never thought we’d see at such a horrifying scope and scale in our country. But here we are. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, in 2023,





REUTERS/CALLAGHAN O'HARE

“more than 3,000 books have been banned in schools across America. These books disproportionately feature stories about LGBTQ+ communities, people of color, and others who have been marginalized.”¹⁴ Even though gun violence is the leading cause of death among children and teens today, the far right goes to extraordinary lengths to block any restrictions whatsoever on access to assault weapons or high-capacity rounds of ammunition.¹⁵ But they’ll use every means at their disposal to make sure high school students can’t check a book about gay identity out of the restricted section of the school library.

The point of diverse books isn’t to promote one identity or another—it’s to make sure all students have access to age-appropriate reading to inform their lives and choices. Factual, trustworthy, honest information isn’t propaganda—it’s power. Over the past several decades, one of the most banned books in America has been *It’s Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris. At quick glance, it’s sort of easy to understand why. It’s a book about sex, all different kinds of sex, written in an age-appropriate way for a middle school audience, with illustrations. Ideally, every child would be learning about safer sex and healthy relationships at home, but many aren’t. Plus, the far right has systematically attacked and undermined sex education for decades.¹⁶

Age-appropriate books and curriculum about health and safety provide vital information to students and can even be lifesaving for some. One story about *It’s Perfectly Normal* stopped me in my tracks.¹⁷ A 10-year-old girl at the library with her mother checked out a copy of the book. Eventually, the girl showed her mom the chapter on sexual abuse and said, “This is me.” The girl was being sexually abused by her father, and the book gave her a way to tell her mom what was happening. When the father was convicted, the judge in the case said, “There were heroes in this case. One was the child, and the other was the book.”¹⁸ Robie Harris, in retelling the story, said the girl’s mother was also a hero for listening to her daughter. And the librarian who ordered the book was a hero, too.

Banned books save lives. When we ban books, we take away power from parents to decide what information they do or don’t want their children to have access to. Banning books is anti-democratic and anti-American. That’s why the majority of Americans oppose the government legislating what can or cannot be in schoolbooks.¹⁹ And a majority of Americans “oppose efforts to have books removed from their local public libraries because some people find them offensive or inappropriate and do not think young people should be exposed to them.”²⁰

We just want kids to read and learn and think for themselves. We want to help them learn how to think, not what to think. Because that’s fundamental to their development and to a healthy democracy.

We Want Kids to Understand the Idea of Democracy

The far right has convinced many Americans that our democracy is broken because they *actually want to break our democracy*. And it might be working. Even before Trump and his supporters tried to overthrow our democracy, a 2017 poll found that almost a quarter of Americans said they would prefer a system of government in which a “strong leader” could make decisions without interference from other branches of government.²¹ A 2024 poll was even more ominous.²² Over 60 percent of respondents agreed with the phrase “What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.” One in four respondents strongly agreed. Most respondents also agreed our nation has to “smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs” and “silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas.” These are authoritarian-primed perspectives.

Democracy is an idea. It only continues to exist if we believe in it and understand it. Foreign policy leader Richard Haass observes, “One major reason that American identity is fracturing is that we are failing to teach one another what it means to be American. We are not tied together by a single religion, race, or ethnicity. Instead, America is organized around a set of ideas that needs to be

What Is Fascism?

Fascism is an approach to politics that rejects independent critical thinking and instead mobilizes people around fear and rage—which makes them more receptive to strongmen leaders who then strip away collective rights and freedoms. Fascists construct an extreme story of us versus them, replacing facts and critical thinking with propaganda that romanticizes the nation’s past while casting ethnic, religious, and social minorities as fundamental threats to that nation’s present and future. That scapegoating whips up not only resentment but also dehumanization and violence. Meanwhile, freedom and democracy decline. As do pluralism and a sense of community.

While there are important, subtle distinctions between fascism, authoritarianism, oligarchy, anti-government extremism, and the far right, in practice at this moment in history these forces and others are conspiring to destroy our public education system and, with it, the building blocks of opportunity for all. Which exact word we use isn’t as important as the warning. I will use these terms and others interchangeably because the attacks they are launching on our education system, our students, and our teachers are interchangeable and interconnected.

Today, fascism is an amalgam of people who either outright oppose diversity and pluralism, want to shrink government as much as possible, or both. Whether they’re motivated by ideology or plain greed, what fascists and oligarchs and autocrats of all sorts have in common is that they don’t want to solve problems. They want to create problems so they can exploit our anger and fear—to give themselves more power and more money, and take power and opportunity away from ordinary citizens. That’s it. That’s their whole playbook.

—R. W.

articulated again and again to survive. It is thus essential that every American gets a grounding in civics—the country’s political structures and traditions, along with what is owed to and expected of its citizens—starting in elementary school.”²³ In other words, what makes us Americans isn’t a singular identity or a singular ideology but a shared belief in democracy and the freedom and liberty for all that democracy creates. That belief is our shared creed.

Remember, the first official motto of the United States—still emblazoned on our nation’s seal and most of our currency—is *e pluribus unum*.²⁴ Out of many, one. Fascists and oligarchs want to divide us—attacking those who are different and turning us against each other so they can destroy America’s democracy and hand disproportionate power to a few of their chosen elites. But know that we, the people, believe in the promise of our nation—that *all of us* are created equal—and that working together while thinking for ourselves is the essence of American liberty. And who helps each and every one of us learn how to work together and think critically? Public school teachers. Public school teachers strengthen democracy.



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Ryan Richman is a high school history teacher at Timberlane Regional High School in Plaistow, New Hampshire.²⁵ He tries to engage his students by showing how historical events relate to and inform the present, often by bringing current events into his classroom. So he gives his students a weekly assignment—to find something in the news and bring it to class, prepared to talk about how that current news event relates to history. According to Ryan, most of the stories his students bring in are about oppression. Those are the current events that catch their attention. “They’re about the Rohingya genocide, they’re about the Uyghur genocide, which are going on right this second,” says Ryan. “They’re about Black Lives Matter.” He’s responding to his students’ interest and helping them make connections with national and world events of yesteryear.

Before his second presidency, during which Trump unleashed an all-out attack on “diversity, equity, and inclusion” as a misinformation-fueled smear to destabilize public education writ large, in September 2020, during his first presidency, Trump signed an executive order banning what he called “divisive concepts” in diversity training within federal agencies.²⁶ With that cue, Republican legislators in at least 20 states introduced “divisive concepts” laws to restrict how teachers discuss inequality and injustice.

New Hampshire passed one such law in 2021. The law itself was convoluted and vague, mandating among other things that students not be “taught, instructed, inculcated, or compelled” to believe “that one’s age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, creed, color, marital status, familial status, mental or physical disability, religion or national origin is inherently superior to people of another” or that any person might be “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.”²⁷ So would talking about the Rohingya genocide and tying it to other ethnic cleansing campaigns in history violate the law or not? It wasn’t remotely clear. In fact, the vagueness of the law was the point—to sow confusion about what could or could not be taught and thus create a broad chilling effect.

When the New Hampshire law was passed, the state education commissioner created a website encouraging the public to file complaints accusing teachers of violating the statute.²⁸ And the far-right organization Moms for Liberty literally pledged a \$500 bounty “for the person that first successfully catches a public school teacher breaking this law.”²⁹ As the *New Hampshire Bulletin* noted, “The new teaching law comes as social studies classes have embraced new teaching methods. Gone is the strategy of rote memorization of dates and battle names. In its place is a model by which students lead discussion of thorny historical issues, and use research to arrive at their own conclusions.”³⁰ This “inquiry method” is meant to emphasize critical thinking. But laws like the one in New Hampshire discourage encouraging students to debate and discuss and think for themselves.

Would the New Hampshire law mean that Ryan’s students couldn’t discuss a topic like affirmative action and the recent Supreme Court decision, which was not only in the news but affecting them as soon-to-be college applicants? What if they were debating the topic? If a teacher shared research data showing the benefits of affirmative action, would that violate the law? What if the teacher were overseeing a class discussion where a student criticized affirmative action and the goal of racial justice? Would that break the law?

In 2021, Ryan and two other New Hampshire public school teachers joined with two parents to sue the state, arguing that the law was unconstitutionally vague and would make it impossible to comply with New Hampshire state education laws that require all schools teach about “intolerance, bigotry, antisemitism and national, ethnic, racial or religious hatred and discrimination [that] have evolved in the past, and can evolve, into genocide and mass violence.”³¹ The brief filed in their lawsuit went on to state:

New Hampshire law thus requires students to examine—and it follows that teachers shall provide the instruction for students to learn—controversial events from multiple perspectives and ideologies and learn to defend and challenge differing views on a wide variety of topics. In short, New Hampshire state law promises to develop students into well-rounded, well-educated young adults who are prepared to embrace all the challenges, complexities, privileges and responsibilities of American citizenship, who are prepared to live in an increasingly diverse world, and who can compete successfully in the New Hampshire, national and global economies.³²

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In other words, historically, New Hampshire's education laws not only encouraged but mandated that students be equipped with critical-thinking skills. But the politically motivated "divisive concepts" law wanted to censor teachers and control not just what students learn but what they think. The vagueness of the law was the point—so teachers never knew what was and wasn't permissible.

In May 2024, a federal judge ruled that the anti-critical thinking law was unconstitutional. US District Judge Paul J. Barbadoro wrote that the law amounted to "viewpoint-based restrictions" that were so vague they would open the door to "arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement."³³

As a final exam question, Ryan often shares a passage from writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. It was Wiesel who said, when receiving the Nobel Prize, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides."³⁴ In their final essays, Ryan asks his students to reflect on Wiesel's insights on bystanderism in the context of present-day events. And Ryan says that his students—the liberal ones, the conservative ones, and all the students in between—often draw connections to racial oppression in the United States. They're thinking critically about the present and the past and making those links. Which, frankly, we want them to do, right? We don't want the leaders of tomorrow to forget about the mistakes of the past—lest they repeat them.

We history teachers have a saying—that "past is prologue." We have to talk about—and think critically about—all aspects of history, honestly, fully, with all perspectives reflected and debated, so that we create well-rounded, informed, thoughtful citizens armed with the skills of critical thinking. That's the point. That's what teachers do. Ryan Richman adds, "I won't be badgered into whitewashing the experience that my students deserve."³⁵ I stand with Ryan and every other teacher in America committed to the dispassionate teaching of honest history and developing the muscle of critical thinking among our nation's young people.

Public schools are more than physical structures. They are the manifestation of our civic values and ideals. The belief that in a free society, free education must be available and accessible to all. The idea that young people deserve opportunities to prepare for life, college, career, and citizenship.

The understanding that, in a pluralistic society such as ours, people with different beliefs and backgrounds must learn to work together and bridge differences. And the principle, as the Founders believed, that an educated citizenry is essential to protect our democracy from demagogues.

It is, however, undeniable that a powerful group of autocrats, oligarchs, and far-right extremists is trying to undermine our nation's values by questioning what we teach and defunding and demeaning our public schools. They attack diversity, equity, and inclusion because they inherently believe some people are more worthy than others. They want to pit Americans against each other while they hoard all the wealth and power for a handful of elites. They want to dismantle the US Department of Education to gut opportunity. They give taxpayer money to private schools and religious schools because they want to defund public schools. They attack critical thinking and rail against "indoctrination" because they want to control what all of us learn and think. And they foment culture wars to distract us from the all-out war they are waging on the American dream. They do not want to help students or help schools. They want to end public education as we know it. Fascists and autocrats fear what teachers do because they know their brand of greed, hierarchy, and extremism cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.

Fascists fear teachers because they know their brand of greed, hierarchy, and extremism cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.

Americans want a better life and more opportunity, not less. They want to be treated with dignity and respect, and they want the same for others, too. From my lifetime of working with Americans across the political spectrum, I know this to be true. We are in a profoundly consequential fight between fear and hope, between anger and aspiration, between chaos and community. And I know, with every fiber of my being, that hope and aspiration and community always win—when we fight for them. Yes, the story of America has included too many dark chapters enabled by our worst impulses. But what makes our nation great isn't that we've always been perfect but that we have fought for justice and have learned from our mistakes—that just as our forebearers forged a new nation to improve upon the one they fought for freedom, so too did our grandparents and our great-grandparents fight to make America more just, more fair, more equitable, more inclusive. An America of boundless opportunity. An America where the next generation has a pathway to the American dream. Just like we, in this moment, must fight for those values and that vision—and educate our children and grandchildren so that they, too, can continue to write the story of America that continues to reach toward hope and aspiration and opportunity and liberty and justice for all. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/weingarten_book.

The Trump Administration Is Trying to Wreck Our Democracy

WE CAN FIGHT BACK

By Ruth Ben-Ghiat



On June 14, more than five million people rallied in about 2,000 "No Kings" protests, including this one in Philadelphia.

We are living through historic times, when the global clash between democracy and autocracy is coming to a head. Authoritarianism is ascendent and now governs over 70 percent of the world's population.¹ The United States has become a key front of this struggle between tyranny and freedom, with President Donald Trump's administration taking unprecedented actions to transition America from a democracy to an autocracy.

My specialty as a historian is authoritarian leaders. As my most recent book, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*, demonstrates through detailed analysis of 17 authoritarian leaders over the last 100 years—including Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Italy's Benito Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and the United States' Donald Trump—authoritarians share key traits and tactics. They capitalize on polarization, resentment, and uncertainty to take power, and then they stay in power with a toxic mix of propaganda, corruption, machismo, and violence.²

This essay focuses on the infusion of propaganda into education and attacks on medicine, science, and child welfare to underscore how the Trump administration seeks not only to destroy our political system of democracy in the present but also to create the conditions for future American societal decline. Educators, healthcare professionals, and activists in the United States have a special role to play in pushing back against this agenda.

The Stakes of Our Authoritarian Moment

Authoritarianism may be defined as the expansion of executive power and the personal power of the head of state to the detriment of the independence of the judiciary and other branches of government. That way the executive becomes beyond the reach of law and, along with close allies, can plunder the workforce, the environment, women's bodies, and the economy.³

Since January 20, the Trump government has sought to crush democratic rights and institutions, intimidate the media and individuals who dissent from its policies, and destroy oversight and inspection mechanisms meant to hold government officials accountable.⁴ It has in addition imposed a white Christian nationalist purity agenda with roots that go back to the fascist era.⁵ That agenda entails detaining, disappearing, and disenfranchising the "wrong" people (nonwhite immigrants and US citizens⁶) and encouraging the "right" people to produce more children for the state.⁷

This sober summary does not, however, capture the Trump administration's ultimate goal: to wreck the United States as a democratic power so that the autocrats Trump is allied with can flourish. "If you have a smart president, they're not enemies," Trump said of Russia, China, and North Korea at a campaign rally in Virginia in June 2024. "You'll make them do great."⁸ And how do you make them "do great"? By taking down their greatest adversary, a country with the world's most powerful military and an economy that at the end of 2024 was seen as "the envy of the world."⁹

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The magnitude of this task is why the Trump administration has acted with dizzying speed on all fronts. In its first few months, the administration laid the foundations for the advent of mass distress, hardship, and disease. Wrecking the state by authorizing Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency to colonize and impede the operation of federal agencies; banning books; pulling federal funding from research; abandoning established public health and medical protocols; and defunding disaster response, climate crisis mitigation, and humanitarian and social assistance to children, the elderly, and other vulnerable populations.¹⁰ All of this will set the United States back decades.



ALLISON BAILEY / NURPHOTO VIA AP

After David Huerta, a California labor leader, was arrested in Los Angeles while protesting an immigration raid, demonstrators in Washington, DC, demanded his freedom on June 9.

In the "upside-down world" of authoritarianism, lies become official dogma, and truth-tellers are discredited, locked up, or killed.

Authoritarians think big and long term. What the war on education and the war on medicine, science, and child welfare have in common is that both degrade the population of the future, creating the potential for America to become a second- or third-rate power.

The War on Education: Gaining Power Through Propaganda

To understand why education is targeted by authoritarians, we need to view propaganda in a broader frame. It's about not only getting people to believe individual lies—say, that Jews are taking over the world or that Trump won the 2020 election—but also changing the public's worldview on many subjects. That's why basic concepts of diplomacy, health, and education take on new meanings as a country loses its democracy and the "upside-down world" of authoritarianism comes into being.¹¹ In that world, lies become official dogma, and truth-tellers and those who labor on behalf of the enlightenment and well-being of humanity—including educators, librarians, and journalists—are discredited, locked up, or killed.

This view of propaganda as a way to influence behavior and thought means that autocrats don't just shut down intellectual freedom and change learning content to reinforce their ideological agendas. They also remake educational institutions into places that reward intolerance, conformism, suspicion, and other values and behaviors authoritarians require. Far from being "ivory towers" closed off from society, educational institutions are often frontline targets of those who seek to destroy democracy. What happens in and around classrooms reflects—and often anticipates—transformations of societies as authoritarianism takes hold.

The regime of Italy's Benito Mussolini (1925–43) provided the template for right-wing authoritarian actions against faculty, staff, and students deemed political enemies.¹² Leftists, liberals, and anyone who spoke out against the fascists were sent to prison or forced into exile. Since most schools and universities were public, most professors and researchers were civil servants and could be pressured through bureaucratic means. First came a 1931 loyalty oath to the king and fascism, then a 1932 requirement to join the National Fascist Party to apply for jobs or promotions. Student informers monitored their peers and teachers, recording any critical remarks or anti-regime jokes, and new student organizations inculcated fascist values.

In the Cold War era, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, who seized power through a 1973 US-backed coup, claimed that universities were hotbeds of Marxism and targeted them for "cleansing."¹³ This entailed the closure of ideologically objectionable departments, such as philosophy, and the purging of tens of thousands of students, faculty, and staff in the first few years of the regime (thousands were also sent from universities to prison, as were many other Chileans). Under this military dictatorship, civilian university rectors were replaced with military officials. Air Force General César Ruiz Danyau announced his arrival as rector of the University of Chile in Santiago by parachuting onto campus. The public school system was starved of funds and, in tandem with the neoliberal economic policies* introduced in Chile, was partly privatized, leaving the very poor without means of education.¹⁴

Today's right-wing autocrats mostly come to power through elections and extinguish freedom slowly, as Viktor Orbán has done in Hungary. Yet, the education sector continues to be the target of leaders who seek to eradicate free thinking and turn campuses into sites where surveillance by the state, through the presence of student, faculty, and staff informers, creates an environment of mistrust and fear. Like his fellow far-right strongmen, Orbán aims to discredit and dismantle all liberal and democratic models of education to produce a new authoritarian-friendly population. As someone who grew up under communism, Orbán knows the power of political socialization. He also knows that universities have always been sites of resistance to authoritarianism, and so he has placed some universities under the authority of "public trusts" run by his cronies.¹⁵

The crusade of Trump and the Republican Party against LGBTQIA+ representation in educational materials has a precedent in Hungarian policies. A 2018 ban on gender studies pre-

ceded the end of legal recognition of transgender and intersex people in 2020.¹⁶ In 2021, a law outlawed any depiction or discussion of LGBTQIA+ identities or sexual orientation.¹⁷

This was followed by a crackdown on *anyone* in the educational sector who dissented from the state. A 2023 measure dubbed the "revenge law" has punished teachers, staff, and students who protest against low pay and disappearing intellectual freedoms.¹⁸ These people have been protesting because Orbán has slowly defunded public education, subtracting 16 percent from its budget over the past decade, while Hungary already has a dire teacher shortage.¹⁹

This law, which Hungarian opposition politician and European Parliament member Katalin Cseh called "a brutally oppressive tool" to elicit "compliance with a police state apparatus designed to silence them," has placed educational policy under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, which is also in charge of law enforcement.²⁰ It allows the state to monitor teachers' laptops and video-record their classrooms. No wonder a protest in front of Hungarian Parliament spelled out the word "future" in melting ice.²¹ Educators and their students see their possibilities vanishing, and thousands of teachers have resigned.



Benito Mussolini, Italy's fascist leader from 1925 to 1943 (shown giving a speech in 1936), had student informers on college campuses.

Autocrats remake educational institutions into places that reward intolerance, conformism, and suspicion.

Hungary matters because its policies directly inspired the educational and other precepts of Project 2025 (the far-right policy playbook that the Trump administration is following²²) as well as US state-level efforts to re-engineer education in an authoritarian key. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has been influenced by Orbán's policies regarding the press, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and education. The remaking of Florida's New College as a model of far-right pedagogy† takes a page from Orbán's crusade against

*See page 30 for "Neoliberalism, Inequality, and Reclaiming Education for Democracy," an article that defines neoliberalism as "capitalism on steroids" and describes how it increases inequality.

†To learn about the attack on New College, see "Defending Academic Freedom" by Patricia Okker, New College's former president, in the Fall 2024 issue of *American Educator*. aft.org/ae/fall2024/okker.



Left: Lighting a candle in 1998 to remember those who disappeared during the reign of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Right: Protesting attacks on Central European University by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2017.

Central European University, which had to move from Budapest to Vienna to continue operating. In 2023, a Florida House bill would have barred Florida's public colleges and universities from offering gender studies, critical race studies, and queer studies—and an ambiguous version of that bill, designed to stand up to legal challenges and strike fear in educators, became law.²³

"Florida could start looking a lot like Hungary," commented Michelle Goldberg (a *New York Times* opinion columnist) in 2023.²⁴ The Trump administration has been able to move quickly with federal-level action in 2025 because states such as Florida have been testing grounds for the removal of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) from educational curricula and policy. Now the entire United States could follow the Hungarian model, but on a far more destructive scale, starting with Trump's executive order to abolish the US Department of Education.²⁵

The War on Knowledge: Discrediting Librarians and Teachers

To speed the transition to autocracy, it helps to discredit authorities associated with public spaces, such as libraries and schools, that encourage intellectual curiosity and democratic values. This is why public and school libraries, along with librarians and teachers, are always targeted by authoritarian parties and governments.

Public libraries and public schools are places where people of all backgrounds, political beliefs, and economic situations gather. Libraries have long been cited by social scientists as spaces that bolster civic life and encourage community: they combat polarization, disinformation, and isolation.²⁶ School and public libraries also have long provided refuge to people of all ages with difficult home situations, and librarians and teachers can become trusted mentors and guides. This can bring them into conflict with authoritarian parties and governments that wish to indoctrinate youth, extend their control over the family, and discourage independent and critical thinking. That's why whenever authoritarians are ascendent, and books become threatening objects, author-

ity figures who recommend and read books are singled out for harassment or worse.

In the United States, myriad state laws and book bans seek to remove the history of white racism, slavery, and fascist genocides as appropriate subjects of study, along with writings about LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences—particularly from school libraries.²⁷ Carolyn Foote, a retired Texas librarian and co-founder of the advocacy group FReadom Fighters, notes that when school districts pull books off shelves without following a clear process for reviewing them, they are "breaking that contract of trust" with parents, teachers, and students and degrading professional ethics.²⁸ The authoritarians' goal is not just to create a hostile work environment for library and teaching staff but also to pressure administrators to submit to corrupt tactics such as banning books on spurious grounds and accepting slanderous speech used against their colleagues.

For the same reason, authoritarians organize personal attacks on library employees and teachers, such as accusations that they are "groomers" who encourage inappropriate behaviors and relationships with the children they serve.²⁹ It also lies behind the frightening attempts to criminalize librarians.³⁰ In Clinton Township, New Jersey, in 2022, the police department received a request for criminal charges to be brought against librarians whose institution had a book with "obscene" content.³¹ This, too, is an imported tactic. The attempt to associate LGBTQIA+ individuals and their allies with pedophilia is an established strategy among the global right, including in Orbán's Hungary.³²

Unsurprisingly, many librarians have left their jobs, either resigning or being fired for refusing to remove books from their collections.³³ In some small towns, like Vinton, Iowa, the consequences have been serious indeed: the Vinton library endured the now-usual attacks by activists objecting to its LGBTQIA+ staff and its displays of LGBTQIA+ books, and the library itself has had to close for lack of staffing. "We couldn't function correctly as a library," former Vinton Library Director Janette McMahon said

about why she left her job.³⁴ Undermining and discrediting institutions such as libraries and exhausting those who stand up for professional ethics and pluralism are how you degrade democracy.

Authoritarian claims on children are also why librarians and teachers are subjected to attacks from “parental rights” advocates. During Joe Biden’s presidency, far-right parents promoted parental rights to discredit schools seen as incubators of democratic values and common-sense public health protocols (masks and vaccines against disease).³⁵ For Mike Pompeo, who served as secretary of state during Trump’s first term, parental rights was a bludgeon to discredit teachers’ authority and disenfranchise them from decision-making. “I think parents should decide what their children are taught in schools,” Pompeo tweeted in October 2021.³⁶ Now that Trump is back in office, the parental rights crowd (which includes Vice President JD Vance) is backing privatization of schools and Christian homeschooling—anything to get children away from the multi-faith, multi-racial communities of public schools.³⁷

The War on Medicine, Science, and Child Welfare: Wrecking the United States’ Future

Like the use of propaganda, much of what the second Trump administration is doing tracks with authoritarian tradition. Since the days of fascism and early communism, autocrats have wanted to reshape government and society in their own image.³⁸ This has meant destroying institutions as they have been understood democratically, giving them different purposes and staffing them with loyalists who do the bidding of the leader and close allies.³⁹

Yet the Trump administration’s crusade to wreck the United States’ prestigious science, medicine, and research sectors, seemingly as fast as possible, is unusual within the history of authoritarianism. Science and medicine are almost always politicized as autocracies grow more extreme. The history of Nazi racial science and the Soviet practice of deploying mental health professionals to have dissenters committed to psychiatric institutions are two examples.⁴⁰ Yet most dictatorships proceed gradually in this area, and they often expand social welfare programs, including medical care, to win over the population—at least until state corruption and the costs of hiring incompetent loyalists to key administrative positions undermine service.

An administration *starting out* with a conspiracy theorist as secretary of Health and Human Services is uncommon. Also uncommon are the immediate planned destruction of child welfare programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, speedy bans on discussions of racial bias and other social determinants of health, and the resolve brought to pulling federal money for research and curtailing the work of America’s most prestigious institutions, such as the National Institutes of Health.

While these attacks opportunistically play on lingering fear and resentment from the COVID-19 pandemic, they are also intended to undermine the concept of expertise. Physician Dhruv Khullar is correct to frame the damage this administration is doing to medical training and biomedical innovation as “subversion.”⁴¹ Engineering the isolation⁴² of the country from beneficial circuits of trade and knowledge exchange that support medical and scientific research also harms American prosperity. Arresting international students and detaining foreign scholars speed the United States’ removal from intercultural networks and educational and scientific collaborations.⁴³



President Trump signed the so-called Big Beautiful Bill on July 4, a cruel law that slashes funding for healthcare, food assistance, public schools, and colleges to pay for tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy.

Educators can be on the frontlines as we take our country back from those who wish to silence and intimidate us.

The degradation of public health and fact-based knowledge, along with state intervention in family politics, converges in the tragic attacks on child welfare being waged by the Trump administration.⁴⁴ There is no better example of this government’s zealous efforts to wreck the United States’ future than the aggressions directed at children’s rights to learn and to grow up healthy and safe.

Two recent articles characterized this crusade as a “war on children,” sharing stories of purposeful cuts to services that provide children with food, instruction, and medical care and protect them from exploitation, abuse, and neglect.⁴⁵ Even programs to investigate missing children are on the chopping block, as are children’s services offices inside of the US Department of Justice as well as the US Department of Health and Human Services.

Research shows that government spending on children’s health and on education “offer some of the highest returns on investment,”⁴⁶ but that only holds if your aims are democratic. The goal here seems to be to create multiple challenges to childhood development through exposure to disease, environmental pollutants, and gun violence, coupled with rescinding funds for care and protection, including Social Services Block Grant program funds. In the Trump administration’s quest to produce a collective failure to thrive, no area has been neglected: even farm-to-school programs, which provide fresh meat and produce to schools, are at risk due to the administration canceling grants from the US Department of Agriculture.⁴⁷

There is a logic that unites these measures: a holistic plan to destroy our nation so that its enemies—Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping among them—can prosper. No wonder *The Economist* recently ran a story on how Trump could “make China great again” at America’s expense.⁴⁸ The only parallels for this are measures imposed by leaders of puppet states that were created

by foreign occupations; those leaders were often treated as traitors after those puppet states ended.

Striking Back on Behalf of Democracy and Our Children's Futures

Although I have painted a grim picture in this essay, I am optimistic for the long term. In their authoritarian arrogance, the destroyers of America have not realized that a reckoning will come. In his first 100 days back in office, the president's popularity had already begun to sink.⁴⁹ We are in the early stages, but soon the real-world, everyday-life effects of the disruption and corruption perpetrated by this government will be impossible to ignore. This will start to open the eyes of many.

It will be Americans' turn to discover the hard truth that autocrats have no interest in public welfare, "good governance," or governance at all. They transform their public positions into vehicles for private enrichment and turn political institutions and the press into instruments for amassing so much power that they will not have to leave office. In the end, they are hated by the majority of the population. Many of them meet a bad end because, rather than promote collective well-being, autocrats produce mass suffering and sometimes mass death as well.⁵⁰

Educators and healthcare professionals, who keenly feel the effects of corruption and politicization, can be vital communicators to the public of this hard-earned wisdom. And organizations such as the AFT and its thousands of affiliates can be key in the mass mobilizations to come, when enough Americans have understood the situation to participate in collective actions, whether that means a general strike or sustained nonviolent protest.⁵¹ Educators and healthcare professionals can be on the frontlines as we take our country back from those who wish to silence

and intimidate us while they make our children less informed and less protected from pathogens and predators.

More broadly, the history of resistance suggests that pro-democracy movements that claim the mantle of moral authority and show care and solidarity in the face of plunder and violence can have an impact. In fact, even a tiny percentage of the population—often just 3.5 percent, according to one study of successful civil resistance movements—can make a difference if they mobilize on behalf of democratic values in situations of tyranny.⁵²

Creating a big-tent opposition movement that includes progressive faith traditions and organized labor—two sectors of civil society that privilege values-guided action—is key. Joining with others, we transform our individual righteous indignation into a potent moral force for good.

Other actions can take place at the individual level, such as having conversations with family and community members who support Trump and the MAGA movement and explicitly raising with them questions of dignity and decency and the ruination of our children's futures. As the government paralysis deepens and affects everyday life, these conversations will likely become easier.

Each time we show solidarity with others or support those who are protecting the rule of law, helping the targeted, or exposing lies and corruption, we are standing up for democratic values of justice, accountability, equality, and more. In doing so, we model the behaviors the authoritarian state wants us to abandon. This is especially important for those of us who work as educators and organizers alongside young people, who may look to us as mentors and moral guides. A reckoning will come for this corrupt and cruel administration; when it does, we can be on the right side of history. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/ben-ghiat.



On April 5, people in New York City—and across the country—held “Hands Off” rallies to protest attacks by the Trump administration.

Economic Inequality Threatens Democracy



By Eli G. Rau and Susan Stokes

In the mid-20th century, democracies around the world were descending into authoritarianism—descents sparked by military coups. Today, military coups have become much less common, yet the threats to democracy have not abated. They now come in a different form: democratic erosion (also known as democratic backsliding).

Democratic erosion is a process by which elected leaders gradually dismantle democracy from the inside, aggrandizing executive powers and weakening institutions of accountability. Backsliding leaders harass the press, reduce the independence of the courts, defy legislative oversight, and undercut the public's confidence in elections. In recent years, democracy has eroded in countries as varied as Brazil, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States.¹

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Studies of democratic stability during the era of coups told us that wealthy and old democracies were the most resilient.² And yet, the United States—the world's oldest democracy, and one of its wealthiest—has shown new cracks in recent years. In 2016, the country elected a president who routinely attacked the free press, threatened to jail his political opponents, and expressed a consistent disdain for democratic norms in both his words and actions. He undermined confidence in elections by continually insisting that electoral fraud was widespread. When he lost the election in 2020, and even when he won the election but lost the popular vote in 2016, he maintained that the elections had been engineered through massive fraud.

During Donald Trump's first term as president of the United States, many debated whether his election—and his subsequent eroding of democracy—was merely a fluke or something with more structural roots. Older models of democratic decay, which pinpointed low levels of economic development and a recent transition to democracy as risk factors, did not square with American democracy being in jeopardy. Indeed, some scholars argued that the threats to US democracy were overstated. Just two years ago, one model suggested that the "probability of democratic breakdown in the US is extremely low" and estimated that in 2015, US democracy faced less than a 1 in 3,000 chance of degrading to the level of Hungary.³ Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has eroded judicial

independence, consolidated control of media outlets to promote propaganda and suppress dissenting voices, taken control of state universities, and changed electoral laws to favor his Fidesz party. At the same time, his government has targeted asylum seekers and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and corruption has skyrocketed.⁴

Our research shows that recent democratic decay in the United States is not a fluke—and the risk of further democratic decline is serious. Although the United States is often thought to be immune to democratic instability, it is not an outlier among countries experiencing democratic backsliding. In fact, it looks a lot like other eroding democracies in the 21st century. Today, the key structural factor that predicts democratic erosion is not wealth or economic growth or the age of the democracy: it is economic inequality. Highly unequal democracies are far more likely to erode than those in which income and wealth are distributed more equally.

Predicting Erosion

Where and when does democracy erode? The first step in answering this question is determining what features qualify a democracy as “eroding.” How do we distinguish between system-threatening executive aggrandizement (attempts to erode democracy) and more conventional executive overreach of the sort that could happen in any democracy? Recently, scholars have identified cases of erosion by tracking trends in horizontal and vertical accountability.⁵ A healthy democracy depends on heads of government—presidents and prime ministers—being constrained by voters (providing vertical accountability) and by the courts and the legislature, among others (providing horizontal accountability).

Expert surveys carried out by the Varieties of Democracy project allowed researchers to identify 23 distinct periods of erosion in 22 countries between 1995 and 2022. These countries are Benin, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Hungary, India, Mexico, Moldova, Nicaragua, North Macedonia, the Philippines (twice), Poland, Senegal, Serbia, South Africa, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States, Venezuela, and Zambia.⁶

What differentiates countries that have experienced erosion from those that have not (such as Canada, Finland, and Portugal⁷)? Are there factors that tell us that a democracy is more at risk of backsliding in one time period than in another? To answer these questions, we analyzed data from democracies around the world. We included information that generations of researchers have demonstrated help to predict military coups, including national wealth (gross domestic product per capita) and the age of the democracy (the number of years since a country became democratic and remained so, without interruption). We also included measures of economic inequality (including disparities in income and wealth). Inequality was not a highly reliable predictor of democratic vulnerability in the 20th century, when the threat was mostly military coups. But the connections (discussed below) between inequality and partisan polarization, and between inequality and public skepticism about institutions, made us suspect that democracies with especially big gaps between the rich and the poor might be prone to eroding.

We also suspected that backsliding by leaders is, in a sense, contagious. Backsliders often draw inspiration from other such leaders around the world. Hugo Chávez, for example, began his first term in 1999 by orchestrating a rewriting of the Venezuelan Constitution; his tactic was adopted by Latin American leaders who would erode

their own democracies, such as Ecuador’s Rafael Correa in 2008 and Bolivia’s Evo Morales in 2009. Viktor Orbán began his drive to undermine Hungarian democracy in 2010. President Trump openly admired Orbán in 2019 when the two met; he claimed the Hungarian leader as his “twin.”⁸ On January 8, 2023, supporters of Brazil’s recently defeated president, Jair Bolsonaro, stormed the National Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace, convinced that the election had been “stolen” from Bolsonaro. The insurrection bore a striking resemblance to the January 6, 2021, riots by Trump supporters in the United States. The implication is that over time, erosion becomes increasingly likely: for each democracy that erodes, other aspiring autocrats around the world have more examples to draw from to undermine democracy.

Although the United States is often thought to be immune to democratic instability, it looks a lot like other eroding democracies in the 21st century.



Income and wealth inequality are highly robust predictors of where and when democratic erosion will take place.

Our analyses of these international data produced a consistent picture. In the 21st century, the key feature that distinguishes eroding democracies from those that hold strong is economic inequality. Income inequality is a highly robust predictor of where and when democratic erosion will take place. So is inequality in levels of wealth—that is, differences not just in income but in people’s overall economic assets. Either way, in more than 100 statistical models we ran, inequality was consistently related to the chances of erosion.

Some of the factors that had been shown in prior research to predict coups were less important in predicting democratic backsliding by way of power-aggrandizing elected leaders. National income per capita played a role but a smaller and less consistent one than inequality. And being an old, long-established democ-

racy did little to protect democracies from the recent wave of erosion. By contrast, in the 20th century, older democracies were virtually immune to being toppled in military coups.

The figure below illustrates the relationship between income inequality and the risk of erosion. Where income inequality is low, the predicted probability of democratic erosion is near zero. But where inequality rises, the threat of erosion skyrockets—reaching a 30 percent chance in the most unequal democracies.

For the estimates presented in the figure, we measure inequality with the Gini coefficient. The Gini coefficient takes a full distribution of incomes (or assets when examining wealth) in a given population and summarizes the level of inequality with a single number: higher values indicate greater inequality. In brief, we calculate it by ordering individuals in a population from lowest to highest income, then measuring the cumulative share of income earned by the bottom X percent of the population. In a situation of perfect equality, this cumulative share of income would be equivalent to the share of the population (50 percent of the population earns 50 percent of the total income, 95 percent of the population earns 95 percent of the total income, etc.). The Gini coefficient measures how much the actual income distribution deviates from this situation of perfect equality.*

This finding—that inequality robustly predicts democratic erosion—is not sensitive to the particular measure of inequality we use. In the figure, we looked at actual income after taxes and assistance from social safety net programs (like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), but the results were similar when we looked at wealth inequality and at the share of wealth or income concentrated among the top 1, 10, or 50 percent of the population. Across each of these metrics, higher inequality is associated with a higher risk of erosion. The greater the share of income going to—or wealth controlled by—the top 1 percent (or the top 10 or 50 percent), the greater the likelihood of backsliding.

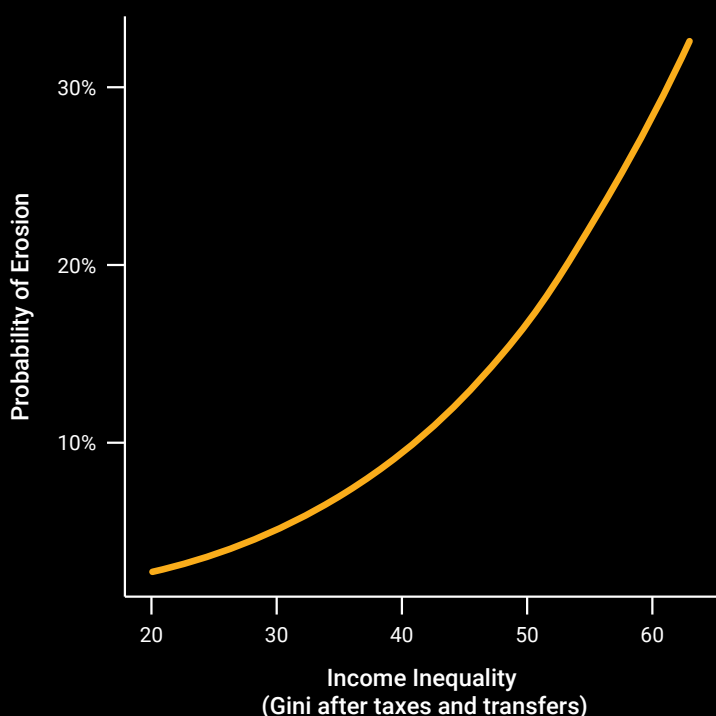
Inequality and Polarization

Having observed that unequal countries are more prone to erosion, what are the mechanisms linking inequality to erosion? Why are unequal democracies more likely to erode? One of the key factors is polarization.

Specifically, there is great risk in *affective polarization*, a phenomenon in which individuals grow to detest members of opposing political parties.⁹ A central feature of affective polarization is that political identities become social identities. This is distinct from, say, *ideological polarization*—a measure of how far apart two parties are on policy positions. In an affectively polarized society, political affiliations take on a larger role in interpersonal relationships. People sort themselves into opposing camps and

*Here are additional details to visualize what the Gini coefficient means. We first order individuals in a population from lowest to highest income. We then create a graph, marking on the x-axis the cumulative share of the population (following this lowest-to-highest-income ordering) and on the y-axis the cumulative share of income earned by the bottom X percent of the population. If there were perfect equality, the graph would show a 45-degree line ($x = y$): for any value X, the “bottom” X percent of income-earners receive X percent of the total income. Next, we draw the line of perfect equality and the curve representing the actual income distribution (where the bottom 95 percent of the population might only be earning, say, 60 percent of the total income)—this is called the Lorenz curve. The Gini coefficient is a measure of how far the Lorenz curve falls below the line of equality (we calculate the area between the Lorenz curve and the line of equality as a proportion of the entire area below the line of equality).

Income Inequality and Democratic Erosion



might be unwilling to engage with those who identify with a different party—or might engage with hostility. Politics becomes increasingly insular, and elections are often characterized by the fear of a despised opposing party coming to power.

Comparative research documents a robust relationship between inequality and polarization, both at the subnational level and in large cross-national studies.¹⁰ Countries with more unequal distributions of income have more polarized societies than those with more equal distributions of income; citizens living in US states with particularly high levels of inequality are more polarized than those living in states with less stark economic inequality.

In highly unequal settings, leaders can cultivate a sense of grievance among citizens who feel they have been left behind. Sometimes that grievance is aimed at economic and social elites; other times, at migrants and ethnic, racial, or religious minorities.¹¹ Political leaders in countries like Turkey, Venezuela, and the United States have taken advantage of long-term inequality to exacerbate “pernicious polarization” among the “left-behinds.”¹²

Polarization, exacerbated by economic inequality, makes democracies more vulnerable to backsliding. Voters who live in highly polarized societies are often more tolerant of attacks on democratic institutions. When facing “acute society-wide political conflicts,” the stakes of elections grow.¹³ Aspiring autocrats leverage this situation to gain power: they present voters with a choice between safeguarding democracy or avoiding the presumably dire consequences that would follow a despised opposing party coming to power. Voters thus face a tradeoff between the cost of undesirable election outcomes and the value of democracy. As politics grows more polarized, the cost of undesirable outcomes rises and begins to outweigh the value of safeguarding democratic norms.

Tear It All Down

Polarization plays a central role in democratic backsliding, yet it’s not the only factor. In fact, democracy is on the defensive even in countries where parties are weak and few citizens identify with a political party. Even in the absence of partisan polarization, democracy is vulnerable to erosion if citizens place little value on protecting their current democratic institutions (or, in some cases, actively wish to see them dismantled).

When voters come to see, or can be led to see, their institutions as deeply flawed, a kind of cynicism can set in. Voters in effect ask themselves, “Why rally to the defense of institutions that are ineffective or corrupt?” When democracy fails to deliver positive outcomes for individuals, they grow more receptive to the appeals of aspiring autocrats who denigrate democracy. Put another way, when the game seems “rigged” in favor of the ultra-wealthy elite, why bother playing by the rules anymore? We call this public mood *institutional nihilism*, which we define as the belief that a democracy’s current institutions are incapable of solving critical problems. This is often expressed in a desire to “tear down” or “burn down” existing political institutions and start over with something else.¹⁴ In theory, this inclination could lead to a push for a more fair and democratic system—tearing down the institutions that foster systemic inequality and replacing them with new institutions that generate more equal opportunities for all citizens. But in practice, institutional nihilism is often wielded effectively



In highly unequal settings, leaders can cultivate a sense of grievance among citizens who feel they have been left behind.

by aspiring autocrats who promise to tear down the current system without presenting any clear plan for something better.

Why might people living in unequal societies be prone to institutional nihilism? Rampant inequality lends itself to a sense that the economic system is unfair. Those who are struggling see others thriving. The problem, then, is not that there isn’t enough to go around; it’s that the system is generating an unfair distribution of resources and opportunities. And if the rules are unfair (in the economic system), then why bother following them (in politics)?

Research shows that people who view inequality as the result of hard work or ability tend to view it as fair;¹⁵ however, when inequality is very high, people tend to see it as unfair, and it undermines people’s belief that they live in a meritocracy.¹⁶ High inequality also tends to reduce upward economic

mobility.¹⁷ The scant prospects for upward mobility amid high inequality further contribute to a sense that the economic system is unfair and not meritocratic.¹⁸

The rhetoric of backsliding leaders leverages these feelings of unfairness and grievance. They frequently denigrate their countries' institutions with interpersonal comparisons, noting that the rich and powerful take advantage of ordinary citizens, getting rich at their expense. In the 2016 US presidential race, Trump complained that "the people getting rich off the rigged system are the people throwing their money at Hillary Clinton."¹⁹ In the context of a drive to undermine the credibility of Mexico's electoral administration body, former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador accused it of enjoying "privileges" and

"extremely high salaries." In a similar drive against the courts, he complained of having "one of the world's priciest judicial systems and one of the most inefficient. We're wasting citizens' taxes on a broken system."²⁰ According to backsliding leaders, institutions are failing because they are controlled by corrupt and nefarious actors who are indifferent or hostile to the interests of regular citizens.

Just as polarized constituents may reason that attacks on democracy are justified if they are necessary to keep the hated opposition out of power, nihilistic constituents may reason that attacks on democracy are justified given how flawed their democracy is in the first place. When backsliding leaders go after the courts, the press, the civil administration, or the electoral authorities, they can claim that they are not in fact harming a healthy democracy. Whereas autocratizing leaders' polarizing rhetoric carries the implication that the capture of power by opposing political parties would be catastrophic, their democracy-denigrating rhetoric implies that the state is already corrupt and incompetent.

As a candidate for Brazil's presidency in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro claimed that the Workers' Party "has plunged Brazil into the most absolute corruption, something never seen anywhere [else] in the world."²¹ Trump, similarly, drew a dire picture of the Democratic Party in 2018: "The Democrats have truly turned into an angry mob, bent on destroying anything or anyone in their path.... The radical Democrats, they want to raise your taxes, they want to impose socialism on our incredible nation, make it Venezuela.... They want to take away your health care.... Destroy your Second Amendment and throw open your borders to deadly and vicious gangs.... Democrats have become the party of crime."²² And in 2023, Mexico's then-President López Obrador regularly excoriated institutions, such as the federal courts, to convince the public that they were not worth saving. He asserted that Mexico's courts were "riddled with inefficiency and corruption," "taken over by white-collar crime and organized crime," and "rotten." He also attacked the people working in the judiciary, saying that they were "often influenced by money and grant protection to criminals" and were "not people characterized by honesty."²³

What's Next? And What Can Be Done?

Do eroding democracies necessarily end up as dictatorships? That has not been the case thus far. Some countries have started out as democracies, undergone a process of erosion, and ended up as full autocracies. One sign of this decay is that they end up as countries in which heads of government are not chosen in free and fair elections. Such was the trajectory of Venezuela. In 1999, it was certainly a troubled democracy, but a democracy nonetheless. A quarter-century later, the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, lost the 2024 presidential elections, probably in a landslide.²⁴ The regime claimed victory, Maduro remained in office, and his opponents are in prison and in exile.

Turkey is another country that at best teeters on the brink of full authoritarianism. Russia never became a full democracy but appeared headed in that direction, only to drift toward what is now a full dictatorship.

Yet this outcome is by no means inevitable. Backsliding leaders sometimes leave office, opening the way to a restoration of a

When democracy fails to deliver positive outcomes for individuals, they grow more receptive to aspiring autocrats who denigrate democracy.



better-functioning democracy. One route from power is by losing an election. In Poland, the conservative party (PiS) held control of the government beginning in 2015. Over the next eight years, PiS reduced the independence of the courts and the press and followed a series of strategies in the would-be autocrats playbook—but in 2023, PiS lost its parliamentary majority and hence its hold on power.²⁵ Depending on how far backsliding has gone, and on leaders' determination to cling to power even when they lose, backsliding leaders do not always respect the outcomes of elections. Trump tried to flout the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in the United States, and Bolsonaro did the same in the 2022 election in Brazil. In both cases, the courts remained sufficiently independent and respectful of the rule of law to stand up against these attempts.

Other backsliders have been forced out by their own political parties. This is what happened to the South African leader Jacob Zuma in 2018. His political party, the African National Council, forced him to resign.²⁶ Something similar happened in the United Kingdom in 2022. Prime Minister Boris Johnson had not taken his country fully down the path toward erosion. But he had sidelined the Parliament, reduced the right to protest, threatened unfriendly news outlets, and undermined the integrity of elections in the public's eye. His Conservative Party forced him to resign.²⁷

Though these paths to ousting backsliding leaders appear distinct, they both boil down to these leaders losing popular support. Trump in 2020, Bolsonaro in 2022, and PiS in 2023 all commanded insufficient electoral support to stay in office. Zuma in 2018 and Johnson in 2022 were forced out by their parties because they were viewed as likely to lead their parties to defeat should they stay in office.

A critical question, then, is what leads the public to withdraw support from backsliding leaders? We saw that institutional nihilism and polarization—and behind these two factors, income inequality—shore up backsliders' public support. Do they leave power only when confidence in institutions increases, partisan polarization ebbs, and wealth becomes more equal?

Since such progress would presumably take hold only over long periods of time, it is fortunate that the answer to the question is no. Sometimes the public turns against presidents, prime ministers, and their governments in reaction to their attacks on democracy. The arbitrary exercise of power can put voters off, especially when times are hard. In the United Kingdom, voters, including Conservative Party voters, suffered greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic. When they became aware that their prime minister and people around him flouted the restrictions that they imposed on their constituents, the hypocrisy combined with the hard times led to a caving of support for the government.

Indeed, though studies of backsliding governments have emphasized polarization and loss of confidence in institutions, backsliding leaders are often evaluated on the standard metrics of performance, especially economic performance. Trump was hurt in his 2020 reelection bid by the pandemic and the economic travails that it brought in its wake. In turn, he was aided in his 2024 reelection by voter frustration with inflation and the high cost of living.

Still, social scientists have learned a great deal about how to de-polarize people and increase their confidence in demo-

cratic institutions. On the former, a polarized public views political identities as correlated with most other aspects of their lives. The hated "other side" likes different food, wears different clothing, has a different sense of humor, etc. In fact, research shows that polarized individuals have exaggerated views of how far apart they are from opposing partisans even on matters of public policy. Exposing people to those with opposing party identities has been shown to reduce their levels of mutual animosity.²⁸

Improving income and wealth distribution turns out to be an investment in a resilient democracy.

Exposure to accurate information can also boost people's confidence in democracy and its institutions. An experiment that showed people videos of protesters suffering postelection repression in authoritarian or backsliding countries made them more favorable toward measures that would strengthen democracy, even measures that were not closely related to freedoms of speech, assembly, or protest.²⁹

We have also learned that backsliding leaders' disparaging statements about institutions can be neutralized by more accurate, positive statements. For instance, in one study, the researchers first exposed Mexican respondents to their president's caricatured account of the country's national election administration body, in which he claimed that it was utterly corrupt and sponsored mass voter fraud. They then exposed some respondents to a corrective statement that rightly noted the high international reputation of that body and its role in helping Mexico transition into democratic governance at the beginning of the 21st century. The rebuttal improved people's views of the election body, even those who were supporters of the backsliding leader's political party.³⁰

Of course, in addition to positive messages and the correction of misinformation, there is a longer-term need for structural reforms. When institutions work badly, it is easier for leaders to claim that not much is lost when they tear them apart. And our research shows that, whatever the moral and economic arguments for more equal distributions of income and wealth, there is a powerful political argument. Improving income and wealth distribution turns out to be an investment in a resilient democracy. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/rau_stokes.

Standing Up and Standing Out

AFT Members Are Fighting Back to Protect Their Students



What do you believe makes America great? Is it welcoming people from around the world who want to build a better life or sending ICE to arrest high school seniors just before graduation? Is it nurturing young researchers and leading the world in scientific breakthroughs or cutting off the funding that enables those breakthroughs? Is it honest teaching about our nation's best and worst moments or banning books, fearing critical thinking, and forcing propaganda into classrooms?

At the AFT, we believe our members—the work they do and the spirit in which they do it—make our nation great. AFT members make a difference in the lives of others every day, paving pathways for a better life for all. And they make that difference even when their work and their values are under attack.

While the Trump administration has been cutting funding for vital educational programs and endangering students, our members have been fighting back. Here we share five examples from across the country of AFT members whose students have been harmed by the administration's actions. These educators are remarkable for standing up to the injustice and for striving to meet their students' needs even without the federal grants. By appearing in *American Educator*, they are heeding a crucial lesson from historian Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*: they are choosing to stand out.

Among other lessons, such as “believe in truth” and “listen for dangerous words,” Snyder calls on all of us to:

Stand out. Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.

—EDITORS

To hear from more AFT members who have been harmed by the Trump administration, check out these *AFT Voices* posts:

“RFK Jr. Has It All Wrong on Autism”
go.aft.org/xme

“Resisting Hatred, Teaching Truth”
go.aft.org/rpv

“Science Research Benefits Everyone; Withholding Funds Hurts Us All”
go.aft.org/9nh

“‘We the People’ Are Losing Invaluable Educational Opportunities”
go.aft.org/064

“Communities React as Students Are Targeted for Deportation”
go.aft.org/wbv

Planning for a Bright Future

By Sunny Jerome

In August 2024, I became a teacher and mentor for Charting My Path for Future Success, a program to help students with disabilities transition into college and/or careers. Funded by the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, it was designed to span three semesters—from the middle of 11th grade until graduation. The program pilot demonstrated great results, and I was excited for my district to participate in a randomized controlled trial to determine the effectiveness of the approach as it scaled up. Across three sites, students were assigned to one of three groups: a “business-as-usual” (control) group, a group receiving Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) lessons, or a group receiving SDLMI lessons plus mentoring. I felt fortunate to be assigned to work with the SDLMI-plus-mentoring group, building on a certificate in transition services with SDLMI that I earned in 2015.

Throughout the fall, my colleagues and I in the two SDLMI groups received in-depth training. We read and reflected on relevant research, practiced teaching the lessons in weekly sessions, and engaged with a professor who ensured that we all met the same high standard. At the same time, we recruited 11th-graders with individualized education plans to participate in the program. Almost everyone who was eligible signed up.

In January 2025, we welcomed students into the program—but it lasted just five weeks. The Trump administration halted our funding on February 10, ordering us to stop work immediately.

In our brief program implementation, we accomplished a great deal. I first connected with each student as a mentor, and then we went into the SDLMI lessons, most of which were done in small groups. The first skill we worked on was goal setting, including long- and short-term goals, barriers and opportunities, and revising goals. Setting and working toward goals is especially important for students with disabilities because it empowers them to advocate for themselves and make decisions about their futures. Discovering that a certain goal isn't a good fit is not a failure; it's part of growth, of learning the process for evaluating yourself, finding the right supports, and determining a better fit. Each student set individual goals, which we refined during our one-on-one mentoring sessions; in our small groups, we did a lot of backward planning to identify the steps to attain their goals.

With the SDLMI lessons, I was teaching the students a process to use throughout their lives. For example, they figured out what steps they needed help with, and each student was going to develop a personal community map showing them where to get that help. The funding was cut off just as we started mapping.

One student I was working with was chronically absent. His goal was to earn his diploma, but he was often uncomfortable in school and stayed home.

Because of this, he had failed sophomore English, then failed it again in summer school. He wanted to transfer to our continuation high school, but that requires good attendance. In our mentoring sessions, we worked on attendance. There was one classroom where he was especially uncomfortable, so we arranged for him to work in his counselor's room instead. That change was enough for him to come to school regularly. When he did miss, he became proactive in finding me for makeup sessions. Once our funding was cut, I was so sad to tell him that we couldn't work together. Fortunately, his short time in the program was effective. His attendance improved enough to transfer to our continuation school, and he did well the rest of the school year.

Another student in my group was interested in a career as a flight attendant or radiology technician. She required a great deal of support because her mother had died; an older family member was raising her, and she was helping with her younger siblings. Finding resources online was a challenge because her guardian was not tech savvy. We had time for initial career exploration and backward planning. Now, although she'll continue to have a case manager who can connect her to resources, she will not benefit from the intense support of the program in which she was learning to develop her plan and find resources on her own. I fear that this student, like most with disabilities, will struggle to finish college or a trade school and instead may need to rely on government-funded programs throughout adulthood. If she had the opportunity to complete the program, she could have been guided toward finding a career path that's a good fit for her and needed minimal or no government support as an adult. I truly believe this program would save taxpayer money in the long run.

I plan to continue using the program's curriculum this year, even though I won't have crucial supports like ongoing training and feedback, because I believe it makes a difference for our students. In the little time we had, it was amazing to see them start to understand that they were in control of their futures. Students with disabilities deserve strategies that work; without such grants like this, teachers are not supported in understanding what those strategies may be or how to implement them with fidelity.

Sunny Jerome, a special education teacher for more than 20 years, has worked at Westview High School in the Poway Unified School District in San Diego since 2009. Her brother, who has an intellectual disability and epilepsy, ignited her passion for becoming an education specialist and making school fun.



Partnering and Persisting

By David Hoppey

For the past two years, I was thrilled to work on Project PREP (Partnering to Renew the Educator Pipeline), a partnership between the University of North Florida and Clay County District Schools that provided the structure to prepare and retain teachers and teacher leaders. Funded by a grant from the US Department of Education, Project PREP was designed as a five-year effort—but the Trump administration cut off our funding in February. The grant covered the costs across five components, including a high school academy for students to take prerequisite teacher preparation courses, stipends for initial teacher training and for participation by early career teachers in an induction program, and funding to support earning master's and doctoral degrees for teachers and administrators. This work spanning from high school through doctoral studies was unique, and we were excited about tracking students to see what aspects of the support were most effective. I led the doctoral component for Project PREP. Our scholars were studying problems of practice in Clay County focused on teacher education, induction, and retention.



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A central goal of Project PREP was diversifying the teacher workforce. Clay County District Schools is large and diverse. It serves more than 35,000 suburban and rural students in northeast Florida; about 18 percent of students are Black, 17 percent are Hispanic, 7 percent are multiracial, and 56 percent are white. Research clearly demonstrates that students perform better when they have at least one teacher who shares their racial and cultural background.* But as in most districts throughout the United States, the teachers in Clay County are not as diverse as the students.

With the loss of Project PREP, what really concerns me is that kids are not going to have certified teachers. Clay County, like all of Florida, has a severe teacher shortage. We know from the

two years that we had funding that Project PREP was making an impact in Clay County. It was shifting the culture, and people were excited about it, especially the superintendent.

When the grant was canceled, the university was very generous. It found other funds to allow the four full-time Project PREP staff, who were managing the couple hundred Project PREP students enrolled at the university, to finish the semester. That gave these people a few months to find new jobs. The university also found money to fund the doctoral students' summer courses, and it is looking for additional funds moving forward for all of the existing Project PREP students.

While the cut was a shock, we haven't lost many students. This is a testament to the resilience and persistence of these future teachers, master teachers, and administrators. They are committed to our profession and to our kids. Many are now taking on loans and finding alternative ways to cover the cost of completing their degrees. We had an amazing celebration at the end of the spring semester (three months after the funding was cut off) with students from all components, high school to doctorate, showcasing their work.

We're determined to continue the program, even without the infrastructure or the staff support the grant provided. We had a really rich, deep commitment from Clay County District Schools, so our partnership will continue in as many ways as possible. Thankfully, so far most PREP scholars are still pursuing education degrees. We're going to track their progress to see if they join the education workforce. We're also planning to track the participants in the induction program to see how it has helped with retention. One of our Project PREP doctoral students is the district's leader for the induction program, so she'll be able to analyze that data.

Our undergraduate and master's students were in cohorts with dedicated courses and events that helped form communities of learners. Since we no longer have capacity to maintain the cohorts, I'm concerned about the impact of those learning communities disbanding. The school district is trying to maintain some of that structure through monthly informal professional learning community meetings, but it is a heavy lift without the grant.

Instead of cutting grants like Project PREP, policymakers should be investing in teacher preparation so educators finish college and graduate school debt-free, especially in light of the national teacher shortage. Many years ago, an Office of Special Education Programs grant from the US Department of Education allowed me to complete my doctoral degree. I was a single father, and that support made an enormous difference. This experience with Project PREP being defunded has me thinking more about how K-12, higher education, unions, and nonprofit groups that care about kids can work together. We need to find common ground for our advocacy, and I think we'll find it in the impact that the Trump administration is having on kids and families.

Working with the Project PREP doctoral students is one of the best things I've done in my career. The stipends the grant provided allowed us to bring in a diverse group of brilliant scholars who have been asking crucial questions about how to support at-risk kids. These scholars' gratitude, intellect, and passion is inspiring, and I can't wait to see what they do next.

*For a summary of this research, see go.aft.org/e02.

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Building Trust to Counter Misinformation

By Katy Dichter, Dave Ellenwood, Allison Reibel Fader, Althea Lazzaro, Adrianna Martinez, Alyssa Jocson Porter, Kelle Rose, and Chris Webb

Since 2022, an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Washington, the University of Texas at Austin, Seattle Central College, and the Black Brilliance Research Project has been collaborating on Co-Designing for Trust, a multiyear grant provided by the National Science Foundation to mitigate the impact of misinformation—particularly on Black and rural communities. Given the Trump administration’s agenda, it’s tragic but unsurprising that the grant’s funding was terminated on April 25, 2025. The team received an email from the National Science Foundation stating, “The agency has determined that termination of certain awards is necessary because they are not in alignment with current NSF priorities.”

It’s tragic not for the faculty and staff involved, though many of us are frustrated and now facing hardships, but for the students. At Seattle Central College, we had several teams of students engaged in participatory research—they were members of the research team developing and refining community-based approaches to help people avoid falling victim to falsehoods. The unique composition of our research team led to profound new community solutions, grounded in real experience, to combat mis- and disinformation.

Since Seattle Central College is a community college, our focus has been workforce education around mis- and disinformation (with misinformation being unintentionally false and disinformation being designed to mislead). We worked with cohorts of students in English and English as a second language classes and with students in the Bachelor of Applied Behavioral Sciences and Bachelor of Allied Health programs for a couple of years to learn from them what types of mis- and disinformation they dealt with in their workplaces and communities. We talked to them as trusted community members and considered what their professional roles and responsibilities would be once they completed their education.

For example, one student in a healthcare program said that a patient came to the emergency department with a severe burn exacerbated by a “remedy” they’d found online. The student wanted to discuss examples of health misinformation and learn how to communicate with patients to gain trust in high-stakes situations. Another student relayed that their workplace had an anti-union disinformation campaign; they wanted help understanding it and talking to their colleagues. As a trans person, another student shared disinformation circulating about their community and wanted to know how to counteract harmful and potentially dangerous claims.

Once we had gathered these and many other examples, we developed case studies and engaged students in determining how to handle them. We started with basic questions: “Who trusts you? How do you build trust?” Then we considered strategies to think



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critically, counteract false information, and create a healthier information environment. Actually having these conversations in your workplace or community is hard, so we also talked through responsibilities. We asked, “As a friend, coworker, or neighbor of people who are promoting mis- or disinformation, what’s your role? What responsibilities do you have?” In our discussions of the case studies, it became clear that with our highly polarized environment, being able to understand your position, respond to falsehoods, and have conversations—even without coming to agreement—is helpful. It is healthy for our democracy to keep lines of communication open in respectful, evidence-based ways. That can cut through a lot of nasty mischaracterization of people and reduce polarization.

As much as we value the content we have been creating, we also value the opportunities this grant gave our students. The cohorts we worked with devoted many hours to this project, and they were paid as researchers. Our work depended on the examples they provided and the effort they put into working through how to handle these challenging situations. When the grant was terminated, we had already developed 13 lesson plans and were preparing to pay new cohorts of students to give us feedback on the lessons. We will complete the curriculum, but now we’ll have to do it over time by piloting and refining the lesson plans as we teach classes. What could have been done in six months may instead take years—and the students we would have been paying will have to volunteer their time and thoughts. Most of our students are struggling financially, so the extra money they earned through this project made a real difference. In addition, the grant would have funded a website for this material; now we’ll have to be creative to determine how to share our *Community Power Tools for Combating Mis- and Disinformation Toolkit* with educators and community leaders across the country.[†]

It is ironic, to say the least, that we have been forced to stop working with our students, who are trusted community members, on a grant that is centered on community trust and community-based strategies. Our students understand what has happened, but to be trustworthy community members, we are determined to finish this work on our own time and with our own resources, so that their work can serve future students and community members, as intended.

The feedback we have gotten from students as we try out and refine our lessons has been overwhelmingly positive. Our materials resonate with students because they are based on their peers’ real experiences—and they are using what they learn about promoting a healthy information environment in real time. That’s another reason we will continue this work.

The authors are faculty librarians and active members of their respective AFT locals.

[†]For more information about the toolkit, contact althea.lazzaro@seattlecolleges.edu.

Keeping Our Students Safe

By Kathryn Zamarrón

I was born and raised on the southwest side, a second-generation Chicagoan. My maternal grandparents came to the United States from Santiago, Chile, in 1969 to lead a Spanish-language Baptist church. They modeled what we owe each other as human beings, as members of our communities. But, as a child, I saw inequality in Chicago all around me. As early as nine years old, I saw the disparities not just between different schools but across neighborhoods, with far less wealth and resources in predominantly Black and Latine neighborhoods than in white ones.

Then, in 2010, I saw the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) elect a new slate of leadership and begin to question and fight these disparities. I was only 15, but it was striking to me to see my grandparents' values applied by the CTU to problems throughout the city. Now I have been a proud member of the CTU since 2020. With the Trump administration targeting immigrants, I feel compelled to continue this tradition to protect students and families from abuses by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

With more than 325,000 students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we have thousands of students who are immigrants—and thousands more who are the children and grandchildren of immigrants. How do we keep our students safe?

How do we make sure that when kids get dropped off at school in the morning, they're there in the afternoon to go home? And how do we make sure their parent or guardian is safe—that someone is there at pickup?

In 2019, during President Trump's first term, we won sanctuary provisions in our contract, and we reaffirmed them in our 2025 contract.* The contract language supports employees who are becoming citizens and makes it clear that CPS employees will protect our school communities and only comply with ICE as required by law. We will not let any unknown person—including ICE agents—simply walk into our schools and take our students. We are responsible for our students' safety until they are released to a guardian. An ICE agent has no business interrupting the school day; until this administration, our schools, hospitals, and places of worship were off-limits. If an ICE agent wants to enter a Chicago school, they must have a criminal judicial warrant issued by a federal judge.

Building on these provisions, the CTU has worked in cooperation with our allies to distribute know-your-rights materials and related resources for families,[†] held workshops to ensure members are well-versed in the law and our procedures, and supported school staff in creating what we call "sanctuary teams."

A sanctuary team is responsible for knowing people's rights and school policies in detail—and they are the staff who respond when ICE arrives, by calling lawyers, for example. These teams are also the dissemination vehicle when the CTU has new information to share, and they help families prepare for ICE encounters.

The world saw our sanctuary teams in action when federal agents came to Hamline Elementary and the school clerk swung into action. The district was called, they were denied entry, and the community mobilized in defense.

I won't name schools that haven't been in the media, but several close colleagues have shared ICE sightings. At a high school last school year, ICE agents asked for a particular student but had no warrant and were denied entry. We've gotten reports of students who were home when ICE came to knock on their doors. One student came to school after his uncle had been detained by ICE at 5 a.m. In another case, ICE targeted a father at drop-off, taking him away in front of his children and leaving them with the school principal. At other schools throughout the spring, unknown vehicles were seen waiting just outside of schools for hours. Members of sanctuary teams began approaching the drivers to ask basic questions: "What's your name? Can we see your identification?" Agents are supposed to identify themselves, but we've found that the vast majority of the time, they leave after such questioning.

What we have in place is working well, but there's room to improve. And while educators are leading, it should be the work of every school district to implement policies and protocols to protect their students and make school not just the safest place students can be but the most joyful place they can be. In the context of Trump's attacks, that means having enough counselors, nurses, and social workers to deal with the unprecedented trauma our students are facing. That shouldn't be a bargaining demand, it should be a given in these times.

In other tragic situations, such as a kindergartner who died of cancer at my school, CPS has a team that arrives immediately with resources and additional personnel. We need something like that for students who live through the trauma of having a family or community member detained.

This work is hard. But it also shows me the best of people. Every day, I find people who are willing to give of themselves to make a community. As a student of history, I know that many people have experienced authoritarianism and emerged from it. We will continue to offer mutual aid, and we will survive.

*For details on those provisions, see go.aft.org/ats.

[†]For the AFT's resources, see go.aft.org/dms.

Kathryn Zamarrón is an elementary school music teacher at Walt Disney Magnet School. She serves on the Chicago Teachers Union's Latinx Caucus and Elementary Education Committee, among other roles.



PAUL GOYETTE

Caring for Our Students' Mental Health

By Hennessey Lustica,
Stephanie Betts, and Cristi Kuhn

In rural, high-poverty communities across upstate New York, our students face growing mental health needs. Rates of anxiety, depression, trauma exposure, and even suicidality continue to rise. Yet, too often, there simply aren't enough trained professionals to meet those needs. In some of our districts, the student-to-mental-health-provider ratio is an alarming 1,120 to 1—far from the recommended 250 to 1.

When the federal government passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act in 2022, it offered a rare lifeline: nearly \$1 billion in grants to expand school-based mental health services. Our districts, Seneca Falls and Lyons, seized the opportunity. Recognizing that no one district could tackle this alone, we built something bigger: the Wellness Workforce Collaborative (WWC), a partnership of 28 school districts, eight colleges, and numerous nonprofits and state agencies, all committed to growing a sustainable pipeline of school-based mental health professionals.

The WWC takes a comprehensive, multipronged approach. For high school juniors and seniors, we launched a Grow Your Own program that offers dual-enrollment college courses, introducing students to careers in mental health and wellness. Graduate students pursuing counseling and social work degrees receive intensive, paid field placements in our schools, while receiving high-quality supervision and mentorship. For existing school-based professionals, we provide professional development, coaching, and even tuition assistance to help counselors earn additional licensure.

The results have been extraordinary. In our first year, 56 high school students enrolled in the Grow Your Own courses, and they all passed. We've trained 155 graduate student interns who, collectively, have provided more than 8,300 counseling sessions to our students. Of those, 89 percent have accepted full-time positions in our schools. Our coaching program has helped retain 100 percent of the school counselors, social workers, and psychologists who participate. The program isn't just filling jobs; it's building strong, lasting relationships between providers and the communities they serve.

We've seen countless stories that illustrate the power of this approach. One intern, for example, connected with a student from a non-English-speaking family who had previously struggled to trust providers. Because the intern shared the student's language and cultural background, she built trust not only with the student but with the family, helping them navigate both school and future planning.

With these promising outcomes, we were optimistic about the future. The original federal grants were designed to run through

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COURTESY OF THE WELLNESS WORKFORCE COLLABORATIVE

2029, giving us time to build long-term sustainability. But in April 2025, we were abruptly informed that our funding would be discontinued at the end of the year, and that any unspent funds from prior years would be rescinded.

The impact of this decision has been devastating. Without the federal support anchoring our work, we were forced to cut our graduate intern cohort from 47 to 31 students this year. That reduction means nearly 2,000 students will lose direct access to counseling services. Eight of our current school counselors, who were relying on tuition support to pursue licensure as mental health counselors, are now left to fund their own education. We also had to close two family support centers that offered free counseling services to families—a loss that can't be measured in numbers alone.

For the communities we serve, this isn't an abstract policy debate—it's personal. These services provide vital support to students and families facing significant adversity. To pull them away midstream undermines the very goals that these federal grants were designed to achieve.

We have not accepted this quietly. With the help of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who sent formal letters to the US secretary of education and held a press conference, and support from Senator Chuck Schumer, we are fighting for reinstatement of these funds. Our districts have filed formal appeals, and state leaders are exploring legal action. We remain hopeful, especially in light of recent federal rulings reinstating other rescinded research grants. Meanwhile, we continue raising awareness through media interviews and outreach to elected officials at every level.

At the same time, we are working creatively to sustain and expand what we've built. New York's unique Boards of Cooperative Educational Services system allows districts to pool resources and contract for shared services. Through these regional partnerships, we are finding ways to continue the Grow Your Own program, expand professional development and coaching, and explore alternative funding streams to keep internships viable.

The students themselves continue to remind us why this work matters. As one high school student in the Grow Your Own program reflected: "I've learned to have more empathy because you never know what someone is going through."

That lesson resonates deeply with educators everywhere. In an era when young people face unprecedented mental health challenges, we need bold, collaborative, and sustainable solutions. Our experience shows what's possible when federal, state, and local partners work together to invest in the future of school-based mental health. We remain committed to ensuring that this work continues—because our students deserve nothing less. □

NEOLIBERALISM, INEQUALITY, AND Reclaiming Education for Democracy



By Neil Kraus

I have been a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls (UWRF) since 2005, and I have taught at the college level for over 25 years. About 10 years ago, I was serving on a couple of committees at UWRF charged with addressing significant budget cuts and changes in tenure imposed by Wisconsin’s governor at the time, Scott Walker, and the Republican legislature. State Republicans removed tenure for University of Wisconsin faculty members from state statute and created a new administrative policy that effectively allows administrators to terminate tenured faculty for any reason, including the elimination of programs.

As our campus committees carried out our work, the politics of education began to confuse me. Educational institutions pos-

sess something that ostensibly everyone needs—education itself. According to conventional wisdom, we live in a knowledge economy, and K–12 and higher education provide knowledge. Education is widely believed to be the key to alleviating poverty and providing economic opportunity for all.

And as a political scientist, I know that in politics, if any individual or organization has something that everyone needs, then that individual or organization has political power. Everyday examples of this dynamic include wealthy campaign contributors or large corporations. In both cases, policymakers will necessarily take the views of these actors into account, often going so far as to solicit their input into the creation of specific policies. Frequently, contributors and corporations even have veto power in the policymaking process. The political process works very well for these privileged actors.

But despite having something that society constantly reminds the public that everyone needs, neither K–12 nor higher education has anything close to political power. On the contrary, policymakers can cut education budgets, erode tenure, jettison liberal arts fields, go after DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives, and—as AFT members know well—attack teachers’ unions, and they likely

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will not lose votes. Depending on the context, they may actually gain votes by engaging in these attacks against education.

To be sure, K-12 education has seen some rebound in political standing since the low point of the 1980s and '90s in the aftermath of the 1983 Reagan administration report, *A Nation at Risk*. But today, even in states with budget surpluses and growing populations, such as Minnesota and Wisconsin, cuts are being made in K-12 and higher education. And despite decades of budget cuts and, as a result, increasing costs for students, public higher education systems have to fight for and defend receiving *any* public support from their respective state governments. Finally, both the higher education press and major media remind us frequently that the “public has lost confidence in higher education,”¹ in a pervasive campaign brazenly similar to the corporate campaign of the 1980s and '90s claiming that the K-12 public schools were failing.

If everyone needs education to succeed, why is education always under fire politically? Why are we always on defense?

To try to better understand the seemingly contradictory politics of education, I began to examine primary data on the labor market, historic and current educational attainment rates, and scholarly literature on these topics. I researched the recent history of business and public policy. I started paying close attention to how the most powerful actors and institutions in our society talked about the purposes—and purported flaws—of education. I carefully read education-related reports that were widely cited in the media. I engaged in basic scholarship by looking up the references in these reports and examining many of the organizations producing this seemingly endless blizzard of literature and, to the extent that they are publicly disclosed, their funders.

In sum, I discovered that the decades of claims that public schools and colleges are failing are at odds with official data on the education system and economy and with much scholarly research. By all standard measures, the American public is better educated today than ever before. That didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was discovering that decades of claims about our so-called knowledge economy are also false. There is not now, nor has there ever been, an abundance of high-wage, high-skilled jobs in the United States.

Rather, I discovered what we all see and experience every day: that the real economy is dominated by low-skill, low-wage service sector jobs. Moreover, decades-old conventional wisdom about a shortage of skilled workers—or a shortage of *any* kind of workers—is not supported by any reasonable assessment of objective evidence. Simply put, we do not live in a society that offers equal opportunity to succeed in a knowledge economy; we live in a highly unequal society with an abundance of well-educated people and an economy dominated by low-education, low-wage jobs.

This is why, in a nutshell, both K-12 and higher education are always on defense: since at least the 1980s, corporate America has engaged in a nonstop political campaign to deflect all attention away from its role in catalyzing inequality and onto the education system. Corporate America blames schools and colleges for the economic insecurity, stagnant wages, and poverty it creates. This campaign has been so ubiquitous, and so seemingly in good faith, that many

individuals and organizations of all ideological persuasions continue to focus on the education system in the larger discussion of the population's economic well-being. Even though tales of college graduates who are severely underemployed and unable to find jobs that match their preparation and credentials are becoming more and more common, we still accept the false notion that there are good jobs waiting to be filled—if only well-educated candidates would appear.

I decided to call the extremely deceptive conventional wisdom about the education system and the economy the *fantasy economy*.² As compared to the real economy, which has an abundance of low-skill, low-wage jobs, the fantasy economy is the charade of the knowledge economy that has been promoted by corporations and the wealthy for their own economic self-interests. It is the mythical version of the economy that has driven the corporate education reform movement—and the concomitant underfunding of public schools and colleges—over the past several decades.

Corporate America blames schools and colleges for the economic insecurity, stagnant wages, and poverty it creates.



As a political campaign, the fantasy economy has two major tenets: the education system is always failing, and the workforce is always inadequate. Claims about a failing education system and inadequate workforce are repeated endlessly and reinforce one another. We are constantly reminded that our purportedly failing K-12 and higher education systems have produced an inferior workforce, and that our allegedly inadequate workforce necessitates major reforms in K-12 and higher education. This rhetorical loop is beyond conventional wisdom, akin to saying that the sky is blue. But it is not supported by any reasonable assessment of the best available evidence.

Inequality, Education, and the Real Economy

The last 40 or so years have been economically challenging for most Americans. The country has experienced exploding eco-

conomic inequality, as wages for most workers have remained flat while those for a small minority have skyrocketed.

But the problem is not a lack of jobs. Far from it. There are nearly 170 million jobs in the United States today, and, except during recessionary periods, the total number of jobs is always increasing.³ The labor market, however, remains dominated by low-education, low-skill, low-wage jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), roughly 60 percent of all jobs today typically require only a high school education or less.⁴ Despite the conventional wisdom that we live in a knowledge economy, the educational requirements of the labor market have changed little over the last several decades, as low-education, low-wage jobs continue to substantially outnumber high-skill, high-wage jobs.

At the same time, educational attainment rates in the United States have reached all-time highs. Recent Census data regarding educational attainment levels show that over 90 percent of Americans 25 and over have a high school degree or GED, 15 percent have some college but no degree, 10 percent have an associate's degree, 23 percent have a bachelor's degree, and 14 percent have an advanced degree.⁵

The educational requirements of the labor market have changed little over the last several decades.



Educational attainment levels for labor force participants 25 and over are even more impressive. Recent data from the BLS also illustrate that over 11 percent of those in the labor force have an associate's degree, over 27 percent have a bachelor's degree, and over 17 percent have an advanced degree.⁶ Compared to educational attainment rates several decades ago, the country's high level of formal education today is truly astounding.

The big takeaway is that we have a labor force in which 69 percent of individuals have formal education beyond high school—and an economy in which only 40 percent of jobs typically require any education beyond high school.

Because the population is substantially overeducated for existing jobs, large numbers of people are consistently underemployed—working in jobs that typically require less formal education than they have received. As the New York branch of the Federal Reserve has shown, for at least the last 35 years, at any one point in time, roughly one-third of all individuals with at least a bachelor's degree are underemployed, with roughly 40 percent of recent college graduates underemployed.⁷

But it is not simply a matter of the disconnect between the country's education levels vis-à-vis available jobs. Across attainment levels, many jobs that formerly paid solid middle-class wages have, over time, been downgraded to working-class wages, while jobs that paid working-class wages—such as meatpackers—now offer poverty wages.⁸ The loss of manufacturing jobs, growth of low-wage service sector jobs, and decades-long corporate attack on labor unions are all direct causes of these long-term trends.

Further, jobs in the public sector, once a paragon of middle-class stability, have increasingly become economically insecure positions.⁹ We see this dynamic playing out now like never before, as the second Trump administration has prioritized attacking

public sector workers. And as educators know, wages for teachers and professors have not kept up with inflation,¹⁰ as evidenced by the hundreds of teachers' strikes across the country in recent years. Teachers routinely work second jobs just to make ends meet. And roughly 44 percent of all faculty in higher education are part-time.¹¹

Also contrary to conventional wisdom, STEM (science, technology, education, and math) jobs occupy a very small segment of the total labor market. According to the BLS, only 6.4 percent of *all* jobs are in STEM fields, a category that includes roughly 100 specific occupations.¹² More strikingly, the share of the total labor market consisting of STEM jobs has changed very little over the years and is projected to change little in the future.

An extensive body of research going back decades has plainly illustrated the oversupply of STEM workers for available jobs, resulting in large numbers of STEM workers underemployed or working in non-STEM fields.¹³ The oversupply of STEM workers is also confirmed today by the routine corporate layoffs of technology workers. Yet because business continually argues that it cannot find enough workers in STEM fields, K-12 schools and higher education are constantly adding STEM programs, which ultimately end up replacing programs in other fields.

But wait—why do corporations claim there are not enough STEM workers or enough well-educated workers? The oversupply creates competition for jobs, depresses wages, and places immense pressure on the education establishment. And it ultimately hurts our students and democracy as non-STEM fields are scaled back or jettisoned entirely, all because of persistent myths promulgated by self-interested corporations and industry groups.

Massive and growing economic inequality within the context of the best-educated population in American history appears to be a contradiction. But once we examine how our economy has changed over the last several decades, this apparent contradic-

tion disappears, and the politics of education come into sharp focus.

Neoliberalism: Capitalism on Steroids

The economy that business interests and President Ronald Reagan imposed on the nation in the 1980s—and that we are still enduring today—is best captured by the term *neoliberalism*. Basically, neoliberalism—a word that was confined to academic discussions until quite recently—is capitalism on steroids. It is a version of capitalism built solely and explicitly in the economic self-interests of owners and shareholders.

Neoliberalism differs substantially from how capitalism operated earlier in the 20th century. Political scientists have labeled the era from the 1930s, beginning with President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, through the 1970s the *mixed economy*.¹⁴ Unlike neoliberalism, the mixed economy had a substantial role for government. Organized labor was a major force, as roughly one-third of all workers in the 1950s were in unions. Business operated on a long-term time horizon, and employers were committed to investing and remaining in countless cities and towns across the United States. The fate of all workers was connected, and a rising tide lifted at least most boats.

The story of General Electric (GE) and former CEO Jack Welch exemplifies how large corporations behaved in the mixed economy. A 1953 annual report from GE described how the corporation worked “in the balanced best interests of all.”¹⁵ The report “trumpeted how much the company had paid in taxes, the virtues of paying its suppliers well, and how critical it was to take care of its employees.”¹⁶ GE bragged that it had the biggest workforce in the company's history and proudly affirmed that it devoted 37 percent of its revenue from sales to pay and benefits for its workers, while devoting a mere 3.9 percent of that sales revenue to shareholders. In 1962, GE's head of employee benefits stated: “Maximizing employment security is a prime company goal.... The employee who can plan his economic future with reasonable certainty is an employer's most productive asset.”¹⁷

In addition to a business culture that valued long-term employees, the mixed economy saw the adoption of numerous major public policies that provided greater economic security for the citizenry. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, public assistance, civil rights, voting rights, and a host of other social welfare and regulatory policies addressed routine market failures and provided increased security and opportunity for the citizenry. The right to collective bargaining was a key part of the mixed economy, which led to increasing rates of unionization throughout the 1940s and '50s. Significantly, education was viewed as merely one of many public services or policies aimed at improving people's economic well-being. An educated population was valued more for helping maintain democracy than for increasing individuals' wages.¹⁸

Of course, economic and educational opportunities were not open to all equally. Women and racial minorities were often intentionally excluded from opportunities afforded to white men. Yet through major court cases and public policies, including but not limited to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the country began to dismantle the structural racism and sexism

Low-education, low-wage jobs continue to substantially outnumber high-skill, high-wage jobs.

impeding opportunities for so many and gradually move toward a real, multiracial democracy.

The political turmoil of the 1960s and '70s brought major advances—advances that the business community saw as threats. Many powerful elements within the business community had never accepted the expanded role of government and organized labor ushered in by the New Deal during the mixed economy.¹⁹ And given the increasingly public political activities involving the education system, such as the pro-civil rights and anti-war movements on college campuses, many business interests came to believe that American capitalism itself was under threat.

Even before these developments, however, economists had provided the theoretical foundation for corporate America's exclusive focus on education's role in providing economic opportunity and, in turn, obfuscation of business leaders' and policymakers' roles in determining jobs and wage levels. In the 1950s, the field of economics invented *human capital theory*,²⁰ and the new theory was used to directly link variation in individual income levels with differences in formal education and training.

Promulgated mainly by economists at the University of Chicago, human capital theory eventually gained broad ideological appeal. By the middle 1960s, human capital theory was extremely influential among leaders in both political parties.²¹ Education became understood by many elites as the path to escaping poverty, even as the country was witnessing President Lyndon Johnson's many groundbreaking social welfare and civil rights policies successfully addressing inequality.

Human capital theory promised that economic opportunity would be open to all through formal education and training. But it also let corporate America off the hook entirely in the larger discussion of economic opportunity, and so the business community embraced it enthusiastically. By the late 1960s, corporate America began to increasingly talk about education in terms of its purported economic benefits, which was a striking departure from the widely shared vision of education for democracy.

Also, in the 1970s, the anti-tax movement emerged, best exemplified by California's Proposition 13, which capped property taxes and then starved public schools of funding. As the anti-tax movement spread, public schools across the country came under constant budgetary pressure. Former California Governor Ronald Reagan capitalized on the moment, pronouncing in his 1980 campaign for president that government was responsible for all the economic ills of the 1970s. Reagan repeatedly argued that unleashing private market forces and getting government out of

the way would allow all Americans to prosper. The constellation of free market, anti-government policies at the heart of neoliberalism was Reagan's entire worldview and platform—and during Reagan's eight years in the White House, an economy built solely for owners and shareholders took hold.

Advocacy for privatization of public services became the default positions of business interests because of neoliberalism's proud contempt for the public sector, simplistic worship of free markets, and opposition to taxation and regulation. Minimizing the cost of labor to maximize shareholders' profits—a foundational belief of neoliberalism—led to the constant corporate attack on organized labor that continues to the present day. Business also began to routinely fight against attempts to increase the minimum wage.

Reagan's shareholder agenda also led to increasing monopolization of all major economic sectors, as large corporations merged with other large corporations in a constant drift toward the consolidation of economic power. As taxes were cut, social welfare benefits were reduced. And in a continuous desire to cut costs (again, for the sake of shareholders' profits), neoliberalism also demanded moving manufacturing jobs to cheaper locations overseas, offshoring many service sector jobs, replacing corporate pensions with 401(k) retirement plans, and increasingly using independent contractors and noncompete agreements by employers.

In an act of economic self-interest, corporate America shifted the discussion of economic opportunity to the education system.

Neoliberalism's policy agenda also led to the gradual, systematic privatization of public higher education, increasingly placing the cost of public higher education on the backs of students and their families. During the mixed economy, public higher education was substantially funded by the states, resulting in very inexpensive tuition and fees. Over time, however, it has become disproportionately funded by student tuition, leading to escalating costs and a student debt crisis.

Significantly, the Democratic Party largely went along with this corporate agenda,²² and the Clinton administration in the 1990s embraced a softened version of Reagan's neoliberalism. Clinton declared himself a "New Democrat" to distinguish himself from Democrats like Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt, both of whom—ironically—were indispensable in making the Democratic Party a majority force for much of the 20th century. The unquestioned dominance of human capital theory fundamentally changed how the nation thought about the purpose of education and was critical in allowing neoliberalism to take hold.

Mythical Education and Workforce Crises

Neoliberalism's overarching purpose of building an economy exclusively in the interests of major shareholders and business owners—who constituted a very small percentage of the population—was bound to be unpopular. Thus, supercharging capitalism to actively hurt the economic interests of a substantial majority of the people in the United States while enriching the few would not be an easy political task. Human capital theory, however, allowed corporate America to make its public campaign for the anti-government, anti-labor, pro-free market economy of neoliberalism *solely about* education while simultaneously making it *solely against* the existing education system.

In an act of pure economic self-interest, corporate America decided to shift the discussion of economic



opportunity entirely away from its own actions and political agenda and to focus squarely on the education system. And this overarching political campaign I call the fantasy economy was aggressively carried out by the Reagan administration.

The Reagan administration's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, was a key part of this campaign. Despite flaws that led to its debunking by numerous scholars,²³ it successfully established the conventional wisdom that the K-12 school system was failing. But getting the public to focus solely on the education system when discussing economic opportunity would require much more than the simple yet powerful assumption of failing schools. The public still had to be convinced of the so-called skills gap—that the skills of the American workforce were inadequate for the labor market.

This skills gap campaign has two major components: one is the notion that jobs that historically required little formal education and skill now required much higher education and skill levels. The other is the idea that traditionally high-education, high-skill jobs are increasing as a share of the total labor market at a rapid rate. The Reagan administration funded an abundance of ideologically driven research at major universities and think tanks to convince the public of these two specific claims.

During his first term, President Reagan's hand-picked appointees at the National Institute of Education awarded Columbia University's Teachers College a \$4 million grant (equivalent to over \$12 million in 2025) to "study the relationship of education to employment, economic growth, and productivity" as one of 10 universities receiving similar grants.²⁴ Columbia's new center, officially founded in 1986 as the Institute on Education and the Economy (IEE), received extensive funding from numerous foundations, corporations, and both the Reagan and the George H. W. Bush administrations. And by the 1990s, the IEE's work was found throughout major media, education, and the state and national public policy ecosystems.

In 1992, the IEE published *The Double Helix of Education and the Economy*.²⁵ The report's executive summary offered three "fundamental recommendations," the first of which was to "change the mission of K-12 schools to take educational responsibility for the economic futures of all students."²⁶ It is impossible to overemphasize the significance of this statement, which is at the heart of the fantasy economy. In promulgating a misleading description of a rapidly emerging, higher-skill labor market and an inadequate education system, the IEE helped to streamline corporate America's overarching goal of blaming the education system for the growing economic inequality wrought by neoliberalism's pursuit of maximizing profits.

In 1987, just one year after the founding of the IEE, the Hudson Institute published what is arguably the single most influential publicly available document on neoliberalism and the politics of education in contemporary American history, *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century*.²⁷ Also funded by the Reagan administration, *Workforce 2000* firmly established the skills gap as conventional wisdom. The report was widely distributed and reported in media across the country.

Despite also having its major claims thoroughly debunked within four years of its publication,²⁸ *Workforce 2000* was remark-

ably successful in convincing both elites and the public that the United States was at the dawn of a high-education, high-skill, high-wage labor market—and that the nation's workforce was not prepared. Twenty-five years later, we're still waiting for this version of the labor market to arrive.

The corporate campaign to convince the country of the onset of a mythical, high-skill labor market went into overdrive during the administration of President George H. W. Bush. On September 25, 1989, the *New York Times* ran a 1,600-word story at the top of page 1 titled "Impending U.S. Jobs 'Disaster': Work Force Unqualified to Work."²⁹ The piece had numerous quotations from CEOs claiming that they could not find enough qualified workers, along with quotations and data from IEE and *Workforce 2000* authors.

By the 1990s, the message of a purportedly failing education system, inadequate workforce, and pending high-skill labor market was everywhere.

By the 1990s, the message of a purportedly failing education system, inadequate workforce, and pending high-skill labor market was everywhere in the media and in the education system itself. Ultimately, charter schools, vouchers, and the test-based accountability of No Child Left Behind were all built on these misleading claims that Reagan- and corporate-funded researchers worked so hard to create in the public mind. The fantasy economy was born.

The Great Recession: The Fantasy Economy Goes to College

In the early years of the 21st century, the business and public policy agenda of neoliberalism continued unabated. But as the Great Recession hit in 2007, the population's economic precarity became a major subject of discussion. The economic promise of college was increasingly called into question. Thus, corporations and foundations launched phase two of their aggressive campaign to make the public believe in a mythical high-education, high-wage labor market and an inadequate education system.

In 2008, Anthony Carnevale (who spent many years as a vice president at the Educational Testing Service) published an article in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* in which he directly challenged the Bureau of Labor Statistics data on the educational requirements of the labor market.³⁰ Carnevale argued that "if used without proper adjustments, the BLS methodology can lead to a gross underestimate of both current and future postsecondary-education requirements in the labor market."³¹ Shortly thereafter, he founded the Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) at Georgetown University, as a "unique collaboration" between the Lumina Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.³²

Education is about relationships. One can never replicate on a screen the magic that happens in classrooms.



In 2010, citing the “poor quality” of official data,³³ the CEW published its assessment of the educational requirements of the labor market. The CEW claimed that roughly 59 percent of current jobs were “available for workers with postsecondary education” and projected that by 2018, “about two-thirds of all employment will require some college education or better,”³⁴ putting its data at substantial odds with that of the BLS. Even as millions of highly educated Americans were underemployed or in low-wage jobs requiring college degrees, misleading claims of a skills gap were used to place pressure on higher education for its purported failures to provide economic opportunity and social mobility for the population.

With the backing of powerful private funders, the CEW’s claim that “about two-thirds of all employment will require some college education or better” was even noted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In 2020, the *Chronicle* observed that “anyone who’s been to a higher ed conference or read a book on the topic in the past decade has no doubt heard some version of that prediction—some of us to the point of numbness.”³⁵ Official data on the education system and labor market, which still showed a predominately low-education, low-wage economy and large numbers of highly educated workers underemployed, was almost invisible in mainstream discussion.

By the 2010s, uncritical acceptance of a high-education labor market and under-educated labor force—the skills gap—had become entrenched. And the logical, albeit false, conclusion was that higher education must be failing. Corporate America championed this conclusion because it opens the door to cut funding for public colleges and universities—and that makes it easier to cut corporate taxes. Just as tens of millions of highly educated Americans are experiencing underemployment, low wages (even in many jobs requiring college degrees), and high student debt, austerity

has become the default policy in education budgeting decisions. And, in turn, a politically weakened higher education sector became much more vulnerable to the imposition of corporate America’s entire education agenda, including narrowing of curriculum under the auspices of “workforce development,” imposing online education on a grand scale (with claims that remote expert educators and artificial intelligence will be superior to classroom educators), and buying seemingly every new technology-related product and service, even as faculty and staff positions are eliminated.

In fact, because of the complete corporate capture of both K-12 and higher education, in nearly all mainstream discussions, virtually every issue in education today is defined as a technology issue with a technology solution. The information ecosystem of educational administrators, school board members, and university governing boards is dominated by technology interests. Far too many reports, conferences, news sources, journals, podcasts, and public discussions targeting educational administrators today begin and end with how technology is the key for all of our students.

For corporate America today, make no mistake: online education is the holy grail. But because it has always had limited market appeal, the sellers of online education are frequently changing marketing strategies and have created a never-ending list of

monikers, including digital, distance, e-, remote, curated, individualized, and customized education, to name only a handful.³⁶ But if the pandemic taught us anything, it’s what all educators, students, parents, and caregivers know well: education is about human relationships. One can never replicate on a screen the magic that happens in classrooms. Therefore, the only way to get online education adopted on a grand scale is by imposing it via austerity.³⁷

Online education tops the agenda* because it kills a long and growing list of corporate birds, including the standardization of content; further narrowing of curriculum; reduction of the teaching staff; weakening tenure and increasing the use of part-time, low-paid faculty; closing schools and colleges; enriching the ed-tech sector; creating seemingly unlimited quantitative metrics upon which to evaluate faculty; and increasing the privatization of public education that began decades ago.³⁸

But once online education is imposed on a large scale, it will come to be seen as “just what education is” for the substantial segments of the population whose only access to education will be on a screen. And that will be that. If educators, students, parents, and concerned citizens don’t actively defend face-to-face instruction, it will go away for many of our students, especially for disadvantaged students about whom foundation funders regularly express such concern.

The great historian of education and activist Diane Ravitch has said, “Parents and educators know that this bizarre concept of

*The debate about online education is primarily affecting students from working-class and lower-income families. More privileged schools and universities are largely exempt from this discussion. These institutions, well-funded and attended by economically advantaged students, would never accept technology as a substitute for in-person interaction with faculty, staff, and each other.

‘personalized learning’ is a hoax because its stony heart is defined by an interaction between a student and a machine, not between humans.... Parents want their children to have a human teacher who sees them, listens to them, knows them, and cares about them. The students will remember the teachers who inspired them for the rest of their lives; they will not remember their Chromebook and iPads.”³⁹

These degradations of our public schools and colleges are a political choice, a product of neoliberalism and the result of taxing and spending decisions made annually by elected and appointed officials running our K–12 and higher education systems. The public is continually told about the “limited resources” available to education, as if we all must participate in some sort of shared sacrifice during an economic downturn. This is utterly false. The country is richer than it has ever been. We don’t suffer from a lack of resources; we suffer from a lack of sharing.

Against Authoritarianism and For Democracy: Reclaiming Our Power

As educators, we need to look very critically at all the wealthy individuals and business interests who talk incessantly about the purpose of education as providing economic opportunity and social mobility. It is in their interests to talk about education this way, because they then do not have to answer for creating an economy that works well for the few while the majority struggle.

All students deserve outstanding public education that is tuition-free from early childhood through higher education. All students deserve face-to-face instruction and access to smaller classes at every level of schooling. All middle and high school students deserve a well-rounded education, preparing them to participate in our democracy as responsible citizens, to engage in the liberal arts for their development as individuals and community members, and to experience apprenticeships that help them find and embark on careers that they find fulfilling. All college students deserve a wide range of programs to select from, as well as tuition-free public higher education options, as our great public university systems were intentionally built to provide. All students on career tracks after high school deserve access to flexible, well-integrated vocational and higher education pathways. And all educational faculty and staff deserve access to a labor union and to be treated and paid as the critical professionals they are.

The wealthiest country in the world can afford everything our students, educators, and staff deserve—we just have to choose the people over corporate interests.

Corporate America and Ronald Reagan stole education from democracy to cloak us in the fantasy economy and impose the dreadfully unpopular and unequal economic system known as neoliberalism. The extreme and growing inequality ushered in by neoliberalism has led to significant instability in our democracy.⁴⁰ There’s a straight line from Reagan and *Workforce 2000* to the authoritarianism of billionaires Donald Trump and Elon Musk.

It’s time for educators and concerned citizens to reclaim the economy and democracy and make education about the creation of well-rounded, informed, fulfilled, democratic citizens. In the process, it is time to jettison the capitalism-on-steroids

known as neoliberalism and construct an economy that works for all.

As educators, our power is limited. But as educators, union members, parents, neighbors, community members, and political activists, our power is multiplied. As we stand shoulder to shoulder, we can ensure everyone in our spheres understands what President Trump’s love of billionaires and authoritarians means for democracy and inequality. Alone, we can’t change the labor market, but once we awaken the vast majority of people suffering under neoliberalism, together we can make demands that will result in real opportunities and dignity for working families.

Alone, we cannot give employees raises or increase manufacturing jobs in the United States, but together, by teaching our neighbors how to form unions in their workplaces and electing leaders who will pass laws that support working families, we can. We can stop the decades-long corporate assault on organized labor, reversing declines in union membership that directly contribute to stagnating wages. We can raise the minimum wage. We can stop employers from using noncompete agreements and independent contractors, both of which depress employees’ wages. We can break up huge monopolistic corporations that suppress workers’ wages, give consumers fewer choices, and wreak havoc on local communities and the environment. We can replace 401(k) plans with employer-provided pensions. We can change the taxing and spending decisions of the federal government, state legislatures, and school districts, making excellent public schools and colleges free.

It’s time for us to make education about the creation of well-rounded, informed, fulfilled, democratic citizens.

The road ahead is long. We have to rewrite the narrative on public education and our economy. We have to show the public the truth about corporate America and how neoliberalism has created massive inequalities. We have to demand a return to a mixed economy in which corporations value their workers and in which public schools and colleges are well-funded because they are recognized as a public good.

Americans know that something is wrong with the economy. The 2024 election shows us that they are grasping for change. But they’ve been misled and betrayed by corporations and the rich. As educators, we are perfectly positioned to teach our neighbors how to achieve our shared goals of increased opportunity, dignity, respect, and a better life for all. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/kraus.

Ideology Over Evidence

The Truth About Vouchers and How They Harm Students



By Josh Cowen

Much of my career as a researcher, writer, and teacher has been built on the idea that evidence should inform public policy. What works, why, and for whom? This was the view with which I leapt, as a young scholar, at the chance to join large research projects concerning the extraordinarily controversial issue of school vouchers: programs that use tax dollars to fund private school tuition and expenses. I felt lucky to work on a federally supported grant with the express purpose of training young analysts to use evidence-based research, while also joining a team that would examine Milwaukee's famous voucher system.

Looking back two decades later, I think that my youthful enthusiasm for evidence use in public policy seems misplaced—optimistic, for sure, and probably naïve. For in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the largest academic

declines ever apparent in the education research record, on any topic, have been attributable to school vouchers. And yet the drumbeat to devote more and more resources to these voucher systems remains louder than ever.

The facts, it would seem, are no match for big-dollar investments—many of them opaque contributions from extraordinarily wealthy individuals who have been pushing voucher plans forward for more than 30 years. Voucher programs are expanding, while the evidence against them is mounting.

My contribution with *The Privateers* (see page 39) is to highlight the way that vast wealth, virulent ideology—usually Christian nationalist in nature, but also a powerful strand of economic libertarianism—and an insular network of intellectuals, lawyers, and lobbyists have advanced an agenda from the rightward fringes of education policy into the political median.

Vast sums of money have supported the academic and other research-focused adherents to voucher ideology. That support—what amounts to industry funding of research to support a product—has successfully countered the empirical reality of the voucher scheme in many places. But those dollars have not been able to change that basic reality.

Here is that evidence in seven straightforward results:

1. Today's Voucher Programs Primarily Support Students Who Were Never in Public School

As the number of states with vouchers grew in the years leading up to this book's publication in 2024, the typical voucher recipi-

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ent had never been in public school. They were already enrolled in private school without taxpayer support, were in homeschool, or were enrolling in private kindergarten from the start. Estimates uncannily hover around the same figure—roughly 70 percent—of students in the most recent programs coming from private schools in states that have released the data: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Wisconsin.¹ And we know from similar reporting that many of the private schools serving such students raise tuition once vouchers become law.²

2. The Larger and More Recent the Voucher Program Is, the Worse the Academic Results

Between 1996 and 2002, a series of academic papers and other reports by one team of pro-voucher researchers showed small positive voucher impacts on standardized tests. Between 2005 and 2010, two major evaluations—one in Milwaukee and the other in Washington, DC—found no impacts, whether positive or negative, on student outcomes. Since 2013, as voucher programs nevertheless began to expand, studies from multiple evaluation teams have found that vouchers cause some of the largest academic declines on record in education research. In Louisiana, for example, the results from studies modeled as randomized control trials—conducted by two separate research teams—found nega-

tive academic impacts as high as -0.40 of a standard deviation.³ A second, federal evaluation in Washington, DC, using that randomized design, and research in Indiana using statistical methods to measure student outcomes over time, both found impacts closer to -0.15 of a standard deviation.⁴ Results in Ohio using similar methods to the Indiana research found academic loss up to -0.50 of a standard deviation.⁵ To put these recent, negative impacts in perspective, current estimates of COVID-19's impact

Vouchers cause some of the largest academic declines on record in education research.

on academic trajectories hover around -0.25 of a standard deviation, while Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans students was roughly -0.17 of a standard deviation.⁶

I have seen the voucher push play out from multiple sides and while wearing multiple professional hats. And it is with the full weight of that experience—18 years now and counting—that I say emphatically: there is nothing in education policymaking today that comes close to the conservative political apparatus accessed by and indeed influencing and even driving, at times, the creation of evidence on behalf of school vouchers. Because of the fundamental link in this present time to broader culture war battles centered around religious nationalism fights over the meaning of freedom, I believe today that voucher advocacy is fundamentally damaging to American civil society. Years ago, I was more involved in this creation than most, and less involved than many. I would like to think my small part was something less than as an accomplice. But certainly, I have been a witness.

One thing is certain: the case for vouchers, whether by scholars, writers, lawyers, lobbyists, or billionaire heirs, has always been a deliberate construction. It is the architecture of an assault on public education as a defining American institution. In this book, I detail the history of that assault, from Milton Friedman's 1955 essay proposing school vouchers (which he promoted as a way to

avoid school integration) to today's drive for "educational freedom," which includes not only vouchers but also book bans, marginalization of LGBTQ+ families, and censored curricula on issues of race and diversity.

I also reveal who is behind all these efforts, sharing familiar and not-so-familiar names. The economic politics of Charles Koch quite literally meets the religious politics of groups like Betsy DeVos's family, the Family Research Council, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Christian Coalition through an organization called the Council for National Policy (CNP), which has members from media organizations, think tanks, political strategists, and extraordinarily wealthy donors focused on fundamentalist policy goals. What they have in common is a shared progressive enemy (usually but not always the Democratic Party), antipathy toward regulatory government, hostility toward labor unions, and a wariness of demographic change they believe to come at a cost to their economic interests and social values.

Education is an intersection for these ideological pathways because—as with *Brown v. Board of Education* and broader desegregation efforts—it is in education that social values form. Above all, members of CNP and its affiliate groups connect through

an active, even aggressive, approach to the use of wealth to further their aims in the political arena, particularly in state legislatures and executive offices, since that's where much of the mechanics of education policy form and function.

—J. C.



Similarly, although earlier studies—including one for which I was the lead author—found evidence that vouchers may modestly improve educational attainment (high school completion or college enrollment), more recent research has found no attainment impacts in either direction.⁷ Moreover, the mechanism behind any improvement is ambiguous, especially in the face of substantially negative test score results. If a small voucher advantage is apparent, it may be due to pipeline impacts—religiously affiliated high schools sending students to religiously affiliated colleges nearby. And research is clear that the attainment advantage exists primarily for students who don’t leave voucher programs—a major source of potential selection bias in even the randomized studies.⁸

3. Financially Distressed Private Schools Explain Negative Student Results

Research shows that vouchers create new markets for pop-up school providers, opening specifically to cash in on the taxpayer subsidy.⁹ The schools that existed before—if they accept vouchers at all—tend to be financially distressed, with the voucher program

voucher programs: that private schools raise their tuition when taxpayers begin subsidizing costs via vouchers.¹²

4. The Most Vulnerable Kids Suffer High Voucher Turnover—Or Are Pushed Out of Voucher Schools

When it comes to vouchers, the decision is as much about the school’s choice as parental choice. Much of the early debate on school vouchers—and about school choice more generally—concerned the concept of “cream-skimming.” The idea behind that unfortunate phrase was that private schools had incentives to admit relatively advantaged students over disadvantaged peers. Research on early programs that had limits on income to be eligible for a voucher found little to suggest that cream-skimming fears played out—at least insofar as they related to family resources.¹³ Instead, the evidence shows high rates of student turnover within and between school years for voucher-using children. In two studies, my own research team found not only that rates of student exit from Milwaukee’s voucher program approached 20 percent annually but that those former voucher students saw academic improvements once they returned to public schools.¹⁴

Who were those children who gave up their voucher? They tended to be students of color, lower-income students, and those with relatively low test scores.¹⁵ Reports from Florida, Indiana, and Louisiana have found similarly high annual exit rates.¹⁶ Investigative reporting has also identified student pushout as one way that voucher schools manipulate their enrollment to get the students they want. Reports show that students with disabilities and students who identify (or whose parents identify) as LGBTQ+ have been asked to leave voucher programs after a more transparent admissions process has let them into the school.¹⁷

5. Oversight Improves Voucher Performance

Since the dismal voucher results began appearing more than a decade ago, a major talking point among voucher advocates has been attributing that academic harm to “overregulation.”¹⁸ The idea largely concedes that, in past programs, voucher-accepting private schools were financially distressed, lower-quality providers. But that concession holds that government oversight on issues like admissions standards (which include enrollment rules against discrimination) or standardized testing kept out more effective providers. The problem with the “overregulation” theory is that it’s untested. In fact, to this day, the only empirical evidence of the effects of accountability on a voucher program comes from our team in Milwaukee, which found that, once a new law requiring No Child Left Behind–style performance reporting applied to the voucher program—and once

private school outcomes were listed by school name, as in the public sector—voucher academic outcomes rose dramatically.¹⁹ It is partly through oversight policies like Wisconsin’s that we have some explanation for negative voucher impacts: there, for example, many of the lowest-scoring students in STEM subjects on the state exam were using vouchers to attend schools teaching creationism as their science curriculum.²⁰

Private schools raise their tuition when taxpayers begin subsidizing costs via vouchers.



acting as something of a bailout.¹⁰ Research from Milwaukee, on the country’s oldest program, has shown that 41 percent of private schools accepting vouchers closed during the program’s life span.¹¹ The average time to failure was four years for pop-up schools opening after that program expanded and eight years for preexisting schools. Financial distress is one reason that academic research predicted what media reporting has shown in newer

6. Parents Looking for Academic Quality Struggle to Find Room in Private Schools

The pattern of academic loss for voucher students raises the question of what parents actually want. Studies from New Orleans are especially useful, because researchers at and affiliated with Tulane University have been able to use school application data to study how parents make priorities.²¹ Those results indicate that, although parents do consider school features like demographics, safety, size, and distance to home, the academic performance of the school remains a determining factor in the way they rank preferences.²² Similar results have been found in Washington, DC, as well.²³ Unfortunately, that evidence also suggests that there simply are not enough effective private schools to go around—perhaps a more practical explanation for dismal voucher results than ideological arguments about regulation.²⁴

7. Voucher-Induced Competition Raises Public School Outcomes Somewhat—But the Evidence for Directly Funding Vulnerable Public Schools Is Stronger

Finally, for those hoping for a bright side to vouchers, there is modest evidence that voucher programs compel small improvements in public school achievement outcomes through competitive pressures. Such results have been found in Louisiana and Florida.²⁵ In these papers, statistically significant impacts of competitive pressure are most apparent in low-income communities that stand to lose substantial funding from voucher programs. However, if the goal is to simply improve public school outcomes, studies showing the impact of directly funding public schools are far more prevalent.²⁶ Providing more resources to begin with helps students more than pitting vulnerable communities against each other to compete for scarce dollars.

Looking Ahead

What would it mean to offer an evidence-based but also equity-based and ethical alternative to the deceptive simplicity of parents' rights and private school choice as a cure-all? Any suggestion I have would draw from the old adage "You get what you pay for," and from the Gospel of Matthew: *Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.*

Fund public schools. It really is that simple. In as much as the last decade of rigorous evidence on school vouchers has identified some of the largest academic losses in the research record, the last decade has also solidified a growing consensus among experts that the more money we spend on schools, the better off children are, not simply academically, but in later-life outcomes like higher wages and fewer encounters with the criminal justice system.

In the last several years, study after study takes that conclusion further. Academic outcomes improve dramatically.²⁷ Educational attainment levels rise.²⁸ Later-in-life incomes grow for workers who were children when policymakers decided to spend new dollars on their public schools.²⁹ Poverty levels fall, and the chances that those children will commit future crimes and become incar-

Even the best-case scenario for school voucher impacts is, in the long run, a failed strategy for educational opportunity.



cerated fall with them.³⁰ When states take on the task of spending equalization across local districts, intergenerational economic mobility improves.³¹ And we know that when school spending declines—as in an economic recession—the results are equally apparent in the opposite direction: cuts to public school funding stall academic progress.³² That means that even the best-case scenario for school voucher impacts—evidence that vouchers will spur improvement when public and private schools compete for scarce financial resources—is in the long run a failed strategy for educational opportunity.³³ And not all dollars are created equal: intergenerational mobility depends on states leveling the playing field for districts with different access to resources.³⁴ That means that voucher plans that move state funds into private schools and leave public districts with only a local funding base—even if that base is secure in the short run—are setting those communities up for disaster when inevitable economic downturns come.

Of course, how we spend that money still matters, both in terms of the specific funding sources and the programs and services that money supports. Other books can and do detail evidence-based spending targets.³⁵ But my view is from a big-picture perspective, and from the standpoint of motivating renewed investments not only in the operation of public education but in its *purpose*. And from that vantage point, answers must form around whole-child approaches, the idea of schools as communities, and the idea of learning as a lifelong endeavor. Ideas include universal school meals that nourish kids throughout the day and alleviate the stigma of poverty; school-based health clinics not simply for children but for the adults who serve them; weighted-funding formulas that reflect

the true cost of educating diverse learners; grow-your-own teacher training programs drawing on local talent; and early childhood investments alongside after-school and summer school programs that recognize education is no longer just 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, 180 days a year. Each of these has a stronger base of evidence than school vouchers. And each in its own way provides a rationale for public education that affects daily life.

Then, because of who and what Christian nationalists are attacking (both implicitly and increasingly explicitly) when they speak about “education freedom,” there does require a direct

defense of public education as a matter of human rights. The marginalization of LGBTQ+ families, reproductive rights, environmental justice, and histories of underserved communities in the United States not only coincides with but is a weapon in the attack on public schools. Our national debates on these issues are potent because they measure commitments to future generations of Americans who will define their own identities and their own destinies rather than having their parents and grandparents define their futures for them. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/cowen.

The Hidden Costs of Voucher Programs

How Public School Students Are Harmed



BY HILARY WETHING

Universal voucher programs for schools are rapidly expanding across the country. Under these programs, states give parents stipends to either homeschool their children or send them to private school. As a policy tool, school vouchers have a long and questionable history. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, several Southern states used vouchers to undermine

school integration efforts, with states offering voucher programs to enable parents of white children to afford segregated private schools.¹

Starting in the 1990s, many states enacted “modern” voucher programs with the claim of supporting students with special needs or students in low-income districts, offering a small number of these students pathways to private school. The number of students using vouchers stood at just 11,000 in 2000 but had increased to over 600,000 by 2021.² More recently, legislation has broadened the applicant pool for vouchers by creating universal programs; as of January 2025, 12 states have programs in which

any student can use public funds to pay for private education.³

While additional costs to provide quality education are not problematic, study after study has found that voucher programs do not improve student achievement. Therefore, vouchers are not a cost-effective way to spend any additional dollars that states or localities are willing to commit to K–12 education. (For details, see “Ideology Over Evidence” on page 38.)

Proponents of vouchers have been under-terred by the lackluster achievement results and often claim school choice is inherently beneficial.⁴ In addition, they try to claim that expanding vouchers would not harm public

Hilary Wething is an economist at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI); previously, she was an assistant professor of public policy at Pennsylvania State University. This article is adapted from her EPI report How Vouchers Harm Public Schools, which is available at go.aft.org/uw6.

resources for education. Their argument hinges on the fact that public school spending is generally determined by governments setting a per-pupil allocation and then multiplying this allocation by projected enrollment. This funding model allows voucher proponents to claim that if vouchers pull children out of public schools, it still leaves per-pupil spending untouched, even though vouchers might reduce overall spending. In effect, proponents are arguing that vouchers would not degrade public schools' ability to provide educational services.

The Economic Policy Institute's analysis shows that vouchers do harm public schools because not all education costs can change commensurately with student enrollment. For example, schools still need to pay for building operations and maintenance, regardless of whether some students leave public schools to attend private schools using vouchers. These "fixed costs" can't be reduced when overall spending is reduced, and that leaves less money for districts to spend on costs that can be reduced, which often include instruction and student support services. To illustrate the damage, we developed a free online tool (available at go.aft.org/uw6) that estimates the *fiscal externality of voucher programs*—the dollar costs to school districts from students leaving public schools with a voucher. (In economics, an *externality* produces an outcome for those who aren't responsible for the decision at hand. In this case, the fiscal externality is the negative effect that voucher programs have on public school systems as they redirect money away from traditional public schools.) The fiscal externality does not quantify the entire cost of voucher programs. It represents

a piece of those costs—but an important, often hidden, piece.

Users of the tool can try out different scenarios to see how much money students will lose out on, putting a number to the reality that children who don't participate in voucher programs still bear the cost of educational choices that others make. Here are some factors affecting how much vouchers cost public schools:

- How many children will go to private schools or be home-schooled in a given year?
- How quickly will enrollment numbers in public schools fall?
- How many of the school district's costs are fixed and can't be changed in response to lower enrollment numbers? (For example, heating and cooling costs for school buildings will remain the same regardless of enrollment.)
- How many of the school district's costs are variable and can be changed in response to the drop in enrollment numbers? (If, for example, fourth-graders were exclusively targeted by voucher programs, school districts could reduce the number of fourth-grade teachers in response—but often the decline in enrollment is much more diffuse, making the choice to let go of any one teacher difficult.)

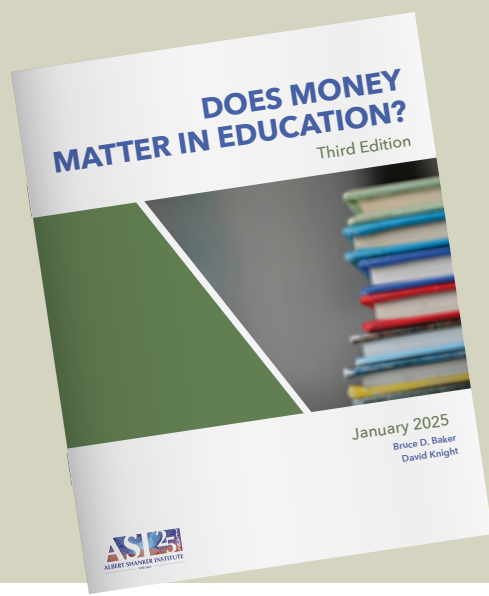
Consider this example from Ohio, a state with one of the oldest active voucher pro-

grams in the country and where vouchers have grown substantially. Using the fiscal externality tool to estimate the impact of a 5 percent decline in enrollment for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District shows that Cleveland public school students stand to lose \$364 to \$927 per pupil in education spending, which adds up to \$12 million to \$31 million per year.

Vouchers harm public schools because not all education costs can change with student enrollment.

These externalities are not just a problem for public budgets. Students stand to lose out on their potential educational achievement when funding to schools is cut.⁵ When that funding is reduced, students, particularly in high-poverty neighborhoods, are likely to have worse outcomes than they would have had if their schools had retained the previous level of education funding. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/wething.



Money Matters

As the research shared by Josh Cowen and Hilary Wething demonstrates, vouchers reduce student achievement and drain funds from public schools. This is especially concerning in light of a recent report from the Albert Shanker Institute conclusively showing that

- increasing K–12 funding improves student outcomes (such as test scores, graduation rates, college attainment, and earnings) and funding cuts hurt those outcomes;
- spending on both current operations and capital investments (like heating, air conditioning, and science facilities) helps students; and
- the benefits are particularly strong for economically disadvantaged students and districts where states have historically underinvested.

The full report, which is the third edition of *Does Money Matter in Education?*, is available for free at go.aft.org/jjs.

—EDITORS

Expanding Access to College

Higher Education Is Vital to Saving Democracy



President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who helped pull the nation out of the Great Depression and built the foundation for the American social safety net, said, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education."¹ As extremists threaten to undermine democracy by attacking higher education, the AFT's Real Solutions for Higher Education campaign seeks to counter the assault by making colleges and universities more accessible and affordable.

Expanding access to Connecticut's public universities is the goal of legislation drafted and pushed by the Connecticut State University American Association of University

Professors (CSU-AAUP), an AFT affiliate that represents about 3,000 faculty, librarians, counselors, coaches, and athletic trainers at the four state universities. This past June, CSU-AAUP succeeded in getting the Connecticut General Assembly to pass their bill extending free tuition from the community college to the state universities. To find out more about this exciting campaign to enhance opportunity for students, we spoke with CSU-AAUP President Louise Williams, who is a history professor at Central Connecticut State University, and CSU-AAUP Secretary John O'Connor, who is a sociology professor at Central Connecticut State University.

—EDITORS



"We're hoping that expanding the debt-free program will save our universities from austerity politics at a time when higher education is more important than ever."

—Louise Williams

EDITORS: Connecticut currently has a pathway for debt-free community college. How does that work?

LOUISE WILLIAMS: Connecticut's four state universities and one community college with 12 campuses are part of a single system, the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, with one board of regents. In 2019, the state legislature passed a bill that created the Pledge to Advance Connecticut (PACT)/the Mary Ann Handley Award to cover community college tuition and enable students to complete associate's degrees debt-free. It is a "last-dollar" program that covers the remaining costs of tuition and fees after financial aid is used. Importantly, students are not expected to take out loans as part of their financial aid. There's also a basic needs grant of up to \$1,000 that covers anything from books to childcare for students whose tuition and fees are covered by a Pell Grant.²

The program has been successful in the community college. Last year, it served more than 13,000 students. Students receiving these funds are 17 percent more likely to persist from fall to spring and 9 percent more likely to graduate than their peers who are not receiving the funds.³

JOHN O'CONNOR: This higher education program is important because Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, yet

it is defined by serious levels of inequality.⁴ The progressive movement in Connecticut often points out that there are "two Connecticuts," where opportunities and outcomes in the state are defined by our zip codes. One's prospects in East Hartford are very different than those in West Hartford; same in Bridgeport and Westport.

EDITORS: How did you plan to make four-year degrees more accessible?

LOUISE: Extending the PACT/Handley Award—now renamed the Finish Line Scholars program—into the state universities was a broad, collective struggle. Our CSU-AAUP colleagues drafted a bill to extend the debt-free program to the four state universities. A version of that bill was folded into the state budget, creating a program in which students who received the PACT/Handley Award for community college will now be eligible for two more years of support at the state universities. We'd like to eventually expand this program to other students, so they can complete all four years at a state university without incurring huge debt.

Union members, students, community allies, union siblings, and legislators all worked in unison to get the win. We found sponsors in the legislature to introduce the bill, lobbied politicians, held a public hearing in the higher education committee, and got about 100 people to testify. Faculty and students continued their advocacy right up to the end of the legislative session. It was a real nail-biting experience—the program was in and out of the budget, changing by the hour. But we never stopped advocating. And we succeeded.

In all honesty, we didn't think we would win, but we did. We got much further than we expected—and we'll be back next year to push it further.

JOHN: It is a CSU-AAUP victory for our members, staff, lobbyist, and students, but it is also a victory for all progressive forces in the state. You don't win something like this without a lot of help. CSU-AAUP is part of two important coalitions that stood with us. Both the Connecticut For All coalition, which is made up of 60 labor, community, and religious groups, and SEBAC (the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition), made up of 15 public sector unions, understood that public higher education is about opportunity and progress, so they lined up behind our bill.

Our campaign benefited from, but also strengthened, the relationship between CSU-AAUP and AFT Connecticut. And the national AFT and the Real Solutions for Higher Education crew forced us to think through key elements of the campaign. The Real Solutions grant we won from the national AFT allowed us to engage student interns to help us demonstrate the importance of this program in a clear, compelling way. It was students who testified in favor of the bill, held a press conference, and pushed the politicians.

LOUISE: While our main focus was on expanding opportunities for students, the added funds that the Finish Line Scholars program will bring to our university campuses are also much needed. Since the Great Recession in 2008, funding for public higher education has remained flat, meaning it hasn't kept up with inflation. This has created a vicious cycle in which tuition goes up and enrollment goes down. We're hoping that expanding the debt-free program will save our universities from austerity politics at a time when higher education is more important than ever.

Politically, we have a trifecta in Connecticut: a Democratic governor and Democrats controlling both houses of the state legislature. If we cannot fully support debt-free higher education for more residents, our public higher education institutions are in trouble. Connecticut should be a model for all the other states. We want to help our students, but we see this as a much bigger issue about the value of higher education.

JOHN: In the past, there was a pipeline from our community colleges to our state universities. That pipeline has become broken, likely because of permanent austerity causing tuition increases and because of COVID-19. We are hoping to reestablish that pipeline.

LOUISE: The AFT's Real Solutions for Higher Education campaign says it all: it's about access, affordability, and equity. There are many people in Connecticut who do not have access to higher education—and many of our students face significant challenges. Some are first generation or come from less well-resourced high schools. John mentioned the inequities across Connecticut. Debt-free community college is a good start. Expanding access to bachelor's degrees by itself will not end those disparities. But it will help.

EDITORS: Why is expanding access particularly important now, as we face democratic backsliding?

JOHN: I believe we can trace today's democratic backsliding to the causes and consequences of neoliberal policies that have been in effect for more than 40 years. Neoliberalism, in its essence, is about a massive transfer of resources from the bottom and middle to the top—dramatically increasing inequality, narrowing opportunity, and making life difficult for working families. In order for corporate America, and the politicians loyal to corporate America, to engineer such a massive transfer of resources and have their policies virtually unopposed for so long, they had to depoliticize the population and destroy progressive forces. Politicized folks tend to be highly engaged. They follow the news, track what their representatives are doing, build coalitions to make their voices heard, and ensure that others know what is happening at the local, state, and federal levels. Depoliticized folks are often too focused on surviving and do not “interfere” with corporate America's agenda. Ultimately, that's what's driving the far right's attack on higher education.

A university education helps people develop the ability to dissent and to participate in democratic decision-making in a real, concrete way. For most people who have power, who have wealth, the last thing they are interested in is meaningful democracy. The elite can pay for their children to attend private universities, so they understand that it's in their interests to starve public universities.

LOUISE: Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the private universities lobbied hard against our bill.

JOHN: Not long ago, higher education in the United States was hailed as “the great equalizer.” But today, higher education institutions consolidate the inequality that exists. Connecticut can



“A university education helps people develop the ability to dissent and to participate in democratic decision-making in a real, concrete way.”

—John O'Connor

afford to change course. We have over \$4 billion in our rainy-day fund—we just needed lawmakers who were willing to make access to a bachelor's degree a top priority.

LOUISE: The governor has been saying recently that if the federal government starts doing anything to withhold money from Connecticut, he may be willing to get around some of the state's spending caps to deal with that loss. So far, he's not willing to get around the spending caps to support higher education. His recent biennial budget is like previous ones that did not provide adequate funding for operations without cuts or tuition increases. He seems to have bought into the notion that people should pay for their own higher education. But when austerity politics result in higher education being so expensive that it's impossible to afford even for those with a full-time job, that isn't realistic. Many of my students work full-time, and they simply can't afford college. Even many of my students from middle-class families have to drop out. Politicians complain that our retention rates aren't very good, but they overlook the reason that students are being shut out of higher education.

Our bill focused on the neediest students—but our long-term goal is for Connecticut's state universities to be tuition-free for all four years for everyone who would have to go into debt to afford a bachelor's degree.

JOHN: To create a vibrant and serious democracy, we're going to have to re-politicize people—that is, empower them to say no. Making higher education free is an important first step. But we

also need to revitalize our unions and social movements. Being organized and in the streets is critical for making our voices heard.

LOUISE: It is interesting that a union, CSU-AAUP, is pushing for free tuition. Some people have said to me, “Why are you doing that? That’s not about faculty wages or benefits.” But it *is* about saving higher education, not just for faculty, but for students and for the nation. So, it’s the union movement that is really pushing for this.

EDITORS: How does higher education bolster democracy?

LOUISE: When we think about Connecticut’s neediest students, inner cities like Hartford and New Haven come to mind. But we also have a great deal of rural poverty and isolation. One of the great benefits of our state universities is bringing these students together, along with their wealthier peers. In my classroom, we create a community where people have to talk to one another and discuss their assumptions. They look at the facts and have to think critically.

When students from very diverse backgrounds listen and talk to each other, I see the transformation in them. They come in with certain assumptions, but as they examine evidence, hear others’ perspectives, and think independently, they develop their own ideas. Thankfully, we don’t just have students from different parts of the state. We have a lot of students from different countries, and we have a lot of students from immigrant families. This gives my students many different perspectives to consider.

I taught a course last semester in which we engaged in complex role-playing games about historical events and eras like the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The big questions were about democracy and opportunity: Who should vote? Why is it important to vote? When do revolutions happen? Why did the French Revolution happen? What is the role of the government in helping the poor? Should we have a minimum wage? Students debated real-world issues, and they viewed issues from all sides.

JOHN: Higher education is one of the few institutions within our society that can provide a critique of that society. That is not something we should censor; it’s something we should celebrate and strengthen.

LOUISE: We introduce students to ideas, events, and people they would never know about otherwise. In a course I teach on the British Empire, students learn about political systems and cultures. We engage in an elaborate game on the creation of India and Pakistan as independent states. My students understand what’s going on now between India and Pakistan because they have studied the issues, including the issues of the Hindus as opposed to those of the Muslims. They understand cultural differences. That’s what history is: a storehouse of human experience. I’m not telling them what’s right or wrong, or what they should believe. I’m giving them options. I’m saying, “Here’s one way things were done. Here’s another way things were done. Here are the consequences.”

EDITORS: What are the next steps with the change you have won?

LOUISE: We’ve done a great job in winning this, but there is more to do. Given what is happening in our nation right now, all of higher education needs to be defended. Just bringing up the issue and focusing on higher education is really important. But we’ll keep fighting year after year for our students to have the debt-free access they deserve. There is more work to do.

JOHN: We are committed as a union to expanding access to our state universities. So we’re going to continue to fight.

LOUISE: I agree with John, and I also draw broader lessons from our fight. I think it’s important for people to know that regardless of what happens, you have to try and you have to push. Whatever injustice you see that you want to address, try. You may get further than you think. But even if you don’t, you’ll still bring an important issue to light.



JOHN: Given the unprecedented moment we’re in, the only way forward is to continue to build stronger connections with one another. Part of that is building stronger unions—unions that are embedded in our communities.

How do we advance the common good? We have to stand up for each other. This brings us back to when the labor movement in the United States was very healthy and could think beyond its own members. When the union movement was robust and strong, when we thought about class and community, when we thought about increasing opportunities for all working people. The way forward at this moment is to think about what labor did very well in the past and do that today. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/williams_oconnor.

Protecting Academic Freedom and Our Democracy

THE ROLE OF FACULTY UNIONS



By Randi Weingarten

In the United States, we face an authoritarian threat unlike anything we have seen in our lifetimes. President Donald Trump is swiftly implementing destructive, dehumanizing, and undemocratic dictates from Project 2025, the authoritarian playbook for his second term.¹

Elon Musk carried out his own vast agenda (some would say, shadow presidency) with the impunity of an autocrat. Musk and his aides have waged reckless attacks on vital research, accessed highly restricted sensitive personnel information, and purged the civil service of independent experts. All this from a man who received not a single vote from the American electorate, nor congressional vetting or approval.

It is not hyperbole to say that the survival of democratic government and a free civil society in the United States is at risk. The AFT is using every resource and tool we have in the fight to defend Ameri-

can democracy. We are taking on both Trump and Musk—in courts of law, in the court of public opinion, in Congress, and through commerce—with our allies in civil society and the labor movement.

A key element in our fight is protecting freedom of expression and, because we are a union of educators, defending academic and intellectual freedom. The AFT's founding slogan over a century ago was "Democracy in Education, Education for Democracy." We understand that freedom of expression and of thought, and the freedom to pursue and develop new knowledge in service of the public good, is the lifeblood of what we do in our classrooms, in lecture halls, and in research labs.

As a union of educators, we are especially committed to the freedom of students to learn, because that is how they become engaged, empowered actors in civil society.

Academic freedom is not a special perk—it is the necessary precondition for experimenting, innovating, taking risks, and challenging orthodoxy. Sadly, in our current illiberal environment, academic freedom is also needed to teach honest history, to uphold established scientific truths, and to fight exclusion of and discrimination against marginalized communities.

The same rights that citizens have in a free and democratic society—freedom of thought, of expression, of press, and of association; the right to assemble and peacefully protest; due process and protections against arbitrary and capricious disci-

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It is not hyperbole to say that the survival of democratic government and a **free civil society in the United States is at risk.**

pline—should be guaranteed in academic institutions for faculty, staff, and students.

These rights carry the responsibility to respect the rights of others. It is not acceptable to insist upon your own right to host campus speakers, for example, yet seek to deplatform campus speakers with whom you disagree.

Colleges and universities—and higher education faculty and staff—play an essential role in ensuring vigorous debate on important matters and about the issues that shape our world. It is more important than ever to provide inclusive learning environments where difficult discussions and debates can happen and where free speech on campus is protected.

Amid the wave of campus protests after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the ensuing Gaza war, the AFT reaffirmed our commitment to free speech and peaceful protest, and we reiterated our condemnation of antisemitism and of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate speech and violence. We must condemn hate and violence *and* stand up for academic freedom and free expression.

Schools and campuses must be safe and welcoming for all. But recently, polls have shown that the majority of Jewish students have felt less safe because of anti-Israel campus protests and encampments. Surveys—by the Anti-Defamation League,² Hillel,³ and others⁴—show that protests have also made it more difficult to learn, study, or concentrate, and that students have had classes canceled, interrupted, or moved to Zoom, or have been blocked from attending.

Clearly more must be done to ensure all students, faculty, and staff feel safe and welcome on campus and can engage across differences. Colleges and universities should be sites of free and open debate, where challenging—and sometimes painful—topics and opposing ideas should be discussed and debated in ways that respect diversity of thought and the dignity and humanity of all. Higher education as a site of free speech and protest is even more essential during times of unrest and uncertainty.

Contrary to the claims by some that universities are bastions of indoctrination, the goal of education is not to get all students on the same page politically or ideologically. It is to develop their ability to analyze, critique, and contextualize information—to think for themselves. The ability to reason through complex problems, to separate fact from fiction and information from disinformation, to apply reasoning, and to form one's own opinions is central to knowledge and essential to democracy. Critical thinking is the most important muscle in the exercise of democracy.

Forces Weakening Academic Freedom

American democracy and academic freedom in US colleges and universities are under simultaneous threat. These threats, in turn, jeopardize America's economy and our vaunted innovative spirit.

The 50-year trend of public disinvestment in our public colleges and universities has led to higher tuition and fees for students, cuts in academic programs and courses, institutional closures, and the decline of stable, full-time positions in academia.⁵

The rampant dismantling of tenure-track positions over the past several decades has done grave harm to academic freedom. Contingent workers now make up two-thirds of the nation's academic workforce, with only a quarter tenured or tenure-track.⁶ Academics increasingly are joining the ranks of gig workers. Precarious employment understandably chills the exercise of academic freedom and risk-taking.

A national survey of nearly 9,000 higher education faculty in the United States found disturbing signs of a national crisis for educational freedom.⁷ The survey was conducted by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, which is affiliated with the AFT), the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and NORC at the University of Chicago. Significant numbers of faculty reported that their academic freedom has diminished in recent years. They feel more constrained in their ability to speak freely in the classroom and in speaking as citizens. Sizable numbers also reported increased pressure to avoid controversy from state lawmakers, from funders or donors, and from regents. More than half of faculty reported that they have self-censored in response to perceived threats to their academic freedom, including refraining from expressing views that they, as scholars, believe are correct.



The challenge is to frame academic freedom so it involves **the rights of students to learn and the rights of citizens to be informed.**



Political scrutiny and attacks on universities and colleges escalated in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election. Congressional Republicans called university presidents to McCarthy-style hearings about their handling of protests against the war in Gaza.⁸ And the Trump administration has halted the flow of billions of dollars of federal funding to many universities that have allowed pro-Palestinian protests on their campuses.⁹

The state of Florida is the canary in a coal mine for educational freedom in American higher education.¹⁰ Other states controlled by MAGA Republicans often adopt the laws, policies, and practices Florida pioneered, and congressional Republicans have proposed national legislation based on what Florida has done. In the last five years, Florida has

- eviscerated tenure protections that provide the main defense for academic freedom in the state's public universities and colleges;¹¹
- engaged in a hostile takeover of New College of Florida, a once highly regarded state college with a progressive educational philosophy;¹²
- eliminated all diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in state universities and colleges;¹³
- removed sociology from the core curriculum in state universities and colleges after its state education commissioner declared that the discipline had been "hijacked by left-wing activists";¹⁴
- pulled scores of courses from the core curriculum in state universities and colleges, without any due process findings;¹⁵ and
- banned the Advanced Placement African American Studies course for its discussion of racism and African American history.¹⁶

Florida is hardly alone in undermining educational freedom. In March, Republican lawmakers in Ohio passed a law that bans DEI efforts, sets rules around classroom discussions, and takes away the right of college and university faculty to strike.¹⁷ The Texas

AAUP conference says universities are already over-complying with the state's ambiguous DEI ban.¹⁸ And in June, Republican lawmakers in Texas passed a law that limits the role of professors in shared governance on their campuses.¹⁹

Trump has trained his sights on America's colleges and universities as well, accusing them of being "dominated by Marxist Maniacs and lunatics."²⁰ His vice president, JD Vance, called professors "the enemy" and promised to "aggressively attack the universities in this country."²¹ A tactic in their quest to quash and control higher education, their perceived opponent, is to smear it.

In the first week of his second term, Trump issued executive orders that created huge uncertainty and anxiety for researchers and scientists who rely on federal grants to fund their research and their livelihoods. These funding freezes not only are attacks on the academic workers in these labs. They also result in very real harm to the public—to all of us. I have spoken to AFT members who are primary investigators in labs that are researching links between common viruses and cancer, working on opioid addiction, and researching cures to Type 1 diabetes. Freezing this funding is an unprecedented attack on public health and on the integrity and independence of academic research.

If Trump continues to carry out mandates from Project 2025, the administration could move to eliminate public student loan forgiveness, impose federal regulations on the accreditation process, require federally funded research to be aligned with the administration's priorities, and wage further attacks on whatever he doesn't agree with by labeling it as "DEI."

Add to this litany of challenges a long-standing problem we must confront: the perception of higher education as elitist. As Nick Burns, an editor at *Americas Quarterly*, wrote, "Even as concerns about social justice continue to preoccupy students and administrations, these universities often seem to be out of touch with the society they claim to care so much about."²²

A Pew study last year found that 45 percent of Americans say colleges and universities have a negative impact on the country.²³ That is staggering, and unfortunately it's not an outlier.

A 2024 Gallup survey about Americans' confidence in various institutions found that an increasing proportion of US adults say they have little or no confidence in higher education. "Of Americans who lack confidence in higher education, 41 percent mention colleges being 'too liberal,' trying to 'indoctrinate' or 'brainwash' students, or not allowing students to think for themselves as reasons for their opinions."²⁴

How Do We Defend and Strengthen Academic Freedom?

This is a dizzying array of challenges confronting higher education. Here is my thinking on what we need to do to make sure that

To secure, protect, and promote these rights and this common good, we must act collectively.

academic work is protected: our efforts must be centered around the central purpose of higher education—indeed, around the purpose of knowledge.

Think back to the Morrill Act of 1862, which created the foundation for what is today the public system of higher education in the United States. The act provided that all qualified students should have access to a land-grant university education grounded in research and scholarship. Of course, “all” at the time meant all white males; the Second Morrill Act of 1890 expanded to include Black males.

This view of knowledge for all is in the DNA of American higher education. Here’s how my alma mater, Cornell University, as New York state’s land-grant institution, describes its charge: to advance “the lives and livelihoods of the state’s citizens through teaching, research, and public service.”²⁵

Adlai Stevenson II described the essential purpose of higher education articulated in the Wisconsin plan as “the application of intelligence and reason to the problems of society.”²⁶

These are the foundational purposes of higher education. Scholarship. Research. Social and economic mobility. Societal improvement. I believe that most Americans generally support those purposes.

But we have to be clear-eyed. For most people in the United States, the concept of tenure reeks of “we are better than the rest of you.” An AAUP data snapshot shows that “support for faculty freedom of expression has been falling in recent years, particularly among those who hold conservative views.”²⁷ If we are to stem the continued erosion of academic freedom, we have to think about it in a different way.

The challenge I am laying out is for us to open up the aperture. To frame academic freedom so it is explicitly clear that it involves the rights of students to learn and the rights of citizens to be informed. The right for communities to have a better future—not just intellectually, but economically.

We must make common cause with the local economy, local businesses. Often the college or university is the engine of the local economy. We must build relationships. Offer job training, internships. Let’s make it clear we need each other.

We must demonstrate the direct connection of community and economic well-being to the purposes of higher education that I just discussed—advancing knowledge, fostering social mobility, creating opportunity, and benefiting society. If our argument for academic freedom is that it is only about the freedom of an elite few, it will fail.

We must show that students’ freedom to learn is harmed when educators are too scared to allow discussion of vaguely defined “divisive concepts.” We must show that it is an assault on educational freedom to prohibit teaching a full and honest account of our

nation’s history. In our pluralistic society, it is unfathomably myopic to limit discussions of racism, sexism, and other societal harms.

We are in a dangerous moment, when democratically elected leaders in the United States are actively curtailing freedoms. Look at the torrent of assaults on rights, freedoms, and vulnerable populations. The targeting of reproductive freedom, immigrants, and the LGBTQIA+ community. And, yes, the targeting of education.

Our union must be the main defender of academic freedom. We can’t leave it to administrators; just look at how many rolled over in Florida. We can’t leave it to governments, because in many places they are the problem.

To secure, protect, and promote these rights and this common good, we must act collectively. That’s why the AFT is organizing so aggressively, why we are fighting for real job security for our academic workers in precarious appointments, why we are negotiating protections for academic freedom into our contracts, and why we are defending our members and the important role that higher education plays in knowledge production through lawsuits and other actions. That’s why the affiliation of the AFT with the AAUP is so important—and why winning elections is so important.

The AFT has fought the battle for freedom of expression, for academic and intellectual freedom in education, throughout our existence. We will continue this fight, alongside allies, because it is at the very core of who we are as a union. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/weingarten.



Fighting Disinformation

Norway's Proactive Approach



By Oscar Westlund

In their values, laws, and practices, liberal democracies typically support freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and academic freedom. These freedoms are cornerstones of any democratic society and cannot be taken for granted, yet they are repeatedly assaulted—especially in countries marked by autocratization. In 2024, there were 91 autocracies and 88 democracies in the world, the first time in 20 years that autocracies exceeded democracies.¹ Assaults on science in countries such as Hungary and Turkey have been salient, as has the quick escalation in 2025 of the assault on academia and journalism in the United States. Although dozens of lawsuits (including several by the AFT) may eventually restore essential funding and freedoms in the United States, the Trump administration is working toward shutting down the US Department of Education and has been requiring schools

and universities to terminate DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) initiatives, withholding funding to schools and universities, and canceling federal funding of research into areas such as climate change, LGBTQIA+ health, and disinformation.

As the article by Ruth Ben-Ghiat shows (see page 12), such assaults on freedoms are part of the authoritarian playbook. Time after time, authoritarian leaders assault academics and journalists to reduce their capacity to produce verified information and check leaders' power. Scholars and professional journalists who want to uphold freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and academic freedom must actively resist authoritarianism.² But how?

My research is focused on digital media, journalism, disinformation, and fact-checking. This article is informed also by my personal and professional experiences. I'm Swedish but have lived in Norway and currently hold appointments at universities in Norway and Sweden—and I collaborate with researchers in the United States and beyond. Like other Nordic countries, Norway is known for scoring high on freedoms for the public, the press, and academics. Given current democratic backsliding in the United States, US academics, journalists, and concerned citizens may find

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Norway's approaches to minimizing misinformation and protecting the public's right to knowledge especially useful. Norway is a constitutional monarchy and well-resourced liberal democracy with a multiparty parliamentary system and high levels of trust between the government and its citizens.³ Comparative research of media systems has found that Norway has a strong news ecosystem marked by high news consumption and trust, with limited societal polarization and populism.⁴ Acknowledging the democratic backsliding and deterioration of journalism and academia in many other countries, these values and conditions are worth defending. What is Norway doing that others can learn from?

This article takes on a lens that journalism professor Ramón Salaverría and I have collaborated on: the reactive and proactive approaches. It starts by briefly discussing the reactive approach, which is associated with the growth of the fact-checking movement the past decade, and by briefly noting its decline in 2025 among fact-checkers dependent on third-party platform funding. (Fortunately, this does not include the Norwegian fact-checking organization Faktisk.) Because reactively countering disinformation is necessary but insufficient, I argue that it should be accompanied by proactively fostering a culture that values knowledge. This longer-term project forms the heart of any truly free and fair democracy. The article then zooms in on three key areas that are central to how Norway proactively works against disinformation: freedom of the press and the mediascape; freedom of inquiry, research, and higher education; and freedom of expression and public resilience.

Countering Disinformation

Disinformation refers to fake news designed to look like journalistic news, but it contains intentionally misleading elements and inaccurate information. Beyond merely aggravating, disinformation is a threat to democracy and the ideal of an informed electorate. It can undermine trust in institutions and expert knowledge, such as scientific research. Disinformation can polarize political discourse and influence both election outcomes and belief in those outcomes. It can also jeopardize safety and public health.

A diverse set of actors, including but not limited to politicians and others in power, produces and/or distributes disinformation for political and/or economic reasons. Disinformation and fake news is a *genre*, but it is also a *label* used by some politicians to undermine the credibility of legitimate journalistic institutions⁵ as well as fact-checking and academic research. In societies where bad actors have succeeded in undermining the credibility of knowledge-producing institutions such as journalism and academia, some members of the public may feel they do not know who to trust or what to believe. Critical thinking concerning sources and the accuracy of claims is obviously important, but it becomes extremely problematic when this results in the public discarding truthful and verified information. The public may become skeptical of everything, which essentially means disinformation is not differentiated from information.

With platforms such as Facebook shifting from professional fact-checking to community notes (like X), and newspapers such as *The Washington Post* adopting an opinions stance favorable

to the Trump administration, people in the United States and around the world may be wondering what the role of verified information and accountability in online spaces will be.

Disinformation is a complex problem, but it can be mitigated. Much discourse around fighting disinformation revolves around how to mitigate the damage caused by the online distribution of false content by specific actors. Such discourse, and the actions associated with it, essentially means *reacting* to the production and distribution of disinformation contents. There has been a global rise of professional fact-checking institutions engaging in online debunking and political fact-checking over the past decade. The global rise in fact-checking was fueled by online platform companies' fact-checking partnership programs, most notably those run by Facebook (now Meta, which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp) and TikTok.⁶ At the start of 2025, there were professional fact-checking organizations accredited by the International Fact Checking Network operating in more than 100 countries.

Authoritarian leaders assault academics and journalists to reduce their capacity to produce verified information and check leaders' power.

Professional fact-checking plays a significant role in reactively fighting disinformation. Research has found that the mere presence of professional fact-checkers in a country can have a positive effect, such as making politicians more cautious when stating claims in political debates.⁷ When Trump first became president of the United States, this coincided with Meta partnering with fact-checking organizations to address the spread of misinformation on its platforms. Eventually, both Meta and Twitter blocked Trump from their platforms. Amid the violent January 6 riots, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote on January 7, 2021, that the risks involved in allowing Trump to use its platforms were too great.⁸ Zuckerberg wanted to support a peaceful transition of power to the incoming democratically elected president.

In the years that followed, Elon Musk purchased Twitter, transformed it into X, and let Trump back onto the platform. Trump was also allowed back on Meta's platforms. On January 7, 2025, exactly four years after Zuckerberg and Meta blocked Trump, Zuckerberg made an announcement that was very favorable to the incoming president: Meta would begin taking steps toward discontinuing its partnerships with fact-checking organizations.⁹ Politicians and pundits had argued that fact-checkers were not debunking disinformation but rather debunking truth and threatening freedom of expression. Echoing such discourse, Zuckerberg questioned Meta's fact-checking partnership pro-

gram for causing too much censorship and not aligning with freedom of expression. Zuckerberg announced that Meta would immediately initiate a process of closing down its third-party fact-checking program globally, starting in the United States.

Zuckerberg's abandonment of the truth will have ripple effects as fact-checking organizations lose access to technological systems for disinformation identification on Meta's platforms (e.g., the Facebook fact-checking product), and as many of those facing cuts in financial support will have to trim their headcounts or go out of business. For example, the only fact-checking organization in Sweden, Källkritikbyrå, operates with one full-time and a few part-time employees. Most of its funding comes from its partnership with Meta and hence will be severely affected if the contract is not renewed. In contrast, the professional fact-checking company Faktisk in the neighboring country Norway will hardly be affected.*

The mere presence of professional fact-checkers in a country can have a positive effect, such as making politicians more cautious when stating claims in political debates.

Faktisk was launched in 2017, and it is co-owned and funded by a diverse set of large news companies (VG, Dagbladet, TV 2, and Polaris Media og Amedia) and the national public service media institution NRK (i.e., the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). Faktisk gains additional revenue from foundation funding, consulting, and its Meta partnership. As of 2023, Faktisk had 15 permanent employees, and a mere 0.3 percent of its annual revenue came from Meta's third-party fact-checking program partnership.

Faktisk has institutionalized a professional fact-checking organization with diverse revenue sources that stands strong amid an age marked by authoritarianism. In countries like the United States that do not share Norway's dedication to accurate information, disinformation can and should be countered by multiple actors such as the media sector, researchers, non-governmental organizations, schools and colleges, libraries, policymakers who value truth, and governance bodies (such as associations that engage in quality control). To help such coalitions develop their strategies for combating disinformation, let's take a look at Norway's proactive approach beyond Faktisk.

A Proactive Approach

In 2024, Norway's government announced that it would "present a strategy on how we can work systematically and long-

*I am privy to this information through my work with both companies, and I have access to their annual financial reports.

term to ensure the Norwegian society's resilience against disinformation."¹⁰ And in 2025, it released a long-term strategy for strengthening resistance to disinformation, working on areas such as giving continued support to journalism; regulating online platform companies and how their algorithms amplify disinformation; assessing how social media impacts public debate; strengthening critical media literacy, including by supporting educators; and researching how disinformation spreads in Norway and its consequences.¹¹

This new effort builds on a report by the Freedom of Expression Commission that was published by the Ministry of Culture and Equality in 2022.¹² The report reinforced that freedom of expression is a fundamental value enshrined in the Norwegian Constitution, and that Norway works to maintain this value for the sake of its democracy. In the report's English summary, the challenge of disinformation is discussed along with a couple of recommendations. Noting that "Statutory regulation of truth is problematic," it calls for "international cooperation on regulating platforms on which falsehoods are disseminated ... [and] transparency regarding the ... [companies'] handling of misinformation and mechanisms for dissemination." Considering planned attacks by rival countries, the report notes that "the Norwegian Government has proposed to make it punishable to cooperate on influence operations with foreign intelligence services," and it calls for "clear frameworks ... to avoid such penal provisions having an unwanted chilling effect on freedom of expression."¹³

This is in keeping with debates in Norway about disinformation that have focused on the significant influence of platforms. In the commission's ambition to regulate platform companies' impact on Norwegian discourse, a key element is implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA), which was adopted by the European Union in 2022. The DSA is intended to bring accountability to platforms, make advertising more transparent, enhance protections for children, and help small platforms grow, among other priorities.

Relatedly, Norwegian intelligence authorities work to identify, monitor, and combat systematic disinformation and influence operations in the digital mediascape. An original study in which 12 people affiliated with Norwegian security agencies were interviewed found that they consider disinformation to be a societal problem; they asserted that disinformation makes it more difficult to have an informed citizenry and that tracking its spread in society is challenging (in part because of legal restrictions). Importantly, they grappled with a foundational problem: expanding their opportunities for surveilling online information would provide better ways to identify and fight disinformation, yet such surveillance would undermine the Norwegian democracy that they are trying to protect.¹⁴

The surveillance of online communication by authorities can jeopardize citizen privacy and journalists' ability to protect their sources. There are ongoing debates about the tensions between extending digital surveillance capabilities and securing citizens' privacy. For example, in May 2025, the Tinius Trust, which is the largest shareholder in Schibsted Media and works

for its editorial independence, filed a lawsuit associated with Norwegian state surveillance of digital communication. It argued that the surveillance authorized under Norway's Intelligence Service Act jeopardizes freedom of expression and source protection.¹⁵ (Norway is particularly cautious because it has a history of unsanctioned and controversial surveillance of citizen groups after World War II.¹⁶)

There are universally problematic tensions between state surveillance of information and disinformation flows vis-à-vis privacy, source protection, and freedom of expression. Norway actively works on addressing these tensions and on the challenges involved with the incredible power and data access that foreign platform and tech companies possess.

The Public's Right to Information

Reactive approaches to countering disinformation are important but insufficient. The heart of the Norwegian approach is a proactive, enduring support for knowledge and expertise. Freedom of the press,¹⁷ freedom of inquiry,¹⁸ and freedom of expression¹⁹ are cornerstones of any democratic society. Norway is a role model in terms of press freedom in the world, and its freedom of expression, academic freedom, and democratic processes are sound. Proactively working to enable and protect these freedoms is paramount for sustaining democracy.

Let's zoom in on three specific areas: freedom of the press and the mediascape; freedom of inquiry, research, and higher education; and freedom of expression and public resilience. The common denominator of Norway's proactive approach involves placing the citizen and their knowledge and expertise at the center. Underlying principles are connected to the above-mentioned freedoms but also to the public's *right* to information, which is supported in the Norwegian Constitution. In light of this, multiple sectors of Norwegian society work toward providing citizens with conditions and means to access verified and relevant information, as well as the knowledge, expertise, and critical thinking needed to assess information and sources.

Freedom of the Press and the Mediascape

In 2025, for the ninth consecutive year, Norway placed first in the global World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders.²⁰ Norway is recognized as having a democratic corporatist model, characterized by a strong, protected press with editorial freedom and a professionalized media sector. The mediascape is diverse, thanks to strong socioeconomic conditions in general and in the media sector. There are expansive media policies that promote media diversity, digitalization, and universally accessible communication systems.

Norwegian publishers are represented by robust professional associations that uphold strong autonomy and editorial independence. They have developed and maintain a journalistic code of ethics, and they operate independently from the state through a self-regulatory system. The Press Council,

working under the Norwegian Press Association, monitors news publishers and assesses their adherence to the professional code of ethics. This ensures that the Norwegian state remains uninvolved in influencing publishers' independence and decision-making. Editorial freedom is also granted by giving sovereignty to editors-in-chief to make decisions.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian state exerts positive influence through its substantial financial support of the media. There are direct state subsidies to news publishers and for priorities such as innovation, distribution, and minority media. Working to maintain media diversity, the state gives added financial support to news publishers facing economic disadvantages. Three categories of newspapers are supported: local newspapers, smaller newspapers in markets with competitors, and niche newspapers. The Norwegian state also grants publishers exemptions from a tax that is normally added to products and services. While the business of journalism has gradually been worsening across the world, and Norway is no exception amid the sharp competition for online advertising revenue, news publishers in Norway manage relatively well thanks to state support and an overall interest among the people in supporting journalism. The annual Reuters Digital News Report has shown that Norwegians are less dependent on social media for news exposure than people in most countries. Norway scores very high on the relative proportion of the public that pays for online news; still, that's only 42 percent.²¹



Overall, Norway maintains a mediascape featuring financially healthy, professionalized, and editorially independent news publishers from both the commercial and public sectors. The Norwegian public generally trusts journalists and news publishers, although alternative news media and media criticism certainly have grown over the past decade. Opportunities for news production that advances knowledge are further facilitated by legal frameworks granting access to public information from authorities, including but not limited to meeting records, email correspondences by state employees, and a multitude of public data repositories. Taken together, these proactive measures support informed citizens and thus contribute to their fundamental resilience to disinformation.

Freedom of Inquiry, Research, and Higher Education

Democratic countries typically prioritize and support their academic sectors and protect academic freedom (including researchers' freedom of inquiry and ability to work independently). Support for academic freedom is vital for the pursuit and advancement of robust and systematic scientific knowledge, which should be crucial for decision-making by politicians, authorities, companies, and others. Unsurprisingly, authoritarian leaders and autocratic countries suppress freedom of inquiry and scientific discourse. Authoritarians engage in political control of academic institutions and researchers, censor research agendas and publications, and impose ideological conformity in curricula.

Librarians play an important role in teaching the public how to navigate the mediascape and develop critical thinking and practices in relation to disinformation.

Authoritarian governments can undermine academic freedom by censoring scientific information, preventing its advancement and publication. When a government halts funding for research into areas such as climate change, African American history, LGBTQIA+ health, and fact-checking, the end goal is to disinform. Ultimately, this results in deliberate censorship of the production and distribution of scientific, credible information. Consequently, alarm bells ring when political actors seek to control the information environment by preventing the dissemination of independent and scientific information, such as by banning specific subjects, books, or terminologies from universities, curricula, and libraries—and thus from public knowledge. In contrast, countries that support academic freedom and the public's opportunities for higher education seek to advance truthful and credible information and make it accessible to the public.

In most countries, accessibility to higher education is inexorably linked to one's ability to pay tuition. The Norwegian higher education system is known for inclusivity and diversity and high academic standards: its public universities and colleges offer tuition-free education for all students and provide generous financial support in the form of loans and grants to cover living expenses. In 2023, 49 percent of the Norwegian population had attained higher education (ninth in the ranking of 38 countries).²² Altogether, Norway supports its public in higher education and in becoming informed, with its university education involving critical thinking, critical assessment of literature, and learning diverse methods and knowledge production.

Researchers in Norway have comparatively high academic freedom. There are structures, institutions, resources, and processes in place that help Norwegian researchers advance and publish research without direct political interference. Tenured faculty at Norwegian universities generally have a significant portion of their employment schedule dedicated to research, alongside their teaching obligations. Consequently, Norwegian scholars have the freedom of inquiry to pursue research in areas they find important and worthwhile. Meanwhile, due to limited budgets to support various research costs, universities are applying mounting pressure on Norwegian scholars to apply for research grants funded by external institutions such as the Research Council of Norway or the European Commission. Such grants provide increased opportunities for research through buyouts from teaching, resources for conducting data collection, and hiring of project research members.

The Research Council of Norway has funded many research projects over the years, including projects focusing on climate change, disinformation, and fact-checking. I worked on one such project from 2020 to 2024 with a team of Norwegian and American scholars. The project, titled Source Criticism and Mediated Disinformation (SCAM), had as its main objective “to develop principles for and practices of digital source criticism and media and information literacy in relation to emerging technologies, with special emphasis on detection and countering of disinformation.” My colleagues and I studied fact-checkers, news publishers, platform companies, and tech companies, focusing on key practices of fact-checking in an age of platformization. Ultimately, with support from the Research Council of Norway, the project resulted in collaborations with the fact-checking industry and dissemination of findings to journalism students and the public, along with numerous publications.²³

Freedom of Expression and Public Resilience

Norway established freedom of expression as a protected right in its 1814 Constitution and has revised and expanded this right in the 21st century. Norway supports freedom of expression through a diverse set of initiatives centered around media and information literacy (MIL). Norway's proactive approach to MIL spans multiple sectors to ensure a well-informed and resilient public. There are initiatives supporting formal education in MIL, known in Norway as *source criticism*, as well as initiatives to raise public awareness. The Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet) prioritizes MIL, promoting critical media understanding among the public. It employs staff with significant expertise in their fields, including an expert responsible for the disinformation sector. It conducts and commissions studies (and provides research grants) in areas such as MIL, media diversity, media consumption, and media technology. Study findings help inform policy decisions and regulatory developments in which the Media Authority also plays an advisory role. Additionally, the Media Authority offers lectures and workshops on disinformation at universities and schools, and participates in cross-sector projects on disinformation and fact-checking financed by the European Commission.

Similar to countries such as Sweden, the school system and libraries in Norway play a prominent role in advancing MIL among the public, making the people more resilient to disinformation. Norway's overall digitization strategy for basic education establishes that school teachers should educate students to successfully navigate digital media and technology. The Ministry of Children and Families also focuses on assisting and educating children and young people, as well as their parents and the adults (including teachers) working with them, to navigate the digital mediascape safely. Moreover, resources are provided to Norwegian libraries and librarians to continuously update their knowledge and expertise in MIL. Librarians play an important role in teaching the public, especially adults and senior citizens, how to navigate the mediascape and develop critical thinking and practices in relation to disinformation.

Relatedly, in 2019 Tenk was established as “a hub of knowledge dedicated to strengthening young people’s resilience against the increasingly fragmented media landscape.”²⁴ Growing out of the Norwegian fact-checking organization Faktisk, but with funding from foundations and the Norwegian state, Tenk offers online MIL materials and resources for librarians, youth workers, parents, and guardians, along with courses and workshops on source criticism and critical media use. Another relevant online repository, offered in English (unlike Tenk’s materials) for greater accessibility to professionals and the public in Norway and beyond, is the “Guide for Digital Source Criticism.” This online handbook (which is available for free at go.aft.org/itf) was developed by my colleagues and me as part of our SCAM project discussed earlier. There were two key reasons for developing it. First, source criticism is essential for addressing the growing complexity of how knowledge is produced. Second, as the digital age brings new challenges, such as misinformation and changing media landscapes, it’s crucial to rethink how source criticism works, particularly regarding digital sources and the underlying systems that support them. The digital source criticism approach underscores the importance of interpretations, not only those associated with the sources and (dis)information being assessed, but also reflexivity around one’s interpretive frameworks.

Norway’s proactive approach centers its citizens’ freedom of expression and right to information. Because they are important for democracy, Norway maintains well-resourced, professional news publishers marked by editorial freedom and a strong university and educational sector. It also supports substantial efforts for advancing citizens’ media and information literacy, digital source criticism, and critical-thinking abilities. Altogether, these efforts result in an informed citizenry and resilience to disinformation. The proactive approach outlined in this article showcases how Norway has invested considerably over time in shaping a healthy

information environment associated with both the media and university sectors.

Still, since Norway scores high on democracy, one may wonder: Can a proactive approach to disinformation be used in working toward a healthy democracy, or is a healthy democracy a prerequisite for an effective proactive approach? This is a daunting question to answer. While the full proactive approach does require government support over time, it is nevertheless possible for a diverse set of actors to work toward helping the public advance their knowledge and critical thinking.

In authoritarian takeovers, it is common to launch a concerted assault on universities and academic freedom as well as on news publishers and press freedom. Undermining evidence-based discourse from universities and independent researchers is intended to censor, cause self-censorship, and erode public access to reliable information for areas such as climate change. Authoritarian leaders also deliberately bypass journalism and journalists. Restricting journalists’ access to the government’s press conferences is one way to accomplish this; another is outright calling well-vetted news outlets “fake news” to undercut their credibility.



In Norway, and in all truly liberal democratic societies, governments and other actors work to sustain a society supporting the independent production and distribution of research and other verified information. Authoritarian countries, in contrast, attack verified information, devaluing knowledge and expertise. The end game is to cause the public to struggle to distinguish between reliable sources and disinformation. Where citizens’ “right” to access verified information has already been jeopardized, I call for concerted efforts to build their knowledge and expertise associated with media and information literacy in a digital mediascape.

Amid a global rise of authoritarianism, democratic countries must defend democracy and democratic principles before these are lost. In the fight against disinformation, I hope these countries will work together to create regulatory frameworks to further protect democracy and essential freedoms—including freedom of expression and the right to information. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/westlund.

Social Solidarity

The Transformative Power of Public Education



By Peter W. Cookson, Jr.

Here is a thought experiment: Imagine America without public education. It's a desolate view, with a tiny percentage of youth enjoying the best education money can buy and large swaths of lower-income families struggling to find even minimal educational services as the neighborhoods now known as food deserts also become education deserts. Democracy and faith in a prosperous shared future would be impossible dreams. Human inventiveness would wither. Care and compassion would be left on the doorstep of the good society to die a slow death. Without a shared space to forge a shared story, almost all the things that matter would be left to fate and force.

We write the story of us together. Our shared story is what infuses our social contract with expectation, enthusiasm, and empathy. But today, our social contract is desperately frayed and in need of reaffirmation and redesign if we are to forge a future in meaningful and peaceful dialogue with each other.¹ American democracy is in peril: 64 percent of Americans believe our democracy is “in crisis and at risk of failing.”² We need a vision of education that is democratic in the fullest and best sense—capable of igniting and sustaining students’ capacities for freedom through social solidarity and honest inquiry. The surest way to ensure that democracy triumphs and thrives in an inclusive, tolerant, and

enlightened civil society is to free the human mind to do what it does best—imagine, share, and dare to challenge authority and outworn ideologies.

Unfortunately, too many students are not getting the preparation they need to be informed and active citizens. Many don’t know the basics of government,³ have little grasp of history,⁴ and experience little of democratic life in their schools.⁵ If we are to create schools that will rebuild solidarity and reinvigorate democracy, we need to empower the whole educational community, including the students. We are not born democratic citizens; it takes practice. Schools and classrooms should be forums for debate, school governance should be based on power sharing, and freedom of expression should be celebrated.

So much of what we see in education policy and politics is about fiscal efficiency, power and powerlessness, and sorting and selecting students to succeed in the *great race to affluence*. We need a new narrative of hope that is imagined, promoted, and enacted by those whose fidelity to justice and inclusion is evident every day with real students. We are a polarized nation; the rebirth of social solidarity will begin with those who know all children can learn and who have the emotional and intellectual fire to imagine schools as communities of hope where human solidarity flourishes.

The Bonds That Unite Us

One of my first experiences as a teacher was being assigned an experimental fifth-grade anthropological studies course called *Man: A Course of Study*⁶ that was designed by the famous child

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psychologist Jerome Bruner. Over the year, students were to learn about the life of the Netsilik people, whose home is the Arctic region in Canada, through filmstrips, maps, songs, class activities, and readings. I was more or less clueless about how to teach this course. The class materials were very sophisticated, and my kids came from homes where books were in short supply. But they were eager to learn. We decided to turn our classroom into a living museum; we painted the walls and windows to look like a Netsilik village, complete with igloos, polar bears, reindeer, and a piercing blue northern sky lit by a huge yellow sun.

Every student was a member of the village, with a name and a role to play. It wasn't long before we began to learn from the inside out. The Netsilik people weren't the "other"; they were us. The students kept journals about their lives, families, hopes, and fears. If they felt moved to do so, they shared their stories. There was rhythm to our learning. Everyone was somebody. Most of all, we had fun. Lots of laughter and failing to sit in one place for more than 45 minutes. It wasn't long before some of my more conservative colleagues reported me to the principal, who poked his head in the classroom, looked around, smiled, and left without a word. We benefited from benign neglect. The bonds that were created in that classroom ignited deep learning because we touched our shared humanity in a spirit of solidarity, curiosity, and joy.

Today, the bonds that unite us are more important than ever. In this age of uncertainty, polarization, and conflict, can we hold on to our democracy? Can we live peacefully with others? Can we reinvent ourselves? As two democracy scholars studying the impact of polarization found,

The United States is in uncharted and very dangerous territory.... There are no peer analogues for the United States' current political divisions—and the track record of all democracies does not provide much consolation.... Pernicious polarization is a uniquely corrosive and dangerous force in democracies.⁷

Our growing fear that "the center cannot hold"⁸ is coupled with a growing distrust of our public institutions and of each other. A 2020 study found that "anxiety over misinformation has increased alongside political polarization and growing fragmentation of the media. Faith in institutions has declined, cynicism has risen, and citizens are becoming their own information curators."⁹

When basic social trust is washed away by unmet needs and unceasing conflict, social collapse is a stark possibility. But it is not inevitable. Social strength and optimism run deep in American democracy. We thrive when we are socially attached. The groundbreaking scholarship of such creative and scientific authors as Michael Tomasello (*Becoming Human*),¹⁰ Joseph Henrich (*The Secret of Our Success*),¹¹ and Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (*Why Nations Fail*)¹² has opened our eyes and hearts about our capacity for unity and renewal. Although we are polarized today, reuniting may not be as difficult as it seems. Our similarities are still far greater than our differences.

Sociologist and physician Nicholas A. Christakis drives home that point in his 2019 book, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*. He writes:

My vision of us as human beings ... holds that people are, and should be, united by our common humanity. And this com-

monality originates in our shared evolution. It is written in our genes. Precisely for this reason, I believe we can achieve a mutual understanding among ourselves.¹³

He bases this optimistic vision of a shared humanity on his study of communities around the world. His research reveals that societies prosper when they forge a vibrant and shared "social suite" characterized by:

1. The capacity to have and recognize individual identity
2. Love for partners and offspring
3. Friendship
4. Social networks
5. Cooperation
6. Preference for one's own group (that is, "in-group bias")
7. Mild hierarchy (that is, relative egalitarianism)
8. Social learning and teaching¹⁴

Christakis's finding is important for us as educators as we create schools where all children thrive and where, in the words of one school superintendent in the South, "*all means all*."¹⁵ The social suite he describes is the foundation for creating learning communities anchored by social attachment and solidarity. When schools develop cultures of attachment and solidarity as their heart and soul, restructuring can begin in earnest.¹⁶ The ties that bind us weave together to form social solidarity, which is the very fabric of a strong, productive society and of schools where shared learning ignites the genius of all children. As three professors of social sciences and philosophy explained:

Social solidarity is not simply a sentiment; it is also a structure of social relations. It needs to be rebuilt at the scales of local communities, national institutions, and the many kinds of intermediate associations in between.¹⁷

Our public schools are our most unique and important invention for creating communities where all children matter and where a lasting spirit of solidarity creates an enduring learning culture of hope and shared intellectual adventure.

Creating Schools of Social Solidarity

Several years ago, a Michigan foundation asked me to study high-poverty schools and assess the impact of their programs on student achievement and well-being. I visited schools in the major cities and the less-traveled agricultural parts of the state. I talked

To ensure democracy triumphs, free the human mind to imagine, share, and dare to challenge authority.





with teachers and students, sat in on lessons, read strategic plans, and interviewed school administrators.

In the course of my research, I visited two schools in Detroit, both located in communities of concentrated deep poverty. One school felt like a jail: guards at the door, broken windows, security cameras in the halls, and locked classrooms. Students and teachers were depressed and angry. Fights erupted even as I interviewed the

principal. Evidence of learning was absent; survival mattered a great deal more. The young people attending this school had been deeply betrayed (not just by their school system but by all of us for allowing such schools to exist), and the teachers in the school felt frustrated by a learning culture that was socially fragmented and troubled. Not many blocks away was a school with no guards, open doors, few security cameras, and a gallery filled with student artwork. There was laughter in the halls; classrooms were alive with learning, and the

bonds between the teachers and students were evident. The principal came from the neighborhood and spoke glowingly of the school's students as "our kids." Before leaving for the day, he invited me to join him for a student pep rally. The teachers were ready to rock and roll, trying hard to dance to the good-hearted amusement of the students. The place radiated with the energy and joy of happy young people celebrating life. Everyone was somebody. Social solidarity was experienced as shared joy.

We know how to create schools of social solidarity. The conceptual and practical tools are within our reach. We know from

social science that human solidarity is founded on a social suite infused with a natural desire for attachment and bonding, and we know from the new science of learning and development that all children can learn. In the words of two scholars at the forefront of this science: "Effective learning depends on secure attachments; affirming relationships; rich, hands-on learning experiences; and explicit integration of social, emotional, and academic skills."¹⁸ Building on this knowledge, we can create schools that are second to none for all children based on clear, empirical, straightforward design principles.^{*19} In my study of deep poverty schools, I discovered that the most important design principles for creating schools of social solidarity are compassion, inclusion, and identity-safety.²⁰

Compassion is the heartbeat of community: We are wired to connect to each other,²¹ but without compassionate communities—where we empathize with one another and are moved to act on behalf of those who struggle—the basic trust that bonds student to teacher and student to student will remain conditional. Perhaps author Frederick Buechner said it best: "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace or joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too."²² How can we unlock the genius of children if we don't include them in our circle of compassion? Being compassionate doesn't mean we ignore self-destructive behaviors, or that we don't hold high academic standards, or that we substitute real change for a soft racism and classism that says the right things but does nothing to dismantle racism and classism in practice. Compassion is the emotional fuel that fires real change.

Inclusion is the weaver of connections: To make a real difference, our circle of solidarity must be as wide as possible and include as many people as possible; in a school setting, this means all students and all adults—including family and community members. A 2012 article in the equity-focused journal *Kairaranga* described

*For an in-depth look at these design principles and the science behind them, see "All Children Thriving" in the Fall 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2021/cantor.

The most important design principles for creating schools of social solidarity are compassion, inclusion, and identity-safety.

four essential elements for inclusion: relationships, shared experiences, a sense of belonging, and advocacy for changes that value all equally.²³ When these elements are working together, they enable transparency, honesty, and openness. The word *kairaranga* is Maori, used by the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand to mean a “weaver of family connections.”²⁴ This evocative phrasing echoes bell hooks’s definition of the *beloved community* as being created “not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”²⁵ The powerful and poetic South African expression *Ubuntu* also captures the deep meaning of inclusion: “I am what I am because of who we all are.”²⁶

Today, the term *inclusion* also signifies the right of all people to be full members of society. The United States has a tragic history of discriminating against and excluding from opportunity people of color and people who lack material resources (among others). As we examine how to create inclusive high-quality schools, the words of equity and diversity scholar H. Richard Milner IV illuminate our thinking: “Every child matters regardless of ... [their] race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, geography, zip code, social status, or poverty status.”²⁷

Identity-safety is the love of somebodiness: Today, social solidarity is under threat from forces determined to limit the rights of families and children to affirm their identities. No school community can be a place of trust and learning if the identities and self-worth of its members are under attack. Talking with the students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia in 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. brought to life the inner meaning of identity-safety:

Number one in your life’s blueprint should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your own worth and your own somebodiness. Don’t allow anybody to make you feel that you are nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.²⁸

The identity-safe classroom fosters relationships based on trust, support, and mutual respect.²⁹ Being affirmed is inseparable from being recognized—from within and without—as somebody.

What We Can Do Now

For the last several years, I have immersed myself in the world of high-poverty schools to better understand how we can create schools that are second to none for all children—schools that anchor their communities, enable all children to follow their dreams, and build social solidarity by emphasizing our common humanity. As I visited schools, I wondered why some of them were depressing and disengaged while others were joyful and on fire with learning. In time, the answer became obvious: smart districts invest in their communities and avoid seemingly magical solutions pushed from afar by consulting companies. Authenticity and candor empower us to move from “I” to “we”—the real educational revolution we need today.

Solidarity Strategy One: Connect at a Deep Level

Several years ago, I visited a school that taught me the importance of connecting to students on a deep level. I arrived early in the morning and parked my rental car near the front door next to a police car. For children living in poverty and deep poverty, police are a daily presence—so I wasn’t surprised, but I was saddened. Not too

far away was a large turkey processing plant in full operation. In the distance, I could hear the whine of traffic along the interstate running just north of the school. The school seemed to have been forgotten in time; poverty and neglect cemented into its weathered facade. When I opened the front door on that hazy morning, I expected to find a depressed institution, academically wandering—but I was wrong. Schools are more than buildings; they are the expression of a community’s hopes no matter the odds. True, the school needed paint. It needed heat. It needed better lighting. But from the moment the principal shook my hand and welcomed me in front of a wall of student art, it felt like this school knew where it was going and why it was making the journey.

I followed the principal and his leadership team into the “media center.” Unfortunately, somewhere along the bureaucratic trail someone in the state department of education had not found the time or resources to provide the school with new books or working computers. But this little school on the “outskirts of hope”³⁰ was anything but hopeless. The students weren’t problems; they were young people bursting with potential. The educators had established a covenant relationship with their students *despite* the obstacles. They had connected with their students at a deep level.

I sat in on a math class where the students learned to play chess. The lively classroom buzzed with the sounds of learning, including happy chatter, laughter, and an occasional shout of unexpected understanding. Chess boards were on every table, and a set of division problems was on the blackboard. The teacher was neither a “sage on the stage” nor a “guide on the side.” She was the lead musician in a learning jazz ensemble, listening, explaining, and correcting in near perfect rhythm with her class. The word *synchrony* came to mind. (Not surprisingly, her students did very well on the state standardized math exam.) Connection is the human electricity of learning. Unless we connect at a deep level with our students and develop their capacity for connectedness, we will struggle to find common cause.

Solidarity Strategy Two: Cultivate a Shared Humanity

In the play called *school*, everyone has a part according to a script written in an unspoken code that is easy to feel but hard to define. In one school day, comedy, tragedy, happiness, sadness, boredom, and excitement can all erupt. Human emotions are not obstacles to creating inclusive and positive learning environments; they are the heartbeat of schools where people young and old can recognize our shared humanity and find lasting friendships.³¹ How we treat each other matters.

Schools are more than buildings; they are the expression of a community’s hopes no matter the odds.





Often glimpses of our shared humanity come in ways that are unexpected and spontaneous. In my second year as a teacher, I found myself teaching a civics class of restless eighth-graders who

were struggling to learn the three branches of government. In the back was a tall boy who, given his age, should have been in high school. He was a talker. Asking him to stop pestering the students around him was a losing battle, but no matter what he did, I kept trying to get to know him.

During one class break, he asked if I would like to arm wrestle. He was smiling. At least he was talking with me. I decided to take a chance and agreed. I don't know what I expected, but he let me win without even trying. It was his way

of apologizing for being a thorn in my side. He never became a model student, but from then on, he tried hard in class, and I learned a lesson: social and emotional health in schools doesn't come in preordered packages with lesson plans. It grows from within when it is nurtured by authenticity, humor, humility, and our shared humanity.

Solidarity Strategy Three: Create Community Schools

While there are many ways for schools to connect to their communities, there is one model that is unusually effective: the equity-driven community school. In a comprehensive review of the evidence from more than 140 studies, scholars found that community schools liberate learning and enhance lasting connections between students, families, and communities.³² Community schools that

fully embrace their neighborhoods, and are dedicated to the fundamental values of fairness and excellence, educate all children in an atmosphere of care and compassion. Their doors are open year-round, from dawn to dusk, and on weekends. They elevate family and community members' voices, welcome diversity, and empower teachers and students to create learning communities that are alive with the hopefulness that springs from the freedom to experiment and innovate. Equity-driven community schools build bridges across communities and cultures by providing wraparound services, culturally sensitive extended learning opportunities, and an inclusive vision of education where no child is excluded from learning because of their race or their family's economic situation (or any other aspect of their identity or background).

One community school I visited enrolled students living in isolated neighborhoods that lacked essential services and were plagued by the wave of opioid addiction that has long beset our nation. The school reached out to the local United Way, which offered to fund the salaries of a trained family social worker and a psychologist. The message was clear: there's no shame in seeking help. The counseling the school provided built bridges to families that otherwise would not have been able to afford the services their children needed to overcome the allure of escaping into addictive drugs.

The promise of equity-driven community schools has grown into a national movement. New York City operates over 400 community schools,³³ and more than 100 school districts around the country have taken the community school strategy to scale.³⁴ California, Maryland, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont have launched statewide community school initiatives because of the mounting evidence that building bridges to families and communities results in more successful students and greater social cohesion.³⁵

Solidarity Strategy Four: Embrace Justice and Healing

Today, over two million Americans are imprisoned.³⁶ Many inmates began their journey to incarceration in school because of minor infractions that were criminalized rather than resolved through mediation and reconciliation.³⁷ Unfortunately, there is some evidence that biases that pervade our society are also in

our schools. For example, a study found that preschool teachers reported more supposedly bad behavior among all Black children and among Hispanic children from low-income families than among white children—despite researchers seeing no differences in behavior—and that impacts continued into elementary school, with increased disengagement and reduced performance.³⁸

Another study found that Black students in middle and high school are far more likely than white students to be suspended for things like using their phones in class or violating the dress code.³⁹

The late philosopher John Rawls asserted that “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions.”⁴⁰ Schools are social institutions; a school that is not just has lost its way. Schools of solidarity are founded on principles of justice, fairness, and a belief in redemption. There are many ways justice can become infused into a school’s culture through connection and communication. Restorative justice is one way to move a school culture from punishment to healing because it provides a path to a genuine accountability and reconciliation process that connects all those who have a stake in a just and educational outcome.⁴¹ One recent report found that:

Creating a restorative environment in which students learn to be responsible and are given the opportunity for agency and contribution can transform students’ social, emotional, and academic behavior and their academic outcomes.⁴²

Turning injustice on its head by elevating understanding and healing is a solidarity strategy that can transform a school on the verge of social collapse into a community of care and compassion.

Solidarity Strategy Five: Lead from the Heart and Head

The vast literature on school leaders reveals that they can be autocratic, bureaucratic, coaches, pacesetters, servants, visionaries, and (from time to time) heroic. I confess that having survived numerous leadership fads and witnessed the work of some great school leaders and some less-than-great leaders, I have come to the conclusion that labels aren’t always helpful. What matters is authenticity, moral purpose, and the ability to communicate. Is this person an *I* leader or a *we* leader?⁴³ Leaders of schools of solidarity must be *we* people by definition because compassion, inclusion, and identity-safety are collective values that need leaders who embody them.

If we are to transform the under-resourced, struggling schools so many children must endure, we need highly motivated moral leaders who think systematically and have a deep affection for the communities they serve. This sounds like a superhuman standard, but happily it is not. *We* leadership is bone deep for those who believe all children can learn. It is time to think big, adopt an asset-based approach to student learning, and “re-culture.” This winning solidarity strategy was expressed well by one district administrator:

Before you restructure, you really have to re-culture. When you hear little flag statements like, “Well *my* children” or “*these* children,” you pick up right away where their bias is. That’s not acceptable. We’re not the ones saying, “Well our kids can’t do this” or “We can’t do this; why would we do this?” We always say, “Why wouldn’t we? Why wouldn’t we do this for all of our kids?”⁴⁴

Exactly. *Why wouldn’t we do this for all kids?* We need a new generation of leaders if we are to create a system of high-quality

schools for all children. The time has come to develop community-based school leadership programs that enroll local people who are racially and economically diverse and understand what it means to be marginalized.

A New Narrative of Hope

Today calls for courageous optimism and a renewed faith in ourselves. It is educators—and the students and families they forge bonds with—who have the vision, experience, and wisdom to renew ourselves and create schools of social solidarity and, in time, renew our democracy. Educators have been silenced for too long; this must end because educators have the power to transform society from the inside out. The time has come to listen to those who know what children need and have the energy and imagination to turn classrooms into oases of learning where all children belong.

Teachers are natural advocates for those who have been silenced and made invisible; they *know* everyone is somebody. Today, there are those who want to continue to silence the life of the mind by banning books, instituting racist curriculum, and monitoring teachers’ personal lives. Educators can push back on injustice by creating curricula that tell the complete story of America, including its glorious moments and its shameful ones. Educators can ask hard questions about why schools serving students living below the poverty line receive less funding than other schools.⁴⁵ And through their unions and community partnerships, they can center families’ voices in demanding answers.

Taking collective action, educators, families, and community members can ask why there are so few teachers and school leaders of color in schools where the majority of students are of color. They can support children living in poverty and deep poverty by promoting access to safe housing, public transportation, nutritious food, and medical care. They can also question why schools that serve students living below the poverty line so often lack up-to-date libraries, computers, and other instructional materials. In short, educators in collaboration with family and community members can become the standard-bearers of basic fairness.

Justice is not a thing; it is a process. It is time to embrace a new, hopeful narrative of the human journey in the spirit of solidarity and somebodiness. □

Educators have been silenced for too long; this must end because educators have the power to transform society.



For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2025/cookson.

Empowering Educators and Students to Defend Democracy

Democracy in the United States is in danger. We are witnessing the gutting of federal services, public health, and public education; the erasure of diverse cultures; continued attacks on truth and constitutional rights; and rising political violence, division, and dehumanization. These developments can make us fearful for our future, but we, the people, are not powerless. Collectively, we can fight for a democracy that works for all of us—and Share My Lesson has devoted resources to help.

Understanding Threats to Democracy

To better understand why democracy is so important, start with the principles integral to the founding of the United States. SML's "Understanding Threats to Democracy" collection features "Why Doesn't the United States Have a King?" This lesson, adaptable for many grade levels, details how our country's founders envisioned a republic with shared power and accountability; it also considers the advantages of a government that represents everyone.

Next, learn what makes democracy work by exploring democratic and anti-democratic efforts across the world. The for-credit webinar "Authoritarianism vs. Democracy" compares countries using 12 categories of freedom—including free and fair elections, consent of the governed, and freedom from state tyranny. In the mini lesson "The Hope and Fragility of Democracy in the United States," students in grades 6–12 explore

US tactics to both strengthen or weaken democracy since the Civil War. "Comparing Trump's Second Term to Autocracies Around the World," adaptable for many grade levels, examines the importance of governmental checks and balances and the dangers of executive branch overreach. And in "Understanding Authoritarianism," students in grades 10–12 research and compare authoritarian regimes and discuss ways citizens can respond and resist.

Several resources tackle how manipulating history contributes to democratic backsliding. One is a lesson based on Jason Stanley's book, *Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future*. This lesson, suitable for students in grades 10 and above (including AP levels), emphasizes teaching honest history to make countries less susceptible to violent authoritarianism.

Taking Action

Educators and students can strengthen democracy through several SML resources highlighting the power of individual and collective action. "The Purpose and Power of Protest" prompts conversations among students in grades 4–12 on the constitutional right to engage in non-violent resistance and advocacy for change. In "Defending Democracy: Lessons for Building Resilience and Taking Action," high school students learn 12 actions to fight authoritarianism, including boosting media literacy, standing

against misinformation, and becoming global citizens who influence society for the better.

Also notable are recent additions to the AFT Book Club series. In "A Conversation with Ali Velshi," the author of *Small Acts of Courage: A Legacy of Endurance and the Fight for Democracy* shares that although today's problems seem overwhelming, "Your job is not to fix the whole world. Your job is to fix something." Learn how engaging in community building and inspiring students to imagine the world as it can be help create a more just democracy. And in "A Conversation with Sami Sage," the co-author of *Democracy in Retrograde* highlights how civic engagement aligned with your personality and unique skills—from joining a local school board, to advocating for public health issues, to volunteering for voter registration or organization drives—can increase interconnection and personal fulfillment.

Finally, the on-demand webinar "How to Stop a Backsliding Democracy in Its Tracks" gives practical strategies to help civil resistance movements succeed, including playing the long game, engaging youth, and using listening skills to disrupt isolation and polarization. For more teaching strategies on defending democracy, check out Share My Lesson's "Educating for Democracy" playlist on YouTube: go.aft.org/8tr.

Do you have resources you'd like to share? SML makes it easy! And if you have ideas or requests, reach out to content@sharemylesson.com.

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM



Recommended Resources

Why Doesn't the United States Have a King?
go.aft.org/v6r

Authoritarianism vs. Democracy: How Comparing Governments Helps Students Understand Governing
go.aft.org/bf8

The Hope and Fragility of Democracy in the United States
go.aft.org/jer

Comparing Trump's Second Term to Autocracies Around the World
go.aft.org/0xt

Understanding Authoritarianism: A Collaborative, Standards-Aligned Lesson for Grades 10–12
go.aft.org/v35

Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future
go.aft.org/7un

The Purpose and Power of Protest
go.aft.org/fom

Defending Democracy: Lessons for Building Resilience and Taking Action
go.aft.org/z2h

AFT Book Club: A Conversation with Ali Velshi
go.aft.org/0x8

AFT Book Club: A Conversation with Sami Sage
go.aft.org/cng

How to Stop a Backsliding Democracy in Its Tracks
go.aft.org/c5c

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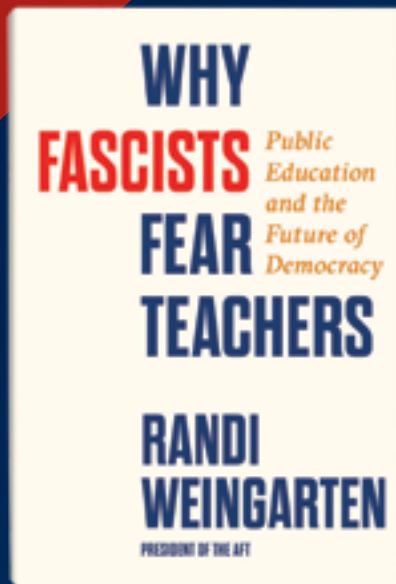
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