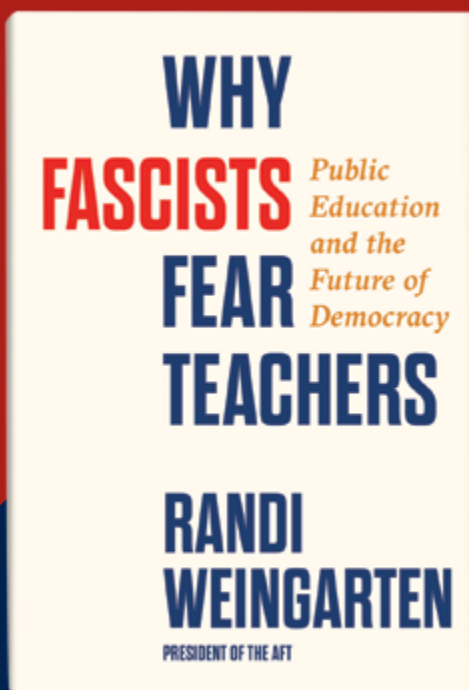# AMERICAN
Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

Protecting Education and Democracy

FIGHTING FOR THE OPPORTUNITIES
AND FREEDOMS OUR KIDS DESERVE

WHY **FASCISTS** FEAR TEACHERS

Public Education and the Future of Democracy

RANDI WEINGARTEN

PRESIDENT OF THE AFT

Coming September 16

Preorder your copy today!

In this moment in history, when our public schools and public school teachers face unprecedented attacks, AFT President Randi Weingarten reveals exactly what's at stake. Public schools are the foundation of opportunity and democracy in America—and that's precisely why fascists and the far-right are scapegoating teachers and trying to end public education as we know it.

There is a plot to destroy public education in America. *Why Fascists Fear Teachers* shows us how teachers, parents, and communities can work together to fight back.

Why Fascists Fear Teachers is available to preorder everywhere books are sold. Learn more at **aft.org/book**.

I wrote Why Fascists Fear Teachers *to answer the question so many educators and parents are asking right now: Why the relentless attacks on public schools and on educators? This book uncovers the long-planned, well-funded strategy to undermine public education, truth and democracy. And this book also honors the incredible work educators do every day to create opportunity, build safe and welcoming schools, and help young people thrive.*

–Randi Weingarten, AFT president

The Big Betrayal

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP said he wanted Republicans in Congress to load his legislative agenda into "one big, beautiful bill." The US House of Representatives heeded his call—and the result is truly ugly. Rather than address the needs of workers, families, and our communities, this bill prioritizes tax cuts for the wealthy, adding trillions of dollars to the national debt and dampening long-run economic growth. It slashes funds for meeting the basic needs of children, seniors, veterans, and low- and moderate-income Americans while converting education funds into a piggy bank that serves as a tax shelter for the well-off.

Trump says he wants to protect and preserve Medicaid and Medicare, but this bill does exactly the opposite. Close to 14 million Americans will lose healthcare coverage because of cuts to Medicaid, the failure to extend the Affordable Care Act tax credits, and other changes to the Affordable Care Act.

Medicaid provides access to healthcare for people with disabilities, retirees, 40 percent of new babies, nearly 1.6 million veterans, more than 2 million military-attached children, low-wage workers, and millions of people on Medicare who get supplemental Medicaid. Medicaid is essential to paying for long-term care for many older Americans, including in nursing homes. Cuts to Medicaid will likely force many hospitals to close or reduce services. Reporting requirements will lead to more people who are eligible for Medicaid getting kicked off their healthcare—causing 15,400 avoidable deaths each year according to the Center for American Progress. And the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office found that this bill will trigger more than $500 billion in automatic cuts to Medicare—representing one of the largest cuts ever to Medicare.

So rather than protect Medicaid and Medicare, this bill cuts them.

Then there are the largest cuts ever to critical food assistance. The Republican bill cuts nearly $300 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's most effective tool to combat hunger, leaving nearly 11 million people—including 4 million kids—at risk. With high grocery prices and the Trump administration's $1 billion in cuts in aid to anti-hunger groups, cuts to SNAP benefits will cause even more children, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities in every community to go hungry.

The bill also would slash $330 billion for college affordability. It would increase costs for students and their families and, by design, leave 5 million students without enough financial aid to afford college. Proposed changes to Pell Grants—the cornerstone of need-based federal student aid—mean 4.4 million students, nearly 2 out of 3 recipients, could lose some or all of their federal grant aid, forcing them to assume an additional $7,400 for a bachelor's degree and $3,700 for an associate's degree. And the bill could take away the most affordable options for income-driven repayment plans that 12.5 million borrowers currently use, tripling monthly payments for most of these borrowers. The bill could end relief for 1.7 million students defrauded by colleges and force more than 425,000 students into risky private loans.

Taking aim at the very idea of public education, the bill includes $20 billion for a new school voucher program that diverts crucial funds away from students in public schools to pay for private school tuition, home-schooling materials, and for-profit virtual learning. As Josh Cowen demonstrates (see page 12), vouchers have caused some of the largest achievement drops ever recorded, and most vouchers go to families whose children already attend private schools. Federal education funding is supposed to be an opportunity agent for our children. It should not be used as a piggy bank for the rich that further fragments and defunds our already underfunded public schools. (For a deeper dive into why Republicans are attacking public schools and colleges, see the article by Neil Kraus on page 4.)

Let's be clear: the "big, beautiful bill" would make millions of Americans—especially our children—sicker and poorer, while making the wealthiest even richer. Delivering 70 percent of tax benefits to the wealthiest 5 percent of Americans at the expense of the bottom 40 percent, cutting essential services, and adding to the national debt is not what America's working families want or deserve.

The "big, beautiful bill" would make millions of Americans sicker and poorer.

A better name for this bill is the big betrayal.

With American families stressed and facing so much economic uncertainty, lawmakers should be shoring up the safety net and expanding opportunity. Now it is up to the Republican majority in the US Senate to decide if they will follow the House, a decision that will determine whether hospitals will be forced to close, whether our parents and grandparents will lose funding for lifesaving care, and whether students in public schools will lose the resources and services they need. That's not what Americans want. And that's why we are fighting it with everything we have as the bill makes its way through Congress.   □

AMERICAN Educator

Protecting Education and Democracy

Supporting Early Career Educators

Teaching is a rewarding but challenging profession—and for new teachers, the reality of navigating the classroom and school community can be overwhelming. Many face these challenges in isolation, which can lead to burnout and an early exit from the profession. But the AFT has interactive support and resources to help early career educators learn and grow in community.

Share My Lesson's Welcome-to-Teaching Conversation Series gives educators a platform to share their teaching experiences and receive support. In these for-credit, on-demand podcast episodes, two early career educators talk with AFT professional development leaders. Each episode is paired with a companion blog and supplemental resources that can be used to help onboard new teachers. Here, we describe the first five episodes and related resources; check out go.aft.org/92n for the entire series and ideas educators can use to spark conversations with colleagues on these topics.

Build Trusting Relationships for Student Success

What techniques can help early career educators handle challenging student behaviors and keep students on task? Episode 1, "Classroom Management," is a conversation about setting effective classroom expectations and procedures—and these tips are expanded on in the companion blog, "Effective Classroom Management." Additional resources, such as tips on navigating cellphone and social media use in the classroom and a webinar on fostering civil classroom conversations, are available in SML's Classroom Management Strategies collection at go.aft.org/3c6.

Some challenging classroom behaviors are rooted in trauma that can distract students from learning. Episode 2, "Children's Well-Being," features strategies for creating a safe classroom environment that fosters trust, de-escalating crisis behaviors, and helping students regulate their emotions and build problem-solving skills. Resources supporting this episode include "Create a School Culture of Care Through Active Well-Being Practices," a new webinar in SML's Social Emotional Learning Lesson Plans and Resources for Middle and High School collection; educators learn mindfulness, gratitude, and kindness practices that help students thrive academically and emotionally.

Families are a critical partner in students' learning, so Episode 3, "Family Engagement," focuses on practical strategies and easy, "bite-size" actions to help educators maintain regular communication with families, partner to provide the instructional support students need, and use literacy as a lever to build great family relationships. Pair this episode with content in SML's Family Engagement Resources collection—like the blog "Showing Up Is Half the Battle," which gives actionable strategies to "tag team" with families in addressing chronic absenteeism.

Manage Work-Life Balance

Balancing the educator's workload with the demands of a personal life can sometimes feel impossible to new teachers. Episode 4, "Teacher Well-Being," reminds educators that taking time to care for themselves also benefits students. Strategies such as setting boundaries with time, engaging in activities that bring joy, and asking for help create space for educators to focus on student growth, success, and connection. The accompanying blog, "Finding Balance as a New Teacher," provides additional tips for relieving stress, such as box breathing and developing relationships with colleagues.

Foster Civic Engagement and Participation

How can educators make civics relevant to all students and address real-world issues that concern students—especially those that are controversial? This is the focus of Episode 5, "Civics Instruction," which covers how to help students understand multiple perspectives and learn to converse about civic issues that relate to their lives. The blog, "Making Civics Instruction Meaningful for Every Classroom," supplements this episode with examples for helping students make connections to their learning and engage each other respectfully, even when they disagree.

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

–THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

PEOPLEIMAGES / ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS

Recommended Resources

Episode 1: Classroom Management
go.aft.org/d23

Effective Classroom Management
go.aft.org/dz2

Episode 2: Children's Well-Being
go.aft.org/de6

Create a School Culture of Care Through Active Well-Being Practices
go.aft.org/xip

Episode 3: Family Engagement
go.aft.org/c72

Showing Up Is Half the Battle: What We Can Do to Tackle the Attendance Crisis
go.aft.org/p2r

Episode 4: Teacher Well-Being
go.aft.org/679

Finding Balance as a New Teacher
go.aft.org/5da

Episode 5: Civics Instruction
go.aft.org/je3

Making Civics Instruction Meaningful for Every Classroom
go.aft.org/69d

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 possess 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

Neil Kraus is a professor of political science and pre-law advisor at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls who specializes in American politics and public policy. He also serves as president of AFT Local 6504, United Falcons of UW–River Falls, and as AFT-Wisconsin's northern regional vice president. His most recent book, The Fantasy Economy: Neoliberalism, Inequality, and the Education Reform Movement, *received Honorable Mention for the 2024 Michael Harrington Book Award from the Critical Political Science Section of the American Political Science Association. It provides an in-depth analysis of the ideas presented in this article.*

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-

nomic 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 remarkably 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 (such as the Swiss system described on page 24). 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. □

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

Josh Cowen is a professor of education policy at Michigan State University and, for the 2024–25 academic year, a senior fellow at the Education Law Center. Over the last two years, Cowen has written, testified, and spoken widely on the harmful effects of voucher programs. His work has appeared in outlets like the Brookings Institution Chalkboard, Time, The Hechinger Report, The Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, *and* The Philadelphia Inquirer. *This article was excerpted with permission from* The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers *by Josh Cowen, September 2024, published by Harvard Education Press. See* The Privateers *for notes on Cowen's funding sources throughout his career.* The Privateers *received no financial support from the AFT or any other organization apart from a six-month sabbatical granted by Michigan State University. For more information, please visit go.aft.org/p64.*

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 13) 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-

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 negative 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 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]

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

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

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 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]

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 incarcerated fall with them.[30] When states take on

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

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.   □

The Hidden Costs of Voucher Programs

How Public School Students Are Harmed
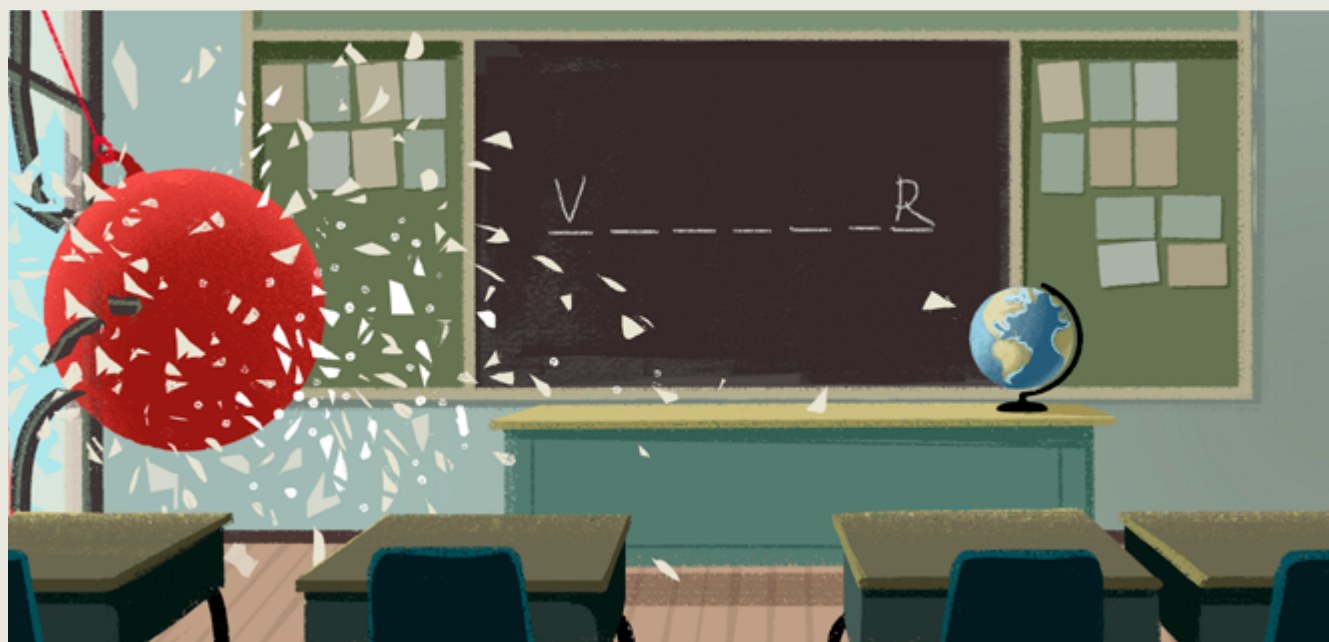
BY HILARY WETHING

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 12.)

Proponents of vouchers have been undeterred 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 resources for education. Their argument hinges on the fact that public school spending is

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.*

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 homeschooled 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 programs 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/summer2025/wething.
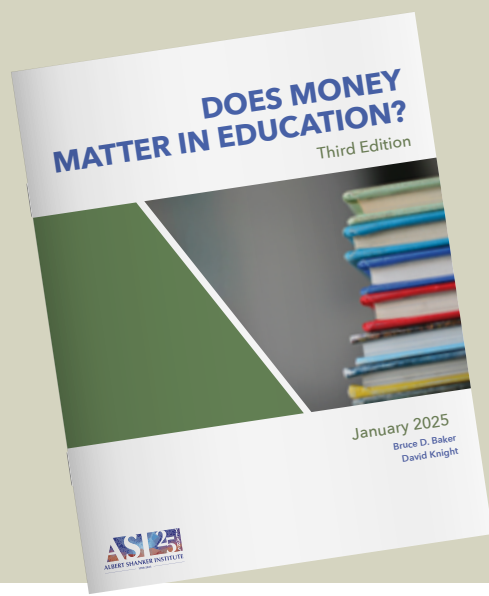
Money Matters

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

DOES MONEY MATTER IN EDUCATION?
Third Edition

January 2025
Bruce D. Baker
David Knight

Supportive High Schools

Educational Communities That Nurture Students' Hearts and Minds

By Linda Darling-Hammond,
Matt Alexander, and Laura E. Hernández

I n 1949, W. E. B. Du Bois said, "Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental." He went on to describe a vision of equitable, democratic schools focused on deeper learning for all students. Although our commitment to develop a more perfect union aspires to enact a right to learn for all children, our society has constructed a system that is still largely based on a standardized, impersonal factory model adopted a century ago. This model incorporates deeply embedded inequalities that dare many of our youth to learn.[1]

We dare them to learn in high schools where they have little opportunity to become well known by adults who can consider them as whole people or as developing intellects. We dare young people to learn when their needs for resources or personal advice require standing in line or waiting weeks to see a counselor with a caseload of 500 or more students. We dare too many of our young people to make it through huge warehouse institutions focused substantially on the control of behavior rather than the development of community.

There is a growing realization that many of our high schools are not designed to educate the next generation to face the challenges of our time. There is also a growing consensus that we know what works for educating students. In recent years, our understanding of the science of learning and development* has deepened considerably.[2] Young people grow and thrive in environments designed to support individualized development; where they have strong, supportive relationships; and where their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs are met.

Many teachers, principals, and district leaders, along with students and their families, understand that schools must change in fundamental ways, yet the inertia of existing systems is powerful. The good news is that models exist: a number of schools that have been extraordinarily effective and have helped other schools to replicate their success have important lessons to offer, based on the elements they hold in common.

Linda Darling-Hammond, a former teacher and teacher educator, is the president of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University, and a member of the National Academy of Education and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Matt Alexander, a former teacher and principal with the San Francisco public schools, is an elected member of the San Francisco Board of Education and a community organizer at Faith in Action Bay Area. Laura E. Hernández, a former teacher, is a senior researcher at LPI, where she coleads the Whole Child Education team. This article is adapted from their 2024 LPI report, Redesigning High Schools: 10 Features for Success, *which is available at redesigninghighschool.org.*

*For details on the science of learning and development, see "Liberatory Education" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator* at go.aft.org/lpw and "All Children Thriving" in the Fall 2021 issue of *American Educator* at go.aft.org/h9e.

This article, and the far more detailed report it's drawn from, outlines the following 10 evidence-based features of effective redesigned high schools that help create the kind of education many of us want for all of our children: safe environments where exciting and rigorous academic work occurs and where all groups of students succeed academically, graduate at high levels, and go on to college and productive work.

1. Positive developmental relationships
2. Safe, inclusive school climate
3. Culturally responsive and sustaining teaching
4. Deeper learning curriculum
5. Student-centered pedagogy
6. Authentic assessment
7. Well-prepared and well-supported teachers
8. Authentic family engagement
9. Community connections and integrated student supports
10. Shared decision-making and leadership

While successful schools include all these elements, they enact each feature in distinctive ways. There are many initiatives underway to transform secondary schools so that students have opportunities for meaningful learning, personalized supports, and connections to their futures, including college and career pathway models that offer experiential learning; early college and other dual enrollment opportunities; community schools that organize supports and connect learning to community concerns; and strategies that support social and emotional development through restorative practices, service learning, and civic engagement. Schools need to create means for enacting their goals that respond to their local contexts and work for the students, parents, and faculty members of their communities.

Here, we introduce the 10 features of redesigned high schools, but we encourage readers to learn more by examining the full report at redesigninghighschool.org.

Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships

Positive relationships create the conditions that allow young people to develop their attention, focus, memory, and other neural processes essential to learning. Effective schools create structures that allow for the time and space needed to support positive developmental relationships between adults and young people, and among young people themselves.

These kinds of relationships are difficult to develop in high schools designed on the factory model, where students may see seven or eight teachers a day for 45 or 50 minutes at a time, and teachers see 150 students or more every day. This structure precludes teachers from getting to know each student well, which is made even more difficult when teachers work in isolation from one another with little time to plan together or share their knowledge about what students need. While teachers care deeply about their students, it is not possible to care effectively for all of their needs in this structure. As a result, a recent survey of US secondary school students found that less than 30 percent felt they were in a school that offered a caring environment.[3]

Over the past few decades, educational research has suggested that, all else being equal, small learning communities of 300–500 students—whether small schools or smaller units within large schools—tend to produce significantly better results

> ## Young people grow and thrive in environments where their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs are met.

for students, including better attendance, greater participation in extracurricular activities, stronger academic achievement, higher grades, fewer failed courses, fewer behavioral incidents, less violence and vandalism, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates.[4]

Yet it is important to recognize that "small" is not enough. The key is not overall school size but rather how schools create strong, developmental relationships and leverage a web of relationships to create a caring community that supports increased learning and a safety net to prevent students from falling through the cracks. Larger secondary schools have redesigned themselves into smaller learning communities to achieve similar results.

Redesigned high schools typically offer significantly reduced pupil loads for teachers (usually in the range of 80–100 students per teacher) by rethinking their use of staff and time. This allows teachers to focus more on the individual needs of their students. One way that schools reduce pupil load and class size is by allocating more of their resources to hiring teachers rather than nonteaching staff and assigning more staff to be regularly engaged in classroom teaching rather than to roles outside the classroom. Most large traditional schools have a bigger administrative staff, and they often hire people to run special programs, such as dropout prevention and compensatory education, that exist to solve problems that arise because students are not getting enough personal attention in the classroom. These programs and positions rarely solve the core problems that are a result of depersonalized instruction, and they become less necessary when students feel that they can turn to their teachers for personal as well as academic support—and when resources are redirected to the classroom so teachers have few enough students that they can spend more time on each one.

Advisory structures are becoming more common in secondary schools as a strategy to promote strong relationships and ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Advisory groups place 15–20 students together with a faculty advisor several times a week for ongoing academic and personal counseling and support. Ideally, this advisor is also one of the students' teachers or counselors, so advisory serves as an extension of an existing relationship. Many studies showing the positive impact of redesigned secondary schools note that advisories are a key strategy for personalization and improving student outcomes.[5]

Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate

Because fear and anxiety undermine cognitive capacity and short-circuit the learning process, students learn best under conditions of low threat and high support. Learning is also supported when

students can connect what happens in school to their cultural contexts and experiences, when their teachers are responsive to their strengths and needs, and when their environment is "identity safe,"[6] reinforcing their value and belonging.[7]

As the table below shows, creating such an environment can require transformations of traditional school practices.

Transforming from a school environment in which...	Toward a school environment in which...
Individual teacher discipline practices vary from class to class, communicating different expectations for relationships	Shared norms and values create consistency and positive experiences for students
The focus is on moving individual students through academic curriculum only	The focus is on community building as a foundation for shared social and academic work
Governance is by rules and punishments	Communities are built on shared responsibility that is explicitly taught and nurtured
Exclusionary discipline pushes students out of class and school	Restorative practices enable amends and attach students more closely to the community
Tracking systems convey differential expectations of students by race, class, language background, or disability	Heterogeneous classrooms with strong community norms and supports convey common expectations

SOURCE: LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE AND TURNAROUND FOR CHILDREN (NOW CENTER FOR WHOLE-CHILD EDUCATION), *DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOLS: PUTTING THE SCIENCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT INTO ACTION*, 2021.

Quite often, challenging student behaviors are a result of traumatic experiences inside or outside of school. One of the easiest ways schools can be trauma informed is by having consistent routines for checking in with students, which provide an opportunity for sharing concerns and help reduce stress and anxiety. Some schools hold their advisory periods first thing in the morning so advisors can check in with students individually or through a community circle to see if any events or concerns have emerged that need immediate attention. Breakfast may also be served as a morning routine, which builds community, destigmatizes free meals, and ensures that students start the day on an even keel, as hunger can also trigger distress.

The cornerstones of a safe, inclusive school climate include explicit teaching of empathy and a set of shared social-emotional skills for recognizing emotions, working with others, and resolving conflict peaceably.* On occasions when norms may be violated, it is important to activate problem-solving strategies that avoid exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions, which disconnect students from school, increase alienation and dropout rates, and fail to teach strategies for conflict resolution or other solutions to challenges students may face.[8]

Restorative practices provide a more effective approach for building a positive school climate, creating greater safety, and

*Some educators are hesitant to teach values or feel that their job is just to focus on academics. But it is impossible for all students to learn to their full potential if schools allow oppressive or harmful behaviors to flourish on campus. If schools do not have active means to build a calm, inclusive, and consistent culture, hurtful behaviors, including bullying—within the school and through social media—can take hold.

improving student outcomes. The goal is to support students on a daily basis through community building, explicit teaching of conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, and methods that enable those who violate the norms of the community to repair harm and make amends.[9] A recent large-scale study found that the more students experience these practices, the more their academic achievement and mental health improve and the less violence and misbehavior schools experience.[10] The gains are experienced by all students and are greatest for Black students and those with disabilities, who are most often harmed by exclusionary discipline; thus, restorative practices hold promise for closing achievement gaps.

Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching

An important part of creating an educational community in which young people can thrive and learn is ensuring that all students feel valued and seen for who they are. This work involves an explicit commitment to culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, which promotes respect for diversity and creates a context within which students' experiences can be understood, appreciated, and connected to the curriculum.

Effective educators proactively seek to create a school environment that is identity safe—where all students feel welcomed and included, where their identities and cultures are not a cause for exclusion but a strength to be valued and celebrated.[11] A growing body of research shows how educators can foster identity-safe environments that counteract societal stereotypes that may undermine students' confidence and performance. Key actions include

- helping students learn to respect and care for one another by creating caring classroom environments in which empathy and social skills are purposefully taught and practiced;
- communicating affirmations of worth and competence to each student, along with publicly sharing these perceptions;
- promoting student responsibility for and belonging to the classroom community, and cooperation in learning and classroom tasks; and
- cultivating diversity as a resource for teaching through regular use of culturally diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities, along with high expectations for all students.[12]

Tools that allow educators and students to learn what they have in common, like "Getting to Know You" surveys, have been shown to build empathy in relationships that, in turn, positively affect student achievement. In one study, researchers found that both students and teachers who learned that they shared com-

monalities with each other held more positive relationships, and students earned higher grades when teachers learned about their similarities with students. This was particularly true for teachers' relationships with Black and Latino/a students, narrowing the achievement disparities for these student groups by over 60 percent.[13]

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices require teachers to learn about and from students and their communities through curriculum and instruction strategies that both surface and build on that knowledge.[14] As educator Gloria Ladson-Billings notes, "All instruction is culturally responsive. The question is: To which culture is it currently oriented?"[15] There is a large body of research showing that effective teachers of students of color form and maintain connections with students within their social contexts. They understand that adolescents are going through a critical period of identity development. They celebrate their students as individuals and seek to learn about their cultural contexts. They ask students to share who they are and what they know with the class in a variety of ways. They regularly incorporate instructional materials that provide various viewpoints from different cultures.[16] Research shows that this approach improves students' sense of belonging and improves educational outcomes.[17]

Feature 4: Deeper Learning Curriculum

We know from research in the learning sciences that students learn at different paces and in different ways that build on their prior experiences and connect to their interests, modes of processing and expression, and cultural contexts. An inquiry-oriented curriculum aimed at learning that transfers to other settings engages students and challenges them to understand concepts deeply, find and integrate information, assemble evidence, weigh ideas, and develop skills of analysis and expression.[18]

Schools that motivate and succeed with diverse learners demand intellectually challenging work, and they are focused on preparing all students to meet the skill and content demands of college and careers—what is now known as deeper learning. Curriculum focuses not just on content expertise but on other essential competencies as well, including critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, effective communication, self-directed learning, and academic mindsets. Students are typically asked to engage in inquiry in all classes, applying their learning to novel problems and tasks and producing significant pieces of analytic work, including research papers, projects, models, and designs, that are aimed at the mastery of facts as well as in-depth understanding.

Schools can demand this type of rigorous intellectual work from students only if they are willing to forgo the goal of superficial content coverage. In-depth study does not imply haphazard selection of a few interesting ideas to focus on. Instead, topics are judiciously selected to provide a framework for many related key ideas, so students come away with an understanding of the core concepts and modes of inquiry in the academic disciplines they are studying.

The traditional high school often takes a "shopping mall" approach,[19] offering many electives for students to choose without guaranteeing serious mastery of essential skills for college, career, and life. Effective schools make deliberate choices about what is most essential and do those things well for all students. They also supplement their own core offerings with out-of-school experiences such as community service, internships, online courses,

The cornerstones of a safe, inclusive school climate include explicit teaching of empathy and a set of shared social-emotional skills.

and courses at local colleges. These programs allow secondary schools to provide choices and give students the opportunity to understand the world in which they are growing up.

Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy

Student-centered pedagogy begins with structures that allow teachers to know students and their learning strategies well; takes place in a safe, inclusive school and classroom culture; values students' identities and cultures; and enacts an authentic curriculum that is meaningful to students. All of these elements help create the essential conditions for a young person to learn. A student-centered pedagogy goes one step further and recognizes that each student is a unique individual who learns in their own way and who needs individualized support to meet their full potential. Psychologist Robert Glaser calls this kind of teaching an *adaptive* pedagogy in which "modes of teaching are adjusted to individuals—their backgrounds, talents, interests, and the nature of past performance."[20]

Universal Design for Learning is a framework for designing pedagogy based on this scientific understanding of how people learn. To create a learning environment in which all students can access meaningful learning, teachers start by considering different modes of engagement. How will the teacher motivate student interest and facilitate productive strategies and self-assessment that enable self-regulation? Then teachers can offer multiple paths of representation, so students can understand new information, improve their language skills, and construct meaning and generate new understandings. And finally, teachers provide a range of opportunities for student action and expression, including physical actions using tools and different response methods; communication options; and supports for executive functions such as goal setting, planning, information processing, and monitoring progress. In each of these areas, teachers must offer multiple means for students to engage so that young people with different backgrounds, experiences, and histories with school can all access the curriculum.[21]

Educators who have worked to implement a student-centered pedagogy understand that it is very challenging to do so unless the school is already redesigned to support this kind of learning. If a teacher has a pupil load of 150 students or more, it will be more difficult to provide individualized scaffolds or ask students to do multiple revisions of a piece of work based on feedback. If a school's culture is not safe and inclusive, students will be less able to focus on the in-depth thinking and effort that challenging work requires. If teachers do not have time for collaboration and professional development, they may not know how to adjust their instruction to meet students' needs. The 10 features described in this article do

Effective teachers of students of color celebrate their students as individuals and seek to learn about their cultural contexts.

not operate in isolation but rather build on one another to create environments in which all young people can thrive.

Feature 6: Authentic Assessment

Effective schools have clear and meaningful expectations for students that relate to what they need to learn for a healthy and productive life. Over the past two decades, an increasing number of schools, districts, and states have adopted what is known as a *graduate profile*, which answers the question, "What do we want students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate?"

Once a school is clear about that, the next question is, "How will we know if we are succeeding?" This is best answered by looking at student work as the concrete representation of progress toward the standards. Students have frequent opportunities to engage in serious conversations about their work and to share, reflect upon, and receive feedback on their progress.

These conversations about the quality of student work best occur in the framework of a well-crafted performance assessment system that more fully reflects what students should learn and be able to do.[22] Performance assessments—widely used around the world and increasingly sought in the United States—allow students to demonstrate their knowledge by directly exhibiting a skill, reporting on an investigation, producing a product, or performing an activity. By measuring students' abilities to apply knowledge to solve pertinent problems, such assessments encourage and support more rigorous and relevant teaching and learning. Research shows that students who regularly engage in such assessments do as well on traditional standardized tests and better on tests of analytic and performance ability than other similar students; they are also better prepared for college.[23]

Performance assessment systems are based on common, schoolwide standards; they are integrated into daily classroom practice; and they provide models, demonstrations, and exhibi-

tions of the kind of work that will be expected of students. Generally, these systems include

- portfolios of student work that demonstrate in-depth study through research papers, scientific experiments, mathematical models, literary critiques and analyses, arts performances, and so on;
- rubrics that embody the set of standards against which students' products and performance are judged;
- oral presentations (exhibitions) by students to a committee of teachers, peers, and others in the school to test for in-depth understanding and assess the students' readiness for graduation; and
- opportunities for students to revise their work and improve in order to demonstrate their learning and meet the standards.

Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers

Redesigned high schools invest deeply in training and supporting their teachers and in providing them with time and opportunities to create a coherent set of practices and become experts at their craft. Teachers with these opportunities are more effective and likely to stay for the long run, with a payoff in student achievement.[24]

There are three key areas in which teachers must be experts: (1) their subject matter and curriculum, (2) the needs of diverse learners and the learning process, and (3) teaching itself. In addition, teachers must develop skills such as adaptive expertise, inquiry and reflection, and curriculum design, which allow them to listen to and observe what is happening in the classroom and make adjustments to lessons and units to ensure that their students are learning. To accomplish this, teachers must possess and develop dispositions including empathy, social-emotional capacity, cultural competence, and a commitment to equity.[25]

Effective schools and districts do not leave teacher hiring to chance. They devote resources and attention to recruiting well-trained educators, often by establishing professional development school partnerships with local teacher education programs. Teachers who enter with comprehensive preparation are half as likely to leave teaching after the first year than those who enter without preparation. Grow Your Own pathway programs, including paraprofessional pathways and teacher residencies, can support local community members to become effective teachers and provide opportunities for seamless support for new educators, starting during their student teaching and continuing with intensive coaching and mentoring during their initial years in the classroom.* These programs, especially when combined with adequate financial supports, can make entering teaching more affordable and reduce attrition while developing a highly skilled teaching force.

Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement

Educators' most important partners, aside from students themselves, are students' families and caregivers. Research shows that authentic family engagement can improve attendance rates, create a more positive school climate, and increase academic achievement.[26] Schools that have been redesigned to build con-

---

*To learn about one such program in Philadelphia, see "Recruiting the Talent Within" from the Winter 2022–23 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/i2k.

nections between educators, students, and families enable educators to better support young people and tailor their teaching to individual needs. This process begins with prioritizing regular, positive communication with families—a simple step that goes a long way to building trust and making families feel welcome.

Parents or caregivers fluent in languages other than English often report that they want to support their students' learning but cannot communicate with teachers who do not speak their language. Effective schools serving students who speak a home language other than English build language capacity by prioritizing hiring staff who speak families' native languages or, for languages with smaller populations, setting aside funding to pay for phone-based interpretation services that teachers can access when needed.

Effective schools serving students from low-income families respond with flexibility, offering meetings at flexible times and in varying ways. When they host meetings at school, schools welcome parents and caregivers with food and childcare—and if the school is not near where families live or work, educators offer to come to locations that are convenient for families, such as places of worship or community centers. They use multiple means of communication as well: telephone, email, web postings and chats, and text messages.

Planned home visits are a research-based approach to building positive teacher-family relationships at the secondary level. Not only do home visits build trust and engage families, but they also help teachers learn about families' goals for their children and provide an important learning experience for teachers who do not come from the same communities as their students. When families are uncomfortable having a visit in their home, the visit can be arranged in another community-based location, such as a library, recreation center, or coffee shop.

Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports

More than half of public school students now live in low-income households, and these young people are living with the consequences of long-term disinvestment not only in our public schools but also in the social safety net. Through trusting relationships and well-coordinated support, schools can ensure that students receive the health, social service, and learning opportunities they need to be successful.

Building strong community relationships can take years. Retaining teachers and principals matters a great deal, as does recruiting educators from the community and actively seeking out leaders and organizations with whom to partner. Teachers and school leaders who come from the community are well positioned to build the necessary connections, and parents or extended family members of students can also be key bridge-builders in this process. Educators who come from other communities or backgrounds need to listen and learn with humility. Schools can then become places for the community to celebrate its strengths, through both cultural programs and partnerships with local community initiatives.

The community schools framework was developed to describe schools that serve as community hubs and partner with community organizations to educate the whole child. The framework builds on a synthesis of more than 140 studies that found that effective community schools that boost attendance, achievement, and attainment are guided by four key pillars: integrated student supports, family and community engagement, collabora-

tive leadership and practices, and expanded learning time and opportunities.[27] Since the publication of the original research, two more dimensions have been added to communicate the ways that school climate and instruction should reinforce the goals of student support: rigorous community-connected classroom instruction and a culture of belonging, safety, and care. These six pillars are shown in the figure below along with other essential features and practices of community schools.
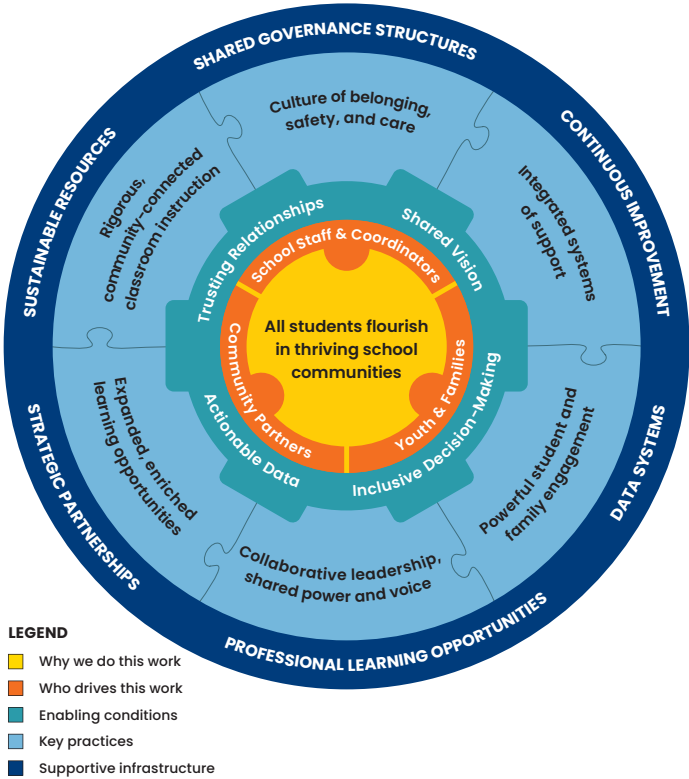
These elements can take different forms across community schools because each school designs its program to meet the needs of its students and families, using the community's assets as a starting point. In effective community schools, families, students, community leaders, and school staff collaborate on a comprehensive needs assessment, on design and planning of the program, and on its implementation.

Feature 10: Shared Decision-Making and Leadership

Redesigning a school to reflect the features of successful schools requires the buy-in of the entire school community. Ongoing success of a redesigned school also depends on staff, students, and family members all understanding and supporting the community's vision. This requires shared decision-making and leadership.

Research indicates that teacher participation in school decision-making is associated with greater retention for teach-

Essentials for Community School Transformation

LEGEND
- 🟨 Why we do this work
- 🟧 Who drives this work
- 🟦 Enabling conditions
- 🟦 Key practices
- 🟦 Supportive infrastructure

SOURCE: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS FORWARD, *FRAMEWORK: ESSENTIALS FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION*, 2023.

It is important for schools to model effective democratic processes so young people grow up understanding the value of democracy.

significant improvements in their practices with the full endorsement and engagement of all members of the school community. Moreover, at a moment in history when authoritarianism is on the rise, it is important for schools to model effective democratic processes so young people grow up understanding the value of democracy, even when it is challenging to implement.

The first key element of an effective shared governance system is the development of communitywide norms and values that guide the work of teachers, parents, and students in making decisions. Shared norms and values, when enacted in the context of collaborative decision-making, are the foundation for relational trust, which studies have found is essential for school improvement. A set of studies on 200 Chicago schools over a period of seven years found, for example, that collaborative structures and activities were key to nurturing relational trust among teachers as well as between educators, parents, and community members.[30] As a part of this research, scholars found that partnerships among teachers, parents, and community members were important in providing the social resources

ers and improved academic achievement for students.[28] There is also evidence that involvement of families and community members along with faculty also strengthens school climate and outcomes.[29] Authentic shared decision-making and leadership at the school level models the collaborative work that effective teachers expect from their students and enables schools to make

Work, Learn, Earn

Why the Swiss Apprenticeship System Works

BY MIRA WECKER

As Linda Darling-Hammond and her coauthors note in the main article, "There are many initiatives underway to transform secondary schools so that students have opportunities for meaningful learning, personalized supports, and connections to their futures, including college and career pathway models that offer experiential learning." While learning from these initiatives inside the United States is important, so is looking abroad. That's why a delegation of education and union leaders, including AFT President Randi Weingarten, visited Switzerland in January to learn more about the Swiss *vocational education and training* (VET) system. The visit was co-organized by the AFT and CareerWise, a US-based nonprofit that focuses on providing youth apprenticeship opportunities that can develop into meaningful jobs.

I was honored to guide the group as they explored different aspects of Swiss vocational education, including a visit to Bühler Group AG, a global Swiss technology company specializing in food processing and materials manufacturing,[1] where they met with the company's CEO and toured the facilities where many apprentices work. Additionally,

Mira Wecker is a journalist based in Zurich, Switzerland, and a recent graduate of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. In 2024, she worked as an assistant producer for the Swiss public television and radio in Washington, DC.

they visited a vocational school in Winterthur, near Zurich, where students are earning their vocational baccalaureates while working in their respective fields. At the school, the delegation talked to the principal, Beat Deola, and attended a Q&A session with students. Wrapping up the tour, they visited Google in Zurich, which is embracing and participating in the apprenticeship system in its Swiss offices.

During the trip, Weingarten appreciated the students' engagement and noted how the VET system keeps their employment and education options open. She also noted many ways that US public schools and employers could deepen their partnerships—such as offering more extensive apprenticeships and stackable credentials—to improve job readiness training for high school students. Here, drawing in part on my own experiences, I'd like to share some of the features that make the VET system so effective.

Making a Choice, Without Closing Doors

Around the age of 15, young people in Switzerland face an important decision: *Do I want to do an apprenticeship or continue my education at a high school?* Those who choose to stay in school have the option of attending a *gymnasium* (academic high school), which in most cases leads to university studies. But those choosing an apprenticeship are not ruling out higher education. After an apprenticeship, young adults can enter the workforce or continue studying. While in the past young people were expected to choose between a job or university, societal norms have shifted. Today, nothing is set in stone. The system is flexible, allowing for changes in career paths.

About two-thirds of all young people choose an apprenticeship through the VET system.[2] They take their first steps into the

needed to improve school conditions that influence student learning, including the learning climate and ambitious instruction. Chicago schools that were strong in these essential supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools weak in such supports to show substantial gains in both reading and math.

Principals at effective schools are committed to enabling everyone to uphold the community's values and goals, but they do not try to take on this role alone; they reach out to others with expertise who can take the lead in many areas of the school's functioning. They follow the advice of community organizer Marshall Ganz, who says that leadership is "accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty."[31] A principal who knows how to enable others to lead can create the space for teachers, parents, and students to create a common vision for where the school is going, and teachers can then make decisions that lead to student success. The ownership that results from this kind of shared governance is critical if innovations are to last.

O ver the past 30 years, thousands of redesigned secondary schools have demonstrated that it is possible to enable much greater levels of success for young people, including those who have been historically left out and pushed out of opportunities to learn. Expanding these opportunities will require redesigning systems at the district, state, and federal levels as well to move beyond the limitations of the factory model. Creating systems that support the learning of all students will take clarity of vision and purpose, along with consistent action to create mutually reinforcing elements that strengthen opportunities for relationships; provide environments of safety and belonging; support authentic and meaningful curriculum and assessment; explicitly develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills; facilitate family and student engagement and voice; and integrate community supports, making them readily available to remove obstacles to learning. ☐

---

working world by applying for a *Lehrstelle* (apprenticeship position) at a host company. If accepted, they work at the company three to four days a week, learning on the job, and then attend lessons at a vocational school for the remaining one or two days. The school provides theoretical knowledge related to their profession, as well as general subjects like math and languages. During the apprenticeship, which is usually three to four years, the host company pays the apprentice a salary that increases with each completed year. Wages vary depending on the profession and host company, but on average the monthly salary is about 600 to 800 Swiss francs (roughly $670 to $890) in the first year and about 1,200 to 1,500 Swiss francs (roughly $1,340 to $1,670) by the third year.[3] Once apprentices have graduated, they receive a federal diploma, which is recognized by employers everywhere in Switzerland.* They are also highly likely to be offered full employment at the company where they were an apprentice.

The VET system covers over 245 career paths across all industries. The 10 most frequently chosen occupations are commercial employee, healthcare worker, retail clerk, social care worker, IT technician, electrician, logistician, draftsperson, cook, and farmer. The vocational training is financed both publicly and privately. On the public side, the 26 Swiss cantons (states), federal government, and municipalities all contribute. On the private side, the host companies as well as professional and industry associations contribute.[5]

---

*Students also have the option of doing a two-year apprenticeship and earning a federal certificate, but less than 10 percent of youth take this path.[4]

Navigating the Swiss Education System

I'm a recent university graduate in communication and journalism. At 15, I had to decide whether to pursue an apprenticeship or attend a high school, and I remember this time in my life very well. I took various assessments and questionnaires designed to help me determine which professions might suit me best. With my class, I visited a career fair where hundreds of companies presented their apprenticeship programs. I realized that I wasn't ready to enter the job market yet. I decided to continue my education, earned my *Matura* (Swiss high school diploma), and went on to study at a university for applied sciences. However, many of the friends I made at my university had apprenticeships. That's what I like about the system: despite taking different paths—I pursued higher education directly, while they completed apprenticeships and earned a vocational baccalaureate—we ended up all at the same university. I consider it a privilege to have had this level of flexibility and freedom; there were paths for all of us, including paths that paid good wages for my friends who needed that extra support.

It's not easy to decide on your potential future job at a young age. But youth are not left alone in this decision. Teachers help their pupils explore which apprenticeships might be a good fit. Additionally, there are career information centers that offer insights into different professions. This process encourages young people to ask themselves, *What do I want to do in the future? What are my strengths? What can a company offer me?* And since there are paths to higher education after an apprenticeship, youth are not

overwhelmed if they are not sure what career or industry they would find fulfilling.

Investing in the Next Generation

The Swiss apprenticeship system is highly respected and deeply rooted in Swiss society. It has promoted prosperity, competitiveness, and integration in Switzerland.[6] In many industries, it's considered more suitable to have completed an apprenticeship than the academic pathway because youth collect work experience early on rather than "just" theoretical knowledge at a university. A famous example is Sergio Ermotti. He completed an apprenticeship and is now the CEO of UBS, Switzerland's largest bank.

Those choosing an apprenticeship are not ruling out higher education. The system is flexible.

For Swiss companies, offering apprenticeships is a strategy for building a talent pool. An apprenticeship is a long-term investment in specific knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the productive performance of apprentices is worthwhile for the companies. In Switzerland, a company's reputation and image are seen more positively if they hire apprentices, and hiring apprentices decreases recruiting costs.[7] Most importantly, the VET system demonstrates how early career choices can still allow for flexibility, lifelong learning, and professional (and personal) growth. ☐

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

Peter W. Cookson, Jr., is a senior research fellow at the Learning Policy Institute and teaches at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. A former elementary and middle school teacher, he is the author of 20 books, most recently School Communities of Strength: Strategies for Educating Children Living in Deep Poverty.

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 teaching[14]

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:

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

> 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

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

> 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 Māori, 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.

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

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.

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.

> Schools of solidarity are founded on principles of justice, fairness, and a belief in redemption.

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/summer2025/cookson.

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 has been carrying 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 American 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-

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.*

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 right now, polls show that the majority of Jewish students feel less safe because of anti-Israel campus protests and encampments. Surveys—by the Anti-Defamation League,[2] Hillel,[3] and others[4]—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/summer2025/weingarten.

Demanding Action

PROTECTING WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY AT NEW MEXICO HIGHLANDS UNIVERSITY

On September 14, 2024, Martin "Marty" Lujan, a custodian at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU), passed away shortly after working inside a campus building that had been closed following odors from chemicals that were not properly stored—setting in motion investigations into health and safety hazards on the campus that put students, staff, and faculty at risk.

To learn more about this tragic incident and how unions can protect workers in similar situations, we spoke with leaders and members of the NMHU Faculty and Staff Association. Andrea Crespin, BBA, is the former president and treasurer of the NMHU Clerical and Facilities Staff Union. Kathy Jenkins, PhD, is a professor of exercise physiology and the president of the NMHU Faculty Association. Michael Remke, PhD, is an assistant professor of forestry and a member of the NMHU Faculty Association. (For information on protecting workers from a broader array of hazards, we also spoke with occupational medicine specialists. That Q&A begins on page 42.)
—EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us about your role at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU) and in the union.

KATHY JENKINS: I'm a professor of exercise physiology, and I'm in my 29th year at NMHU. I came as a visiting professor and loved it so much that I just stayed. The university has a mission of open enrollment, and as one of the original Hispanic-serving institutions, NMHU has the values of diversity and access to education woven throughout the curriculum, so it's exciting to work here.

I'm also president of the Faculty Association, one of the three bargaining units of the NMHU Faculty and Staff Association. I represent approximately 100 tenured and tenure-track faculty, and I'm the lead negotiator for our collective bargaining team.

ANDREA CRESPIN: I was born and raised in this community. I graduated from NMHU in 2002 with my bachelor's in accounting and then came to work here. I currently work in the registrar's office. I got involved with the union in 2015. I have served as treasurer and president of the Clerical and Facilities Staff Union, the bargaining unit representing clerical and facilities staff. But I was promoted recently, so I'm not currently eligible to be a member of the union.

MICHAEL REMKE: I've been an assistant professor of forestry here since August 2023. I was attracted to NMHU because it's a teaching university where I could still engage in research, and this area is very affordable. I'm a member of the Faculty Association. This is my first unionized job. I had heard other people's opinions about the union, but I wanted to find out what it was like for myself. I've found it's a wonderful, supportive group of people who are really advocating for faculty and for employee wellness.

EDITORS: What led to investigations into health and safety hazards on campus?

KATHY: In July 2024, we started hearing complaints among the faculty that there was a foul smell in the Ivan Hilton Science and Technology Building, which houses a number of departments, including chemistry, biology, computer science, forestry, and natural resource management. We were told, "Oh, everything's fine," but people working in the building had a different experience.

MICHAEL: My office is on the first floor of the building, and the smell was like decaying flesh and chemical fumes. We learned that a walk-in cooler in the cold storage room had broken, and

there were specimens that had gotten very warm as a result—and that there were unsorted and unlabeled chemicals being stored in that same room. We were told the issue was under control, but weeks later, the entire first floor again smelled strongly of death and chemicals. After a full day of class prep in my office, my eyes, throat, and lungs were burning. I had a headache, and my stomach was cramping.

When I called our Environmental Health and Safety Office and reported the smell, my symptoms, and that I was worried about improperly stored chemicals, I was directed to file a workers' compensation claim through human resources. It took several days for human resources to process any paperwork. (My claim was eventually denied; because handling chemicals isn't part of my job, the insurance company ruled that chemical exposure didn't happen while carrying out my "normal" work duties.) Meanwhile, the first floor of the building still had chemical fumes, and other workers also started experiencing symptoms.

KATHY: The administration responded incorrectly for many weeks. At first, they just put up caution tape to keep people away from that part of the building. That, of course, didn't help with the smells. Then, they tried to close one of the floors. But the smell went through the HVAC system to every other part of the building.

In August, another faculty member filed an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) complaint about the chemical fumes. She spoke with OSHA's deputy director of hazardous waste, who ramped up a campus visit because of the previous complaints. At the same time, the university finally hired an abatement company, which came to campus on September 3, saw the cold room, and pulled the fire alarm. They refused to touch any of the chemicals because they were unlabeled and improperly stored. So the fire department came and closed the building immediately.

ANDREA: Unfortunately, although the building had been closed, we learned that the custodial staff was still required to work inside. We were also told that the custodial manager recommended custodians work in pairs so one could drag the other out if they passed out due to the fumes. Then Marty Lujan passed away on September 14, the day after he was assigned to clean the building.

After Marty passed, Kathy and I got a phone call that OSHA was on campus to do a walkthrough of the Ivan Hilton building as a starting point of its investigation into Marty's death and the

"**After a full day ... in my office, my eyes, throat, and lungs were burning. I had a headache, and my stomach was cramping.**"

–Michael Remke

chemical exposure. During the walkthrough, although we were given N95 masks, there was still a very strong chemical smell when the lab was opened. After being in that building for less than an hour, my throat hurt and I had a sharp headache. So I can only imagine what employees who spent eight hours a day in the building went through.

EDITORS: How did the union organize to address the problem?

KATHY: The union really pushed this issue to the forefront. I don't work in the building, so I didn't know what was happening until after Michael became ill and filed his workers' comp claim and the other professor filed the OSHA complaint. When I learned about the problems, I spoke with them and immediately notified NMHU's president on behalf of the union. When we learned through another faculty member that Marty had passed, we again immediately contacted the president. The administration went into protection mode, but we were undeterred. We filed two grievances and went to the media about the issue.[1]

NMHU's president just joined our university in July 2024. Our Faculty Senate and Faculty and Staff Association worked together to bring about this leadership change by voting no confidence in the Board of Regents in May 2023.[2] The board was supporting a former president and provost who were ineffective and were hurting the institution. Our goal was to make the university a better place, and it took a public outcry for us to be heard. We got a new president and a new vice president of finance out of it—and we're excited to welcome our new provost in July. So, we came to this problem with the Ivan Hilton building knowing how to collaborate to accomplish our goals—and knowing that we would have to do everything we could to both support and pressure our new president to take the appropriate actions.

ANDREA: Our national unions, the AFT and National Education Association (NEA), were very helpful in organizing for some of the immediate changes we needed and strategizing more actions long-term. They came to campus in October, and

a strategic group met with faculty and staff who worked in the building and collected stories of what had happened. The AFT and NEA jointly held OSHA-10 trainings to certify as many people as wanted to participate. And in November, the union filed a request for a health hazard evaluation with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). That investigation was proceeding, but it was halted abruptly in April because of cuts made by the so-called Department of Government Efficiency. Thankfully, the AFT, Public Citizen, and other healthcare unions have filed a lawsuit to reverse those cuts, and some NIOSH staff were reinstated in May.

Our union's strategic group meets once a week to see what more can be done to keep workers safe. We also continue to let the staff know that the union is here to help if they feel unsafe in their jobs.

MICHAEL: The union made us feel heard. They organized and facilitated interviews with OSHA so that faculty and staff had representation and met with me to make sure that I felt protected against retaliation for speaking up. They held a vigil for Marty after he passed and advocated for faculty to get replacement offices and help with rescheduling things while the Ivan Hilton building was closed. They put pressure on the president to host a forum in December for open dialogue about everyone's collective experiences.

With more people contributing to the narrative, there was more recognition from the president that the administration needed to handle this. Things have moved really slowly, but in my opinion, the president has been stepping up and trying to do the best that he can. Unfortunately, he's depending on people who will not take action or hold themselves accountable. The union is showing clear support for the faculty and staff and getting the president to care, which can mobilize people, but we still need more support. We need more upper-level leaders to help with some of these processes.

KATHY: Ivan Hilton reopened on January 10 at the start of the new semester, even though NMHU still had steps to take to demonstrate compliance with the fire department and ensure that the building is safe. Some of the chemicals were still in the building. The abatement company has since been able to remove most of them, but so much material has been collected over the years without being properly disposed of that only a few hazardous waste companies in the United States can handle the volume. We're continuing to press the issue, and we'll continue to file grievances as necessary to get this handled. We're sending the administration the message that they need to be transparent and communicate, and they need to follow the law.

EDITORS: What factors do you believe contributed to this incident?

KATHY: People have known this building was a problem for years. When the Ivan Hilton building opened over 14 years ago, departments brought over almost everything from the storage of the old science building, even if they weren't using it. Many of the chemicals that made the move were unlabeled and/or expired and should've been properly disposed of. Instead,

they've been kept in rooms that were intended only for short-term storage. The university kept citing financial difficulties as the reason for not disposing of the materials, but according to the research policy handbook we negotiated, the university is supposed to allocate 42 percent of grant funds for administrative costs, including hazardous waste disposal. That money has not been earmarked correctly. We need the university to start using those funds for what they were intended—to further our educational mission and to keep everybody safe.

When people raise an issue and ask for change for so long but keep being told "No," they become apathetic and finally give up, and I think that happened here. People stopped being so careful about storage and disposal because nothing was being done. When we walked the building with the OSHA investigators, we saw chemicals stored next to flammable materials and chemicals in unapproved containers and shoved onto shelves on top of each other as departments ran out of space because the university never disposed of these materials.

The investigation turned up other serious safety violations in the building and elsewhere on campus. In one building, human remains had not been stored properly. And the state police and New Mexico Environment Department's Hazardous Waste Bureau started to investigate the university's poor record-keeping for chemicals. Our collective bargaining agreement says that the university must follow all state and federal health and safety standards, but it hadn't filed hazardous waste reports in years. And our safety manual says that we're supposed to have a safety officer who specifically works in this building to ensure everything is up to code, but there was none.

I think our systems infrastructure just eroded away over time, so we had no prevention or reporting mechanisms in place. It is the university's responsibility to create that system of support and infrastructure, and we have been pushing to get that in place.

ANDREA: That infrastructure eroded due to lack of training and accountability. For instance, there was a person who was in charge of keeping track of all the chemicals, but he was never properly trained for the job. He reported issues with the chemicals being unlabeled and improperly stored several times, but nothing was ever done. He became so fed up that he quit.

MICHAEL: To add to that, I learned that 11 years ago, the campus had a chemical hygiene officer who was in charge of chemical safety, handling, procurement, inventory, and so forth for the whole campus. This person was a chemist with a PhD who set up campus safety plans that should have been followed, but when they left the position, the university chose not to replace them.

The former director of the Environmental Health and Safety Office crafted chemical handling plans based on the chemical hygiene officer's work, but when that person left the university, the plans were forgotten. I found them on an archive of our website after arriving on campus and being shocked by the state of some of the labs. I immediately started correcting my lab based on the chemical handling plan, but the dean never disseminated the plan to department chairs so that other faculty could also make corrections to their labs. And importantly, the plans were never communicated or made accessible by the Environmental Health and Safety Office. Although they conduct inspections for fire code violations, they never once held anyone accountable for chemical handling or chemical hygiene violations, even though both were blatantly obvious in our facilities.

ANDREA: Another factor is that once people started experiencing issues because of the chemical storage and handling, they wouldn't report it—many times out of fear of retaliation. People were experiencing things such as confusion, nausea, headaches, vomiting blood, respiratory and intestinal issues, and other concerning symptoms. A few were reporting but their supervisors were ignoring them, so they ignored the issues themselves. For those who came to see me, I'd tell them to go see a doctor, but there was no master list of chemicals being stored in the building, which a doctor would have needed to know what to look for in their bloodstream. The university took a long time to release the chemical list, which was unfortunate.

MICHAEL: Some of the custodial staff in the Ivan Hilton building were not part of the union until a lot of this happened. They would tell me they'd been assigned to clean up a spill or move chemicals, and I'd advise them not to do it unless they were given protective equipment. But there were a lot of concerns that they were going to be punished or terminated if they didn't do their job. Fearing retaliation, they weren't comfortable going to their supervisor, and they weren't comfortable not doing what their supervisor had asked of them.

> **The administration went into protection mode, but we were undeterred. We filed two grievances and went to the media.**
>
> **–Kathy Jenkins**

ANDREA: That fear is still there. When the building reopened, a custodian asked me if they had to go back to work because they were afraid to be in that building. Another told me that the nightmares they'd been having the last several months have only just stopped.

EDITORS: What do you want to share about Marty Lujan?

ANDREA: Marty was my friend. I met him when I was in high school, and my mom and I worked with him before we came to NMHU. He was very outgoing; he always had a smile on his face and was always willing to help. Every time I saw him, he would ask about my mom. He loved her so much.

The numbers of students and staff who came to Marty's memorial showed what an impact he had on our campus. This whole incident has been heartbreaking. His coworkers, who were with him every day, have taken it very hard. When I heard about all of this, I asked myself why he continued to work in that building. But I know he was fearful of losing his job. It's ironic, because he was the one always telling other people to go see their union rep for help, but he didn't come to me when he was ordered to keep working in the building.

MICHAEL: I saw Marty every single day that I was on campus, and he was such an amazing person. He was the first-floor custodial staff in Ivan Hilton and probably one of the brightest lights in the building. Not only was he always here at work, but he was so loyal and enthusiastic about doing his job. He was always going out of his way to make sure we had everything we needed. He knew his job was important because keeping the facilities clean and functional is how we keep things running. So it's been wonderful to see how many people care about Marty, but the circumstances are tragic.

KATHY: It's unfortunate when somebody passes away that you find out so much about them. I didn't work in the building, so I only saw Marty a few times. But it's been amazing to hear stories about what a wonderful, kind, and funny man he was. To hear the number of people he spoke to every single day. The outpouring of love for him has been tremendous.

EDITORS: What are you advocating for to continue protecting workers?

ANDREA: We have seen some important changes made. For instance, the university hired a new environmental health and safety officer, and that officer and their staff have been given training. We also have staff members in the Ivan Hilton building who are in charge of chemical stockrooms and are creating a centralized database for material safety data sheets, hazardous waste tracking, and chemical tracking. And in September 2024, 30 members of our facility staff were certified in OSHA-30 training because they were out of compliance.

Now we are pushing for continued work safety training for staff, because that's an area that has been neglected. I know of one custodian who worked here for eight months and didn't know she wasn't supposed to touch certain chemicals because she was never properly trained. And one thing the OSHA officials noted right away was that the chemicals our custodians use to clean were not properly labeled. So our staff needs training, and the university needs to communicate training opportunities properly. When the hazardous waste management training and the OSHA-10 training were scheduled, the staff received notification just one day prior, yet the custodial staff was told it was mandatory to attend.

MICHAEL: Importantly, those trainings need to have paper trails for accountability. With much of what we've been advocating for, the administration has tried to hand it off to us to implement, but the faculty union is going to keep pushing for administration-based roles to track and implement trainings, disseminate information, enforce rules and policies, and create systems of accountability. Right now it's both-and—we are fighting for the administration to fulfill its obligations, and the union continues to facilitate the trainings the law requires to keep workers safe.

We will also be pushing for the university to release the full chemical manifest list of all the 4,000-plus chemicals that were removed from the building as well as the results of the comprehensive air quality testing they conducted to determine the building was clear to reopen. And as Kathy said, there are still tasks the university needs to complete to keep the building open and operating safely.

From there, it's going to be up to faculty to handle things properly in their labs and up to custodial managers to make sure that custodians have the proper protective equipment for mixing and handling their cleaning chemicals. We now have a chemical safety committee that helped develop new chemical handling protocols, and we have very strict chemical handling requirements and policies from the New Mexico Environment Department to ensure regulatory compliance. I feel much safer in the building now that we have working emergency showers

> **"Join the union, join a bargaining unit, and let your voice be heard."**
>
> **–Andrea Crespin**

and eye-wash stations, a weekly inspection plan for emergency equipment, and a new chemical hygiene officer to oversee chemical handling. We're working with him to address ongoing issues with mishandling and with legacy waste that may have been missed in the cleanup. Plus, because of the volume of hazardous waste involved, we're required to have relevant staff receive hazardous waste training from the Environmental Protection Agency; it's mandated that those staff have spending authority for emergencies with no preapproval requirements.

So now we have established channels to prevent students, staff, or faculty from becoming ill—or worse. I hope that we can create a culture of safety on campus where people learn that "If you see something, say something." But I genuinely trust that the vast majority of faculty and staff are here trying to do their jobs with care, and I am stoked to be able to teach some lab techniques again and trust that my students and I are in a safe environment.

KATHY: The university is stepping up, so we are seeing good things come out of this effort to revamp our safety and hazardous waste practices. When we uncovered safety issues with other buildings and the union notified the president, he acted immediately to ensure people had the resources to put safety practices in place. We want to continue to see health and safety conditions improve throughout the campus.

We want to be a partner with the university in helping create a good, safe infrastructure, and we want NMHU to be known as one of the safest places in the world. According to the environmental safety report from the New Mexico Environment Department, the campus had 16 critical violations.[3] We need to do our part to start following the rules, but at the same time we don't want to let the administration off the hook. As Michael said, without accountability, we can't move forward. So that's a part of our grievance.

We want to get more of our faculty and staff involved in this work, but we're also fighting some anti-union sentiment on campus and tactics intended to whittle down our bargaining units and prevent staff from being represented. We should have about 400 members in our units, but we have just 250. So we need to get all those positions back in to help push our agenda forward.

And we need to help our faculty and staff who are experiencing acute and chronic effects of the chemical exposure. We want to bring occupational medicine practitioners—who are rare in New Mexico—to campus so that faculty and staff can get answers and the medical treatment that they need. Access to these clinicians, along with access to the chemical manifest list, could give people more direction and insight into what's happening to them, and it could help them better protect themselves and their families.

EDITORS: What do you wish you had known? What would you tell others facing similar situations?

MICHAEL: My biggest regret is that we did not successfully mobilize the university to get people tested immediately after chemical exposure. Now it's too late; most of the chemicals are out of the building and have been metabolized in people's bod-

ies, so there's no way to test all that we were exposed to. I wish I'd had a better understanding of what state- and national-level union resources were available to help us push for testing.

I also wish that our union had formed a subcommittee specifically to figure out all the needs, including staff representation, across all units. I think sometimes our units get a little siloed, and we could get much more work done quickly by working together. We did a lot of things well, such as getting details to the public about the situation when the university was not being transparent. Unions are such a powerful tool—especially when they are well versed in things like whistleblower protection laws. When we were all scared, the union made us feel safer. I don't think I would've gone to the press if I didn't have union support.

ANDREA: We've tried very hard to let our clerical and facility staff know that the union is here to help. That is our main goal. We want to make sure that they feel safe in their work environment. And that's what I'd want to tell anyone else in this type of situation. Join the union, join a bargaining unit, and let your voice be heard.

KATHY: I think the biggest lesson I learned through this is to use small things to build union power. If you engage members and create a ruckus on the small issues, you create power to make long-term change, and you'll have more power in the future. For us, one of those small things was going to the press. The president didn't want that to happen. But why wouldn't we? The situation was atrocious. A member of our NMHU family died. We're never going to let them forget.

As union members, we are always fighting for justice. Being a part of bringing justice to this campus has been one of the most uplifting accomplishments of my life. And with the AFT's support, people are feeling more power and starting to shake off the apathy of the past. We're seeing that together we can make change, and that is energizing. □
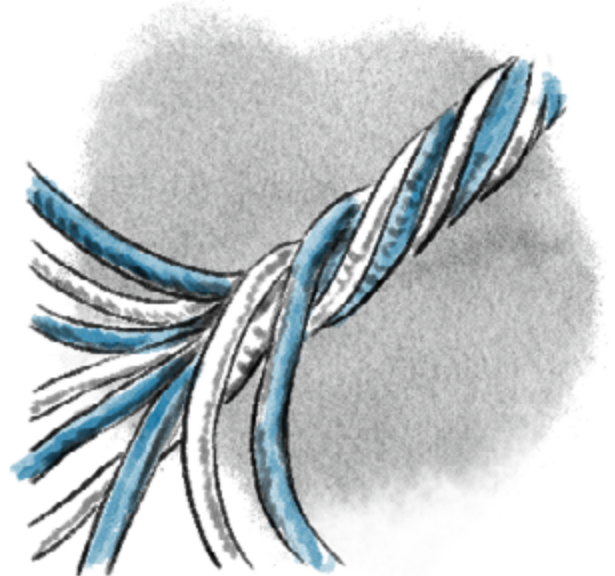
Protecting Workers

Lessons from Occupational Medicine

Marty Lujan's death was tragic—and likely preventable. To learn essential lessons for worker protection, we spoke with three occupational medicine experts. Robert "Bob" Harrison, MD, MPH, a specialist in occupational medicine, founded and is senior faculty with the University of California San Francisco Occupational Health Services. He served on the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration Standards Board and also directs the California Department of Public Health's worker tracking and investigation program. Joseph "Chip" Hughes, MPH, served as deputy assistant secretary for pandemic and emergency response at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 2021. For 31 years, he was the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Worker Training Program. Currently, he is a senior policy advisor to MDB, Inc. Before retiring, Katherine "Kathy" Kirkland, DrPH, MPH, served as the executive director of the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics, where she spent three decades. She also served as an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Public Health Nursing at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

For more information and resources on a range of topics, including asbestos and chemical exposure, indoor environmental quality, and safe laboratories, visit aft.org/health-hub. You can also email the health and safety team directly at 4healthandsafety@aft.org.

–EDITORS

EDITORS: How did you get involved in occupational medicine?

BOB HARRISON: When I was a medical student in the late 1970s, I learned about occupational medicine by working with Tony Mazzocchi, who was the national head of safety and health at a chemical workers union.[1] Union members at a factory were exposed to several toxic chemicals and were suffering from liver damage—but they didn't understand what was causing it. The doctors in the area didn't understand the complex chemicals used in this factory or how they could affect the liver. I researched the problem and worked with the local union to provide training so everyone understood the connection between their liver problems and those toxic chemicals.

After I graduated from medical school, I went to the University of California San Francisco, which at that time had one of the few training programs for doctors in occupational medicine. Now there are about 20 of these programs around the country.[2] Once I finished my training, I became a faculty member. Now I train specialists like me—two to three per year—and they diagnose and treat patients with me. My union relationships have been my inspiration in the field. I appreciate being able to make a difference for workers in many different unions.

KATHY KIRKLAND: I got started in 1990 when I became the administrative assistant for the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC). We had a whopping staff of two and were fortunate to have a very active board of directors—including Dr. Bob Harrison. When the AOEC was formed, the American College of Occupational Medicine was mainly corporate focused and didn't address environmental issues, though it later became the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, which we at AOEC always like to attribute to AOEC's influence. The AOEC has always been involved with public health and been pro-worker, as opposed to pro-company.

Occupational medicine remains a very small specialty. This year (2024–25) is the first in which it will be part of the National Resident Matching Program.[3] Occupational medicine requires a one-year clinical residency in a clinical specialty and then two years of specialty training.

CHIP HUGHES: I was a student activist searching for a labor- and worker-based career as an organizer. The day after I graduated from college, the United Mine Workers sent me to Harlan County, Kentucky, to support coal miners striking against Duke Power Company as part of the Black Lung Movement. After that, in the mid-1970s, I got involved with a group of people to develop the Brown Lung Association focused on cotton textile workers—they were a forgotten, downtrodden group of people.

Arend Bouhuys, an occupational medicine physician from the Netherlands, came to the United States in 1962 because he wanted to investigate the presence of byssinosis, or cotton dust disease.[4] His work became a North Star for documenting a problem that no one was acknowledging. Occupational medicine is like being a disease detective. You can't see someone's alveoli being destroyed in their lungs or tumors growing until it's too late. And even when the disease is undeniable, attributing it to the workplace is difficult. Bouhuys's studies and our years of working together resulted in an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Cotton Dust Standard in 1978.[5]

> **"Finding out what chemicals are present in the workplace is a right of every worker."**
>
> **–Bob Harrison**

EDITORS: What are some of the challenges of occupational medicine?

KATHY: Traumatic workplace injuries are pretty easy to diagnose, but workplace illnesses and cumulative injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome are much more difficult. This is where occupational medicine physicians are key because of their in-depth training in epidemiology, ergonomics, and toxicology, including low-dose chronic exposures.

A critical part of being in the occupational health field is making patients aware of their risks on the job. You can't let them seriously endanger their lives, so you focus on education and supporting workers' choices. For example, you can't tell a painter, "Your lead level is too high, so you're going to have to quit work for however long it takes to get your lead levels down. And in the meantime, I don't know what you're going to do for work." But you can teach painters how to limit their exposures, such as by washing their work clothes separately and using respiratory protection.

In order to get younger physicians interested in occupational medicine, you need leaders, like Bob, who advocate for it. Occupational medicine does not provide a lot of income to a hospital or clinic, and taking a good occupational medicine history requires about 45 minutes. Medicare, Medicaid, and other forms of insurance aren't set up for that.

Given how few medical schools offer occupational medicine and the payment structure barriers, one challenge is the lack of occupational specialists. In areas with no trained occupational physicians or nurses, workers depend on clinicians who are willing to connect the dots. But physicians typically have 15 minutes per patient—that doesn't leave time for asking about issues at work. So it's important for union members to bring information to clinicians. Have several women working in one factory given birth prematurely? Are multiple workers in one section of a plant experiencing headaches? Unions are well-positioned to gather such information and raise red flags. Sometimes there's a problem, and sometimes these are just coincidences. Clinicians are needed to help figure out whether coworkers are at risk.

BOB: I'll add that the complexity of occupational medicine is an inherent challenge. If workers are concerned about toxic chemicals, for example, they first need to understand what the toxic chemicals are. Each individual chemical can be toxic or cause harm, and combinations—like the mixtures in many brand-name chemicals—can be even more harmful. Finding out what chemicals are present in the workplace is a right of every worker under an OSHA regulation called the Hazard Communication Standard issued in 1985.[6]

When it comes to complex chemicals, the amount of available information varies significantly. The Safety Data Sheets (SDS), which are required by OSHA to be available to everybody in the workplace, are a great place to start looking. But sometimes the SDS is incomplete, so the next step is contacting a doctor or a toxicologist who has knowledge of the health effects of those chemicals.
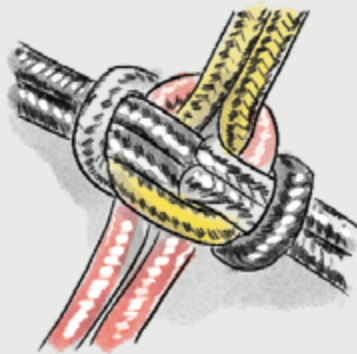
> **"With collective action ... we can create a world where no one has to sacrifice their health for a paycheck."**
>
> **–Chip Hughes**

Let's say somebody's concerned about a problem with their nervous system; they are experiencing frequent headaches and tingling in their arms and feet that they think might be from nerve damage. They go to their regular doctor and bring the SDS for the chemical they're working with. Their regular doctor may not know much about that chemical. Even a neurologist may not know—doctors generally have only one or two hours of training in occupational medicine. So, I highly recommend that an occupational specialist gets involved if more investigation is needed. But, as Kathy explained, we don't have enough specialists.

CHIP: I was nearly 40 when I went to work for the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, a federal agency that looks at the way the environment affects our bodies, our organs, our systems, our genes. My focus has been on developing education training programs for workers in hazardous situations, including the Exxon Valdez spill, the World Trade Center cleanup after 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, Ebola, and COVID-19.

It feels like we've barely scratched the surface in creating a medical and public health infrastructure that can serve workers in a world so full of hazards. One would think it would be really easy to rally majority support for protecting people who risk their lives on behalf of everybody else. But sadly, that hasn't been the case.

Occupational medicine takes place in the fraught battleground of labor and management. A lot of the fight around occupational and environmental diseases centers on causation and liability. And in the case of workers' compensation for occupational diseases, instead of going to the hospital and getting treatment, workers have to file a claim to figure out whether their treatment will be covered by their insurance and whether their harm is compensable. The litigious nature of occupational disease is an impediment to getting the necessary care.

To resolve this, we need a national healthcare system that integrates occupational medicine and environmental medicine. Workers shouldn't have to hire a lawyer, an industrial hygienist, and an epidemiologist to prove workplace-caused harm in order to be eligible for treatment. Many other wealthy countries, such as Canada[7] and England,[8] have integrated healthcare systems that cover everyone, so their workers don't have delays or added costs in accessing care for work-related problems.

KATHY: I agree. If you look at the systems in Sweden[9] and France,[10] as well as Canada and England, they are so much better than what we have in the United States.[11] We have higher infant mortality, higher maternal mortality[12]—so many issues, and yet our system is not designed to put time and money into preventive care or even basic treatment.[13] We need to get away from paying for procedures and start paying for prevention and treatment of chronic disease.

EDITORS: How can unions help protect their members and all workers?

BOB: The most important thing unions can do is ensure workers know their rights. Workers have the right to a healthy and safe workplace under the General Duty Clause of the Occupational Safety and Health Act.[14] It covers all safety and health hazards—anything from a machine that has a rotating blade that's not guarded to a roofer who is not connected by a safety rope, a construction worker on a ladder, or ergonomic hazards (such as from repetition, where doing something over and over again causes wear and

tear on muscles, nerves, and tendons and can eventually lead to permanent injury).

Although OSHA requires the employer to measure hazards and correct them immediately, in my view unions ideally would have their own capacity to measure—or at least warn of—hazards. At minimum, unions should bargain to ensure they have a union representative involved in evaluating and correcting hazards.

OSHA was created to protect workers, but it's important to provide training and support so workers feel safe making complaints. That's a key role for unions. Under OSHA law, the employer cannot retaliate against somebody for filing an OSHA complaint—and complaints are confidential—but many workers are hesitant and need support.

> **"Don't be afraid to speak up and talk to your colleagues and union steward. See if you share any symptoms or concerns."**
>
> **–Kathy Kirkland**

CHIP: For the last 30 years, I've preached that each organization needs to have its own emergency response capacity, which may involve protocols, procedures, plans. It may involve having staff experts to call on, knowing who to call, or at least knowing who knows.

How you prepare your organization to live in our world of risk needs to be something that leadership takes seriously. In the union context, that's a challenge for the labor movement and for each local. How do you think about health and safety within your organizations—your union and your employer?

KATHY: I'll add a message for workers: Don't be afraid to speak up and talk to your col-leagues and union steward. See if you share any symptoms or concerns. If you're a union member, you are fortunate because you can complain to somebody. It's the undocumented workers who are living hand-to-mouth who have nobody to complain to. And if they do complain, they're fired.

EDITORS: Let's turn to Marty Lujan's tragic death. What lessons should we learn to prevent future tragedies?

BOB: The first step in a situation like this is to intervene at the very beginning—the longer somebody is exposed, the greater their risk. There should be a response plan in place, including a comprehensive inventory of the chemicals someone could be exposed to, whether there are chemicals being used, old chemicals being stored, or new chemicals being ordered.

In addition, there should be an environmental health and safety department that must review each chemical and grant permission for it to be ordered, used, or stored. That department shouldn't prevent research from being done, but it must prevent students, custodians, janitors, and others from being exposed to those chemicals. There should also be a health and safety committee with a clear reporting system for anyone who has potentially been harmed—and the reporting system should specify who is responsible for responding immediately. If exposure or harm is happening, the health and safety committee must take it seriously and ensure that all other responsible parties take it seriously.

Unions need to advocate and bargain for an effective health and safety committee so that workers know they have a pathway for reporting, their concerns are heard, and the employer will meet its responsibility under OSHA to respond. In some cases, the right thing for the employer to do is contact OSHA to get help addressing the problem. And, if the employer doesn't do that or otherwise solve the problem, the union or any individual can contact OSHA.

Especially with chemical exposure, as an occupational medicine specialist, I always advise erring on the side of caution. You may not be sure there's a toxic chemical involved, but stop the exposure and do an investigation. If you have an effective environmental health and safety department and an effective health and safety committee, these investigations can be done quickly. If you don't have them, then it's time to take collective action to first stop the potential exposure and then establish these necessary safeguards and procedures.

In April 2025, the Trump administration eliminated most of the scientists and staff at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). This includes funding for the 18 Education and Research Centers around the country that give specialized help in occupational medicine, toxicology, industrial hygiene, and outreach and education. The AFT, along with several other national unions, is suing the Trump administration to restore the funding for NIOSH so that all workers can get the help they need to keep their workplaces safe.

CHIP: I've spent my career in chemical emergency response. The worker trainer in me would say that every worker in every workplace should have emergency response preparation—much like what Bob described. Every worker should know not to enter a potentially hazardous site and who to call to begin evaluating the site. No one who's not a trained professional should respond to a chemical leak in a workplace unless it's been characterized, meaning that you know what chemicals are involved, how lethal they are, and what protection is needed.

Ideally, workplaces would have someone on staff with the appropriate level of expertise, like an industrial hygienist or an occupational physician or nurse, so that there is some emergency response capacity. But in most cases, employers rely on local fire departments, including volunteer firefighters in rural areas; they often don't have the expertise or the equipment needed for an adequate response.

Over the past several decades, the United States has developed an infrastructure of trained HAZMAT technicians—think of firefighters in moon suits. But that infrastructure is mainly in urban areas and in big companies. Our chemical emergency response structure across the country is a patchwork.

To improve our national capacity, I think we need three things. One, having the awareness in the workforce of how to protect yourself. Two, having the infrastructure everywhere so that even rural counties have the capacity to act while protecting emergency responders. Three, having the expertise in occupational medicine throughout the country to determine when there are health hazards and to warn people about them.

As we look to the future, we must honor the struggles of those who came before us while building a movement that is bold, inclusive, and adaptive. The fight for worker health is far from over, but with collective action and a commitment to justice, I believe we can create a world where no one has to sacrifice their health for a paycheck.   □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2025/harrison_hughes_kirkland.