



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

A MOMENT LIKE NEVER BEFORE

Keynote Address by AFT President Randi Weingarten

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I have never looked forward to our TEACH conference as much as I have this year. That's because of you—the educators in this room and the educators of this nation. It's been a tough year; I don't know if it has ever been more challenging. Yet you make a difference in your students' lives, no matter what. You build your students' confidence to think independently and with creativity. You help each student realize their unique potential. You create community—in our classrooms, our schools, our neighborhoods. You are our nation's future-makers.

And you do all this as you deal with everything from budget cuts to culture wars—with class sizes that are too high and salaries that are too low, amid so much divisiveness. You have done this while officials, whose job it is to support teaching and learning, make your jobs harder.

Even our ability to make our classrooms welcoming spaces has gotten harder. I think about the teacher in Idaho who was ordered to remove a sign she had in her classroom for years: "Everyone is welcome here." She was told by her administration, this year, that this was a political opinion, not a sacrosanct responsibility. Can you imagine that reassuring children that they are in a safe, welcoming space is now an act of insubordination?

Being an educator will be even more challenging next year because of the law that President Donald Trump and Republicans call "big" and "beautiful." Yes, it's big, but it's anything but beautiful. It will have devastating effects, and it betrays the people who voted for Trump hoping he would deliver on the better life he promised.

This is what Trump thinks is beautiful:

- Taking food from children in need.
- Ripping healthcare away from millions of Americans.
- Eliminating good jobs in clean energy and manufacturing.

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

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- Defunding public education and making it harder for low-income students to afford college.
- Making Americans sicker, hungrier and poorer.
- Adding trillions to the deficit.

And for what? Tax cuts for the very, very rich. Trump delivered all right—just not for working folks. Do wealthy people need more tax breaks? How about a working-class tax cut instead?

Think about what this bill will mean for your classrooms: It'll mean children coming to school with even more needs and fewer resources to support them.

Despite it all, you persist. You are still inspiring and prodding, providing love and support. Because you are the future-makers. You are the nation-builders. So being with you, being in this community—you can see why this gives me great hope.

I want to talk about how we fight back and fight for a better life, as educators, workers, trade unionists and Americans. And why we must be beacons for our communities, as never before. Because we are in a moment like never before.

This government is attacking the foundations of our humanity—healthcare, food security, education, research to cure deadly diseases, Social Security to keep the elderly and the vulnerable out of destitution. Masked agents are disappearing people—yes, disappearing them—people just trying to do an honest day's work. We are not talking about hardened criminals. Even our students aren't safe, like the high school student arrested by ICE on his way to volleyball practice and the teen who was detained as he headed to a school field trip.

So many Americans are anxious and struggling to get by. We need an agenda of affordability, opportunity and dignity, a pathway to a better life for everyone. Yet Trump is making life harder for everyone, with the exception of the billionaires who bankrolled his campaign and are now enjoying the return on their investment. The president's trade war is making everyday goods more expensive and is crushing small businesses. He is waging war on workers—including stripping collective bargaining from more than 1 million federal workers.

Trump is pursuing an agenda of chaos, corruption and cruelty. Of contempt for what we do as educators. There is a war on knowledge, on teaching the truth, on your autonomy in the classroom, on pluralism—and teachers are on the frontlines. That is what autocrats do—throughout history and throughout the world today. Vladimir Putin has said, "Wars are won by teachers." It's a grudging acknowledgment of the importance of our profession—and an unveiled threat. No one is surprised that Putin, like other authoritarians, has purged schools and universities of non-loyalists, and had curriculums and textbooks rewritten to whitewash past and present wrongs. But we should be alarmed and outraged that we are seeing authoritarian tactics here in America.

Educators and schools—from pre-K to higher education—are under attack: for teaching American history, for promoting excellence and equity, for valuing freedom of thought, and for protecting all children's right to learn free from fear. For seeing all of God's children for the precious souls they are.

Why the relentless attacks on public schools and teachers? The perpetrators of these attacks fear what we do—the teaching of reason, of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, power and privilege cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.

That's why this moment compelled me to write a book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*. I warn about the dangers of this attack on knowledge and on pluralism, and I spell out the ways we can fight back to defend critical thinking, opportunity and democracy.

We know that the route to the American dream goes through our public schools. Public schools are the embodiment of America's civic values and democratic ideals: that all young people should have opportunities to prepare for life, college, career and citizenship. In a pluralistic society, people with different beliefs and backgrounds must learn to bridge differences and work together; that happens in our public schools. And, as the founders advocated, educated citizens are essential to protect our democracy from demagogues.

But at this moment, public education is on a precipice. Donald Trump and his allies don't just want to abolish the Department of Education. They are laying waste to public education. They're gutting funding for key personnel and programs so public schools cannot function properly.

And they are also waging a full-scale assault on higher education—attacking both autonomy and affordability. We are engaged in a full-scale fight back. America's colleges and universities are incubators of innovation and discovery. They are both the envy of the world, and indispensable to the communities in which they are located. And recent polling demonstrates that young people really want them to be accessible and affordable.

Remember what Trump and Education Secretary Linda McMahon did this year with the “Dear Colleague” letter; they tried to pull federal funding, Title I and IDEA funding in particular, from schools where they thought there was a whiff of equity, diversity or inclusion. Our lawsuit stopped that. I was going to say Trump and McMahon are illegally withholding more than \$7 billion in K-12 education funds for this next school year—funding that Congress authorized and that schools obligated. But today, they backed down. Our lobbying, our lawsuits and our advocacy for why these funds matter to kids worked!

And we are not stopping. We stood with Sens. Bernie Sanders and Ed Markey this week as they introduced their bills calling for fair pay for teachers and school staff. No one should have to endure poverty to serve in the profession that makes all other professions possible. Thank you to all of you who lobbied Congress yesterday.

It's not just Trump and McMahon. The majority on the Supreme Court has allowed Trump to proceed with mass firings at the Department of Education, setting his plans to dismantle the department back in motion. Justice Sonia Sotomayor, in her dissent, understood this would “unleash untold harm” for students and warned that it is a “grave threat” to the Constitution's separation of powers.

And now Trump and his congressional majority have gone for the jugular. Their big, ugly tax law includes a nationwide voucher program—an unprecedented and uncapped tax credit that will hurt students in public schools and could cost taxpayers more than \$50 billion a year—nearly double what the federal government spends on helping poor kids and kids with disabilities. They are literally taking money from our most vulnerable students for a tax credit that rich folks can use for vouchers. This administration has abandoned students in public schools.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and George Washington championed public education as a public good. As imperfect as they are, our public schools are where we create opportunity and community—for all, not just some. Let me ask you: Are we going to let the likes of Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, Linda McMahon and the architects of Project 2025 end public education as we know it?

People are with us. Americans support public schools and want them strengthened, not defunded and dismantled. The majority disapprove of the president's agenda—his economic agenda, his education agenda and now even his immigration agenda. There is a movement growing by the day saying this is not us; we don't want these cuts, this chaos and cruelty; none of this is helping working people have a better life.

Five million people—including many in this room—took to the streets for “No Kings” protests in one of the largest demonstrations in American history. Being in the streets, standing up for our values, is the most effective way to reverse this slide toward authoritarianism.

So what more do we do as educators and as unionists? First, we continue to be who we are as future-makers—educating and nurturing our students so all children can achieve their dreams. The work you do is the most important work in our society. But we can't just close our classroom doors and hope what is happening on the outside never makes its way inside. We must fight back against these attacks on our students, schools and way of life. At the same time, we must imagine a bold vision for our public schools and a better life for working people. And fight for it. Fight for it at the bargaining table and on the streets; fight for it at the local school board and at the statehouse, fight for it in Washington and at the ballot box. Fight for a better future that gives people hope, builds connection and overcomes the authoritarian threat we face. A future that people can see, feel and believe is possible.

SAFE AND WELCOMING, RELEVANT AND ENGAGING SCHOOLS FOR ALL

I want to focus on what that vision looks like for our public schools. And that boils down to four words: safe, welcoming, relevant and engaging. These words represent what parents want for their children and what educators want for our students. You have told me this in my visits to classrooms and schools and communities across the country. It's a vision we can build upon in every community—red, blue or purple.

We know from brain science that safe and welcoming schools aren't just a good idea for kids' well-being; they're essential to success in school. People cannot learn when they are hungry or stressed out. Schools must be places where students, families and educators are safe, supported and accepted. Yet we know that too many students do not feel safe, whether because of loneliness, anxiety, depression, gun violence, immigration status or countless other reasons.

That's why educators and other school staff do everything in our power to create safe and welcoming spaces. One way the AFT has promoted this is through community schools. They are a research-backed way we serve all students, particularly the most vulnerable, by bringing services and activities they and their families need under one roof. Community schools can be open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities and homework assistance. They can offer child care, counseling, dental and medical care, and other services the community needs like English language instruction, GED programs or legal assistance. The common thread is that they help students and families learn and thrive.

But Trump's budget zeroes out funding for community schools. And current grantees are having their grants reviewed for any trace of addressing social-emotional learning, trauma or equity. Which is a “gotcha,” because proposals were required to include those very components.

Look, I have to address the elephant in the room. Hate—whether it's racism, homophobia, Islamophobia or antisemitism—hate has no place in our schools. We must do everything we can to en-

sure the Palestinian student, the Jewish teacher or the parent from another country feels safe and welcome in our schools, no matter what is happening in the world. And we cannot let other forces, which want to deny the existence of discrimination in some quarters, act to weaponize it in others.

Creating safe and welcoming environments ensures students are ready to learn. Students also need a well-rounded education that develops important skills, exposes them to a wide range of ideas and knowledge, and prepares them for college, career and life. That's where "relevant" and "engaging" come in.

Let's start in the earliest years. In education, the basics are the big thing. And what's more fundamental than reading? Reading, writing and oral communication are essential skills students need in school, as citizens and in the world of work. We know that when students become strong readers when they are young, they are more likely to be successful later in life. That is why the AFT gives out books. We've given out more than 10 million so far, many at community events across the country through our partnership with First Book.

And then there's the how-tos of teaching reading. For a quarter century, the AFT has been advocating for evidence-based reading instruction and putting professional development, publications and partnerships behind it. This year, we added training for teachers to strengthen the vital family-school connection with workshops and tools to promote reading at home, whether through read-alouds or everyday conversations for young readers or questions to spark engagement and deepen understanding in the teen years. Our affiliates in Minnesota, Ohio and Texas are already running with this strategy. And this year we've added two courses on dyslexia: a three-hour grounding in key signs of dyslexia and practical tools to help kids read, and a multiday deep dive into the full range of instructional strategies.

Speaking about teaching stuff, I hear from members over and over again that they need a place where they can find what they need when they need it. Well, we've got two. We have the AFT's ever-growing Share My Lesson, which houses all our literacy resources and will soon have a hub for parents and community. And we're proud to partner with WETA—that's right, public broadcasting—on Reading Universe, a one-stop shop on teaching reading right. In less than two years, Reading Universe has grown to have more than 40,000 unique visitors every month. And it gets bigger and better every day. Coming soon is a series for paraprofessionals on the science of reading that is being piloted by AFT members!

I often say that joy is important. So is play. Play is proven to support cognitive development, and it helps kids with skills like cooperation, empathy and even conflict resolution. It supports the kind of engagement we know kids need. That is why recess is so important.

As kids get older, both curriculum and engagement get more challenging. Just like I have been a broken record on community schools, I am even more of a broken record on project-based instruction. Project-based instruction and experiential learning help students learn how to solve problems, to analyze and synthesize data, and to apply learning to new situations—knowledge and skills people need, whatever they do in life.

High-quality career and technical education is an incredible model of experiential learning. And 95 percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 70 percent go to college. Before she was education secretary, Linda McMahon claimed to be a big proponent of CTE, but she seems too busy cutting services for kids, sending student loan borrowers to debt collectors and attacking trans kids.

So we're not going to wait for McMahon to push for these transformational programs. We are working to expand CTE to more students, partnering with more employers, community colleges, unions and others to prepare students for potential careers in healthcare, information technology, advanced manufacturing and traditional trades. Here are three examples of some of our efforts to expand CTE: We worked with CareerWise to launch the Education and Apprenticeship Accelerator, a groundbreaking partnership that dramatically expands apprenticeship opportunities for youth across the United States. The AFT, the United Federation of Teachers and New York State United Teachers have partnered with Micron on an Advanced Technology Framework to help high school students hone the foundational skills necessary for career success in the booming semiconductor industry. And we are partnering with the World Economic Forum to create a curriculum that will lead to good jobs and solid careers in U.S. manufacturing.

The goal of education should be to cultivate the skills necessary to succeed in our rapidly changing world, not to create good test-takers. That will require our education system to move beyond stifling accountability models that narrow what teachers can teach; condemn kids to low-quality, high-stakes standardized tests and excessive test prep; and do nothing to improve learning.

I'm not proposing less rigor—to the contrary. All students need a rich and challenging education that lets them learn by doing. Assessment should allow students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, including through performance-based tasks like essays, oral presentations, model building, podcasts, film and other demonstrations. But that's all too rare, because for the last 25 years, since No Child Left Behind, standardized test scores too often have been the be-all and end-all.

The strategies we're advocating—focusing on reading, wrapping services around schools, project-based instruction—these are not shiny new objects, they're just good ideas that help kids succeed. They need to be scaled and resourced. And if Trump really believes local school districts and states should be in charge of education—as frankly, they've always been—then maybe he and Linda McMahon should spend some time listening to educators who are always focused on what helps kids.

While these solutions may not be new, the distractions caused by these devices are. We are facing a crisis of engagement in our schools—a crisis compounded by screens and social media. We are competing for students' attention against intentionally addictive algorithms designed to distract young users. As professor and author of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt says, cellphones and social media are making our kids sedentary, solitary, anxious and depressed. States like New York have led on combating this through a bell-to-bell ban on phones in school, to ensure students are present and engaged and teachers can teach rather than being the phone police.

Speaking of technology, artificial intelligence has and will alter our world in ways we can't imagine. There are legitimate concerns about AI, or "AI" as the secretary calls it. Even the pope, in one of his first public remarks, spoke about the threats of AI to human dignity. But there is also real promise in these tools, to save educators time, manage paperwork, personalize instruction and engage students. The real question is whether, as educators and as a union, we will be able to navigate how AI is used in education, or whether it will be dictated to us by people outside the profession.

Educators must be able to maximize the good and minimize the bad, to use it safely, wisely and ethically. That's why we first developed commonsense guardrails for using AI, and now we've launched the National Academy for AI Instruction. We are working with the UFT and Microsoft as leading partners, and with OpenAI and Anthropic.

Let's be clear: We don't go into this with blind trust. But when educators aren't in the driver's seat, we've seen what happens. Others, led by the testing industry, turned our schools into testing factories. And others led the rollout of social media. We cannot make the same mistake with AI.

That's why we're building a training facility in New York City that will be open to every AFT member so they can gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to use AI responsibly and creatively in their work. This academy positions educators not just as users of technology, but as leaders in shaping how it is developed and implemented in real classrooms. AI should serve our values, support strong instruction and enhance the work that teachers do, never replace it.

It's clear the Trump administration wants us to have no role in shaping and harnessing this technological change. It's insulting that Trump signed an executive order saying teachers need to be trained on AI—without involving teachers, and while decimating funding for our schools and colleges. They even fought for a 10-year moratorium on any rules of the road or sensible guardrails for AI. We fought that, of course. And won. The Academy for AI Instruction is how we create a future where technology enhances learning and strengthens the human connection that sits at the heart of every great classroom.

This is who we are as a union. This is who we are as educators, as future-makers.

FIGHTING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

I know that many of you are probably thinking: Randi, this all sounds really great, but the wolves are at the door, we're facing existential threats, we're in a fight to survive. That's true. If we don't fight the threats to our freedoms and our way of life, those threats will only further encroach on your classroom, your students and our profession. But when we fight back, as important as that is, it only gets us back to where we started. We must fight for a better life that people feel is authentic and possible.

We're educators. We are used to walking and chewing gum at the same time. And we know our history. The Civil Rights Movement wasn't just about fighting racism and the ravages of Jim Crow; it was about fighting for good jobs, freedom and opportunity. The Progressives of the early 20th century weren't just fighting against the excesses of the Gilded Age; they were fighting for workers' rights and safe communities. The New Deal wasn't just about ending the Depression; it was about a new social contract for our nation to have a thriving middle class.

Defending democracy and defeating authoritarianism requires all of us. And the AFT is engaged on every front: In the courts and in the court of public opinion. In the Congress and at the ballot box. On the streets and in our communities. Because our future is on the line.

It may seem like the other side has insurmountable advantages. But think about our Founding Fathers, think about abolitionists and suffragists. Think about the labor movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. The 1963 March on Washington brought more than 250,000 people from across the country to march for jobs and justice. It changed the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement and the political environment, paving the way for massive legislative and social change.

Last year, when the president of South Korea declared martial law, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest. It was that massive people-powered movement that led the government to rescind martial law, hold its president accountable and push through democratic reforms.

It's clear that we cannot be silent. We can't stay home. Now is the moment to stand up, speak up and show up. To be on the streets, together. Like the 5 million people who took part in the peaceful "No Kings" protests to say: *We will not stand by while democracy is dismantled*. And the "Protect Our Kids" and "Hands Off" rallies. And the July 17 "Good Trouble" teach-ins, and what we will do on Labor Day weekend.

To paraphrase scripture, no one can do everything, but we all can do something. Being in the streets is how you beat fear; that is how you show people they are not alone. It's how you convince Congress to act. And if they don't do the right thing, it's how you start the process to elect those who will, to elect leaders who care more about their constituents' needs and aspirations than they fear the bullying and threats of their party's bosses. That is how we reclaim the promise of America.

We are the future-makers. So let's imagine that better future and fight like hell to make it reality. Imagine fully funded public schools and the freedom to provide the learning you know engages and excites your students instead of the straitjacket of standardized tests. Imagine teachers and support staff being paid what they deserve. Imagine an economy that gives every American a path to the middle class and a vibrant life. Imagine a government that cuts taxes for the working class, not for the rich, and that recognizes that healthcare is a human right.

I know each one of us has a vision of a better future that is worth fighting for.

USING OUR POWER FOR GOOD

It takes power to challenge power. Through our union, we have collective power, and we build and use our power for good—both to fight back and to fight for a better life, for opportunity and dignity for all. That's what public education does. That's what the labor movement does. Building community, caring, fighting, showing up and voting. Because the people, united, will never be defeated. Showing up. Making good trouble.

As I close, I again find myself thinking of Martin Luther King, specifically his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* We are in a time of troubling chaos, fear and anxiety—familiar feelings in Dr. King's day. He asked which path America would take: Chaos or community? Inequality or opportunity for all?

We, the educators of America—the future-makers, the freedom lovers—we choose community. We serve and strengthen our communities, and we know that together we can achieve what is impossible to do alone.

None of us asked for this fight, but fight we must. For our students. For public education. For our colleges. For our communities. For freedom and democracy. For affordability and opportunity. For dignity. For a better life for all.

So, are you ready to fight the chaos and cruelty? Are you ready to fight for community, for our profession and for our students? Are you ready to fight for the better future we imagine and know is possible?

Together, united, as educators and unionists, we will meet this moment, we will fight for the promise of America, and we will let freedom ring from sea to shining sea.