

Strengthen, don't abandon, public schools

Randi Weingarten

President, AFT

The route to the American dream goes through our public schools, where educators dedicate themselves to helping every student reach their unique potential. But public education is in peril—from devastating funding cuts and extremists stoking culture wars, to efforts to divert funding for students in public schools to private voucher programs. Attacks on public education are not new. The difference today is that the attacks are intended to destroy it. And President Donald Trump is trying to hasten its demise.

Trump and his allies aren't just abolishing the U.S. 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.

Trump and his secretary of education, Linda McMahon, tried to pull federal funding—specifically for low-income students and students with disabilities—from schools where they thought there was a whiff of support for equity, diversity or inclusion. An AFT lawsuit stopped that. Trump and McMahon had illegally withheld more than \$7 billion in K-12 education funds for this next school year—funding that Congress authorized and that schools obligated. But last week, they backed down. Our lobbying, our lawsuits and our advocacy for why these funds matter to kids worked.

But this month, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court allowed Trump to proceed with mass firings at the Education Department, setting his plans to dismantle the department back in motion. And now Trump and his congressional majority have gone for the jugular: Their big, ugly budget bill 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. This administration has abandoned the nearly 90 percent of American students who attend public schools.

Last week, I laid out a new blueprint for America's public schools in a speech to thousands of educators at the AFT's TEACH conference in Washington, D.C. In countless encounters with educators, students and families across the country, they have told me that they want schools to be safe, welcoming, relevant and engaging. We can follow that blueprint in every community—red, blue or purple.

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

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

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

The AFT is working to expand high-quality career and technical education programs to prepare students for in-demand careers in healthcare, information technology, advanced

manufacturing and traditional trades. This engaging and relevant approach works—95 percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 70 percent go to college.

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

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

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

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



Weingarten speaking at the AFT TEACH conference on July 25 in Washington, D.C.

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