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# AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS



## Teaching 250 Years of Struggle and Hope



NOTHING IS MORE  
AMERICAN  
THAN OPPOSING  
A TYRANT

I'm silently  
correcting you

NO THRONES  
IN AMERICA

THIS IS WHAT  
DEMOCRACY  
LOOKS LIKE!



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# Devices-Down, Eyes-Up, Hands-On Learning

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

WE ARE IN an era of massive disruption.

Artificial intelligence is triggering seismic shifts in virtually every aspect of society. The affordability crisis is squeezing working- and middle-class families and pushing those living in poverty over the edge. Addictive technology and social media platforms are deepening anxiety and depression—especially among our youth. People with enormous resources and power are stoking division. And the democracy we have built over 250 years is being assaulted from within.

Teachers are no strangers to disruption; we're often the first responders to it. Time and again, teachers provide stability amid chaos, and the human connection at the heart of the student-teacher relationship, and we help our students navigate a changing world. But this turbulent moment requires a concerted *national* response to prepare our young people for life's opportunities and challenges.

Whatever the future holds for students, they need:

- A broad base of foundational knowledge, starting with literacy and numeracy skills.
- Curriculum that is relevant, is engaging, and fosters curiosity, including subjects like the arts, athletics, and civics.
- An emphasis on active learning through meaningful projects and opportunities to apply knowledge in ways that connect learning to real life.
- Safe and welcoming classrooms and campuses where young people feel seen, supported, and ready to learn. That includes promoting well-being and protecting students from gun violence, immigration raids, and bullying.

These basics equip students for the deeper learning and problem-solving that will be crucial throughout their lives. They help make students more confident and more engaged learners. It's how we promote curiosity and critical thinking and ensure all our students have the agency

and persistence they need to confront challenges.

Young people are resilient, but too often, the kids are not all right. A major reason is that they are drowning in tech.

As Jonathan Haidt, professor and author of *The Anxious Generation*, says, cellphones and social media are making our kids sedentary, solitary, anxious, and depressed.\* On top of that, there are growing concerns about the adverse effects of all this tech on students' cognition, attention, and achievement.

Jared Cooney Horvath, a leading neuroscientist, recently analyzed how reading and math trends shifted after state-by-state expansion of education technology. Prior to large-scale digital adoption, fourth- and eighth-graders' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress had been rising steadily for years. After adoption, the trajectory shifted, often sharply, toward decline. Correlation is not causation, but Horvath cites research indicating that this pattern appears across states, countries, grade levels, subjects, and years.

Now, with artificial intelligence, we are at a crossroads that will define the future of work and society. Without proper oversight and strong guardrails, there will be real dangers to our safety and privacy, to the climate and the very fabric of society.

\*To read an excerpt of Haidt's book, see "Distracted by Design" in the Spring 2026 issue of *American Educator*. [go.aft.org/mk9](http://go.aft.org/mk9).

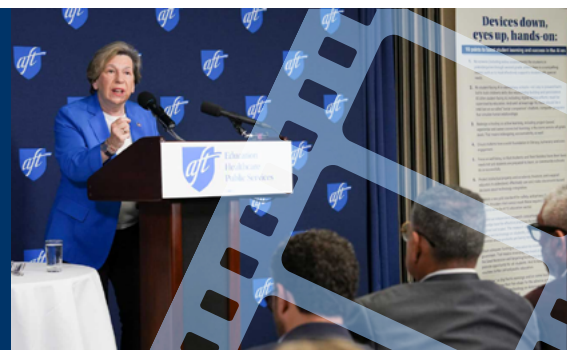
One thing the AI revolution does not change is the essential purpose of education: teaching students how to think and how to connect, and giving them enough knowledge to do both well.

I'm not calling for an AI ban or a Chromebook bonfire. What I am calling for is getting the balance right to harness the benefits of technology while mitigating the harms. I am proposing a 10-point plan to boost student learning and success in the age of AI:

1. No screens (including online assessments) for students in prekindergarten through second grade, unless there is a compelling reason, such as to most effectively support a student with special needs.
2. No student-facing AI in elementary schools—not only to prevent harm, but to build children's skills like relationship-building and persistence. All other student-facing AI, including digital literacy efforts, must be supervised by educators. And until at least age 16, there should be a total ban on so-called "social companion" chatbots, computer programs that simulate human relationships.
3. Redesign schooling so active learning, including project-based, experiential, and career-connected learning, is the norm across all grade levels. That means redesigning accountability as well.
4. Ensure students have a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy, and civic engagement.

## Watch and Share

In a landmark speech at the National Press Club on May 27, Randi Weingarten proposed a bold vision for public schools with a 10-point plan for boosting learning in the AI era. While this column provides a brief excerpt, you can watch, read, and share her full speech by going to [aft.org/DevicesDown](http://aft.org/DevicesDown).



5. Focus on well-being, so that students and their families have their basic needs met and students are prepared to learn, as community schools do so successfully.
6. Protect intellectual property and academic freedom, and support educators to understand, effectively use, and make classroom-based decisions about technology integration.
7. Establish a new gold standard for safety and privacy for the use of AI in schools. Providers that cannot meet these requirements should not be eligible to serve the K-12 education sector.

## The AI revolution does not change the essential purpose of education: teaching students how to think and how to connect, and giving them enough knowledge to do both well.

8. Establish an independent research consortium to build a strong knowledge base for effective practices for education that can be sustained and scaled. The research should include the effects of AI, screens, and technology on students, and should not be paid for by the industries whose products are being researched.
9. Ensure adequate funding of education by states and the federal government. This means reversing the trend of disinvestment since the Great Recession and targeting funding to level the playing field and promote opportunity for all students—and not letting AI and vouchers further defund public education.
10. A “tech tax” on Big Tech’s earnings and on some business operations, to ensure they pay their fair share for the adverse and disruptive consequences of this technology on American families, such as workers being displaced by AI.

In sum, to ensure our students are prepared for the future, we need a “devices-down, eyes-up, hands-on” strategy.

Research already attests to the value of engaged and active learning. It’s a pedagogy we know works, especially when students are solving real-world problems and receiving meaningful feedback. And in the AI era, it is even more important than ever. It needs to be the way every student can learn, in an age-appropriate way, in every grade.

This does not replace the need for a broad foundation of knowledge starting with literacy and numeracy. But today, students need a new set of basics built on the ability to think critically, communicate, collaborate, and apply knowledge.

To really prepare young people for complex challenges, our true goal is to have students who can work together and problem solve. They must be able to pool their collective knowledge, strengths, and perspectives, because today’s problems are greater than each of us, but they are not greater than the sum of us.

Brain science tells us that kids can’t learn unless they feel safe, and unless school is a welcoming environment where they feel they belong. Students can’t learn if they are hungry, or coping with stress from home, or don’t *have* a home. One way to support student and family needs is through community schools, which connect services and activities to the school itself. Community schools produce among the best returns on investment in the research record—an average of \$7 to \$15 for every \$1 spent.

Speaking of investment, over the past 20 years, study after study has shown that money matters in education, and it matters a lot; investment in schools improves student outcomes, while funding cuts hurt those outcomes. Yet 42 states devote a smaller share of their economies to their K-12 public schools than they did in 2006, representing a loss of hundreds of billions of dollars in potential revenue.

This disinvestment is particularly acute in states such as Arizona, Florida, and Texas, where recent voucher expansions will exacerbate the cycle of underfunding and underachievement. We must stop the runaway train that private school vouchers are becoming. Vouchers have produced some of the largest declines in student learning in the research record.\*

**A**s we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation, public schools remain—as the founders argued—essential to forging a pluralistic, unified nation that is stronger tomorrow than today. Indeed, I just wrote a book about this.<sup>†</sup> By bringing together children of different races, religions, languages, and cultures, public school classrooms are laboratories of democracy that forge bonds and bridge our differences—if we support and nourish them.

The 10-point plan is grounded in what I’ve witnessed firsthand over the last two decades, visiting hundreds of schools and listening to thousands of educators, parents, young people, and others. The plan addresses the enormity of the tech earthquake, dealing with screens and student-facing AI; creating an enforceable privacy standard for the use of AI in schools; calling for deep, classroom-relevant research in education; insisting on protections for intellectual property and academic freedom; and demanding a tech tax to compensate the country for the consequences.

We need a relentless, intentional focus on what our young people need: greater literacy, numeracy, and civic engagement, and active learning that excites and engages them—all while ensuring their social and mental well-being and ability to form healthy relationships. Devices down, eyes up, hands on.

America’s teachers—as they always have—are doing noble work; they’re showing up every day to help young people realize their potential and build our collective future. Today’s students will be the ones who heal, help, and lead us. They will be the environmental stewards, the innovators, the artists, the first responders, and the teachers of tomorrow. The other side is trying to exploit the current crisis to destroy public education and pluralism as we know it. We have a different vision: to revitalize and reimagine public schools so every one of our students can harness their future and build the country they dream of. ■

\*For details on vouchers’ impact, see “Ideology Over Evidence” in the Fall 2025 issue of *American Educator*. [go.aft.org/w5s](http://go.aft.org/w5s).

<sup>†</sup>To read an excerpt, see “Why Do Fascists Fear Teachers?” in the Fall 2025 issue of *American Educator*. [go.aft.org/mcf](http://go.aft.org/mcf).



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# America 250

Teaching in Trump 2.0



By Brian S. Grindrod

Long after the final bell has rung, I sit in my classroom at Wilbur L. Cross High School in New Haven, Connecticut, where over 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.<sup>1</sup> The quiet contrasts sharply with the mental noise of my daily work. As a social studies educator, I find myself constantly navigating the intersection of two powerful time periods: the enduring legacy of 1776 and the dynamic, often turbulent energy of 2026. Looking at the empty desks, I wonder how my students—who are growing up in one of the most diverse and economically challenged cities in the state—see themselves reflected in our nation’s founding documents. I question how a set of documents written more than two centuries ago remains important to a generation facing digital misinformation, historic polarization, and a shaky political landscape.

*Brian S. Grindrod is a social studies teacher and Advanced Placement coordinator at Wilbur L. Cross High School in New Haven, Connecticut. He serves as a mentor for the Center for Civic Education’s We the People and Project Citizen programs. Additionally, he is one of his school’s social-emotional learning ambassadors and serves as the Student Council advisor. In 2026, the Connecticut Council for the Social Studies honored him with the Award for Excellence in Social Studies Education, Grades 9–12. Grindrod used Gemini to assist with brainstorming and revising his original draft; he critically reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-generated suggestions to ensure they align with his professional expertise and pedagogical vision.*



In my US government and American law courses, I strive to help my 10th- and 11th-grade students move past the trivia of history and recognize themselves as protagonists in the nation’s ongoing narrative—a shift we achieve through active historical inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Day to day, I guide them in analyzing primary sources to develop critical disciplinary literacy<sup>3</sup> and applying those historical lessons to the contemporary civic issues they encounter in digital spaces like TikTok and Instagram.<sup>4</sup>

We are standing on the threshold of a monumental era of celebration for our country. From 2026 to 2041, the United States will mark the semiquincentennial of the Declaration of Independence, the ratification of the US Constitution, and the adoption of the Bill of Rights. In Connecticut, we are also approaching the 400th anniversary of our colonial founding, which was among the very first experiments in self-government. These milestones, particularly in contrast to the democratic backsliding we are facing under President Trump,<sup>5</sup> bring me back to Benjamin Franklin’s famous 1787 retort as he exited Independence Hall in Philadelphia. When asked by Elizabeth Willing Powel (one of George Washington’s confidantes) what kind of government the Constitutional Convention had produced, he didn’t offer a guarantee; he issued a challenge: “A republic, if you can keep it.”<sup>6</sup>



These commemorations provide opportunities to consider how the late 18th century informs our future, to deepen our understanding of the nation’s core principles, and to navigate the “tensions and ambiguities” of our shared journey.<sup>7</sup> History is not merely a collection of remote facts, but a dynamic resource to grapple with our national identity and aspirations.<sup>8</sup> Take the Preamble of the US Constitution, for example, which powerfully articulates our nation’s core purpose:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

From the moment these words were written, even striving for this ideal has required overcoming significant institutional challenges, and today we benefit from—and continue—those efforts.

In my classroom, I have long prompted students to consider questions such as, “What was it like to live then?” or “What would you do?” These questions foster historical empathy, a critical cognitive process that allows students to understand the past on its own terms.<sup>9</sup> However, in our new era of civic fragmentation, the separation between the late 1700s and current events is diminishing—and the urgency of these questions has reached a fever pitch. The pursuit of a “more perfect Union” continues through educators’ efforts to foster inclusivity and empathy, even as federal educational priorities shift toward a more nationalistic approach that considers honest history and equity programs “discriminatory.”<sup>10</sup> All public school teachers, regardless of discipline, can serve as civic educators,<sup>11</sup> and public schools can function as democratic institutions, striving to prepare future generations for an America that fully embodies the principle of “We the People.”

### Lincoln’s Road Map: Truth Over Myth

As educators deal with teaching in a polarized America, we can look to Abraham Lincoln for guidance. Lincoln understood that the myth of a perfect Union must eventually bow to the truth of a struggling one. In his 1838 Lyceum Address, a young Lincoln warned that the greatest threat to the American republic was not a foreign invader but internal decay—specifically, the breakdown of the rule of law and the rise of mob passions. He argued that the only way to sustain the republic was through a “political religion” of reverence for the law.<sup>12</sup> In our era of political upheaval, I believe this is my primary task: teaching students that the foundation of liberty is respect for the rule of law.

Importantly, Lincoln also explained that “We the People” cannot be a selective term. In 1858, he gave a speech on the need to resolve the question of enslavement, famously stating that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”<sup>13</sup> Today, our house is still divided by many forms of inequity and bias; as a civic educator in an urban district, I see this division every day. Lincoln’s message still holds: If the promise of the Declaration that “all men are created equal” is not universal, the republic’s structure is unstable.

**In our era of political upheaval, I believe my primary task is teaching students that the foundation of liberty is respect for the rule of law.**



Perhaps naively, throughout most of my life I believed that our republic’s structure was stable. We hadn’t achieved our “more perfect Union,” but we seemed to be making progress (albeit too slowly). Then, on January 6, 2021, as the musical Hamilton puts it, “the world turned upside down.”<sup>14</sup> Our nation’s Capitol was attacked by fellow Americans hoping to overturn a presidential election because of a lie. Worse, a lie propagated by the president. While experts in authoritarianism predicted that Trump would not give up the White House gracefully,<sup>15</sup> to my students and me it was shocking—a deep stain on the republic. Suddenly, Franklin’s old warning was no longer a far-off anecdote. It was a reality we were living through.

I remember the overwhelming uncertainty of that day, wondering what I could possibly say to my civics students the next morning. We were still trapped in the digital boxes of COVID-era remote learning, and my instinct was to cancel our scheduled guest speaker, a federal magistrate judge, to process the breach of the US Capitol in private. But the magistrate insisted on logging on.

The next morning, I joined a digital classroom filled with nervous students. The magistrate didn’t sugarcoat things. He talked about the rule of law, explaining that the people students saw on the news might someday appear before him in court. Suddenly, the “mischiefs of faction” arising from “a number of citizens ... united and actuated by some common impulse of passion ... adverse to the rights of other citizens”<sup>16</sup> that James Madison wrote about in Federalist No. 10 weren’t just vocabulary words—they were real, happening in our own time.

My worldview as an educator and American shifted that day. I realized that teaching the founding documents is about not only valuing tradition but also giving students the tools to understand and influence the world. These documents are blueprints for a house that's always under renovation, striving to be less divided. It's up to our students to decide whether the house will stand.

## Pedagogy of Engagement and Action

For the past eight years, but with far more energy and commitment since January 6, 2021, I have transformed my classroom into a center for democratic engagement that cultivates active, responsible citizens. I rely on project-based learning (PBL) for much of this work because, nearly 20 years into my career, I'm confident that PBL represents the future of education. Done well, with effective implementation of high-quality materials and frequent student feedback, it allows students to develop the critical-thinking and collaborative skills necessary for modern life.<sup>17</sup>

## We the People

My professional transformation began in 2017, when I joined the Center for Civic Education's James Madison Legacy Project, which was funded by a US Department of Education Supporting Effective Educator Development grant.<sup>18</sup> The grant's primary emphasis was assisting teachers in under-resourced areas to close the "civic empowerment gap."<sup>19</sup> This yearlong professional learning experience introduced me to the We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Unlike typical professional development, the curriculum was created by real classroom teachers and constitutional scholars, and it made a real difference in my teaching.

We the People engages students in doing history. The culminating activity that my students become immersed in is a simulated congressional hearing.<sup>21</sup> It's a dynamic experiment in classroom democracy that extends to regional, state, and national competitions. I organize six teams of students, typically three to five students each, who become constitutional experts on a specific unit of study. Each year, the Center for Civic Education releases unit questions that require students to dissect everything from Enlightenment theory to modern-day Supreme Court precedents. This hearing process is a hallmark of civic discourse—the ability to engage in civil, evidence-based deliberation.

Think of this as a typical government hearing: Each team delivers a prepared opening statement and then defends its position against follow-up questions from a panel. This simulation hones essential skills, including research, collaboration, and the evaluation of constitutional principles in a real-world context.

To begin this experience, we hold a "Candy Congress" hearing. I provide students with candy, and they must conduct rapid research to develop a two-minute pitch on why their selection should be the "national candy." A panel of guest judges, often administrators or fellow teachers, asks follow-up questions to test their reasoning.

This initial activity serves as a catalyst for deeper engagement, introducing students to the hearing format while allow-

**We the People asks students to master the historical and aspirational *why* of our government. Project Citizen demands they tackle the practical *how* of public policy.**



ing them to navigate the risks and opportunities of public speaking in a low-stakes environment. By the time they reach the state competition, they are far beyond trivia about history, having mastered crucial skills like active listening and empathetic collaboration as they developed deep knowledge of democratic principles.<sup>22</sup>

Watching my students transform from passive learners into budding constitutional scholars is the most rewarding part of my job. When they work together to craft their four-minute testimonies, they wrestle with the why behind our laws, dig for evidence, and challenge each other's thinking—a process that builds their perspective-taking and collaborative problem-solving abilities. The atmosphere in the room is electric when they practice answering tough, unscripted questions from a panel of volunteer judges; that's when I know they are truly engaged citizens.

When I took my class to the Connecticut state We the People competition for the first time in 2018, I had no idea what to expect. My students struggled with follow-up questions, public speaking, and confidence. Asked about how to solve gerrymandering, they were stumped. After the competition, I went back to my mentor teachers and figured out how to manage the system given the odds stacked against us. The next year, I flipped the classroom so students worked independently in their teams. They worked with a law firm that helped them with follow-up questions. In the years following, we worked with Yale University graduate and law students to practice writing, reading essays, and answering follow-up questions.



Operating within an urban district like New Haven introduces unique challenges. For example, unlike schools with selective tryouts, coaching by high-power law firms, and booster clubs, I work with the students assigned to my roster, striving to secure their buy-in for a program that demands intense public speaking and critical thinking. And at the state competitions—which we’ve participated in every year since 2018—I frequently perceive bias in which affluent high schools are assigned the more spacious rooms and in how judges react to students’ clothing. Although the official judging rubric states that dress is not a scoring criterion, my students—many of whom cannot afford formal suits or professional attire—often face judges who seem to subconsciously correlate formal dress with academic depth. I explicitly prepare my students to overcome the stereotype that urban students lack the refinement of their suburban counterparts. And although we still don’t have a booster club, I have leaned into the New Haven community to build a grassroots support system. By utilizing my mentor network, engaging with the local federal court, and collaborating with college professors, college students, and local law firms, I have provided my students with the tools and resources to dismantle these stereotypes. We have turned challenges into opportunities for resilience, proving that brilliance is not defined by a zip code or a suit.

In 2023, we earned the honor of representing Connecticut at the We the People National Finals as the John Lewis class.<sup>23</sup> This prestigious award is granted annually to a Title I school, accompanied by a \$10,000 scholarship to facilitate travel to Washington, DC.<sup>24</sup> Competing against teams from across the country, carrying the weight of New Haven and the legacy of Representative Lewis, my students encountered fair, rigorous judges who recognized them as brilliant, capable scholars. Placing 35th in the nation—and outperforming state champions and wild card entrants from 13 other states—they proved definitively that academic excellence is not confined by wealth. Even more importantly, my students demonstrated that when given the proper tools, they are the very people who will preserve the republic.

### Project Citizen

Building on my experience with We the People, in 2021 I began teaching the Center for Civic Education’s other flagship program, Project Citizen. While We the People asks students to master the historical and aspirational *why* of our government, Project Citizen demands they tackle the practical *how* of public policy.<sup>25</sup> It is one thing to debate the 14th Amendment in a mock hearing; it is quite another to walk into a real city council meeting and argue for a specific change in municipal policy.

My classroom is now a laboratory for this process within my social studies classes. My students follow a rigorous multistep journey: identifying community problems, researching existing policies, developing their own public policy proposals, and creating a concrete action plan to influence government officials. This framework immerses students in action civics, which research shows significantly increases their agency and long-term civic participation.<sup>26</sup>

It’s thrilling to see my students shift from individual opinions toward collective, research-informed policy recommendations.



The Project Citizen process requires students to identify a real community problem and advocate for a practical public policy solution. We spend significant time reflecting on community problems and brainstorming solutions, which integrates with our work on informed engagement. My students consider the multifaceted impacts of various policies, forcing them to develop empathy—a competency they often discover is more challenging to build than public policy knowledge. By grappling with the diverse needs of their New Haven neighbors, they realize that public policy is not just about laws and regulations, but also about the people. Using structured reflection, my students also evaluate how they are developing self-management skills, such as goal setting and perseverance, which are necessary for the grind of policy research and advocacy.<sup>27</sup>

The impact on our school has been remarkable. I have observed students applying the civic problem-solving and innovation skills acquired in my classroom to effect meaningful change. For example,

- students persuaded school administrators to create at least two wellness blocks per month during the school day to address mental health;
- student athletes successfully lobbied city government committees to build a new multipurpose turf field; and
- students testified before the state legislature in support of increased educational funding, which strengthened their advocacy skills.

## Integrated Civic Competencies

Over the past school year, I have been deeply involved in implementing the Project Citizen: Integrated Civic Competencies (ICC) pilot program.<sup>28</sup> This grant project, funded by the US Department of Education’s Education Innovation and Research program, is groundbreaking because it intentionally weaves social-emotional learning (SEL) into the framework of civic education. In our nation’s polarized climate, the ICC pilot focuses on teaching students *civic SEL*—the ability to engage in civil discourse, practice active and empathetic listening, and collaborate with classmates who hold different viewpoints.<sup>29</sup> Unlike *We the People* and Project Citizen, which provide major curricular components for specific courses, these civic SEL competencies can be woven into any course.

One of the most profound impacts of this approach is the inclusivity it fosters. In my American law classes, where we routinely engage in Project Citizen, honors students work alongside life skills students to solve real-world problems. Emphasizing civic SEL has enhanced this collaboration as students with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and skills identify community problems, assess the trade-offs of alternative policies, and co-create action plans. For example, some students are developing a policy to address safety concerns as students walk to school, while others are working on a schoolwide kindness campaign. This process fosters genuine empathy and inclusive social skills while demonstrating the value of diverse teams for producing robust policy solutions.<sup>30</sup>

To ground their research in reality, we bridge the classroom-community divide by hosting guest speakers, from local activists to elected officials. Through this interaction, students practice active, empathetic listening and civil discourse with adults in positions of authority. They learn that informed engagement is not merely about having a loud voice, but about having a well-researched and respectful one that can hold its own in the public square.

In addition to enriching their public policy development, the ICC pilot has enabled my students to develop essential media literacy skills. Self-awareness, particularly in relation to civic identity and belonging, is a critical competency in this context. I encourage students to reflect on how information from various media sources aligns with or challenges their lived experiences and research—and to be on the lookout for misinformation.<sup>31</sup> This process is integral to responsible decision-making, as students apply media literacy concepts to evaluate and refine their own reasoning.<sup>32</sup>

Students are learning to critically assess news sources as part of their civic problem-solving and innovation skills. By examining how media shapes their civic decisions, they transition from passive consumers to critical participants, capable of defending policy proposals with well-researched, contextually grounded evidence.<sup>33</sup> As an educator, it’s thrilling to see my students shift from individual opinions toward collective, research-informed policy recommendations that can withstand scrutiny.<sup>34</sup> It’s yet another way they are prepared to preserve the republic.

## These Programs Work—But They Are in Jeopardy

Recent independent research from Georgetown University’s Civic Education Research Lab confirms that *We the People* and Project Citizen enhance learning and engagement. Students

If we want to keep our republic, we must treat civic education as the essential infrastructure of our nation.



who participate in these programs demonstrate higher civic knowledge, stronger skills in civil discourse, and a greater likelihood of civic participation as adults.<sup>35</sup>

Despite overwhelming evidence of the programs’ efficacy, federal funding cuts have placed the future of these initiatives at risk. In June 2025, the Trump administration canceled specific US Department of Education (ED) grants for the Center for Civic Education programs, such as *Civics that Empowers All Students* and *Project Community: Media Literacy and Public Policy*. These grants had historically been a vital source of support for professional learning opportunities for teachers in high-needs urban and rural districts<sup>36</sup>—the very educators responsible for closing the civic empowerment gap.<sup>37</sup> This move targeted the grants that sustained the Center for Civic Education’s ability to provide mentorship and resources to educators in urban centers like New Haven.

The loss of ED’s grant funding has dramatically reduced access to teacher training and new PBL opportunities for students in underserved communities, all but ensuring that only students in wealthy, well-resourced districts will receive a high-quality civics education.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, research from early 2026 suggests that these cuts have already widened the civic empowerment gap, as schools in wealthier districts can continue to rely on private booster clubs and local endowments, while urban programs that depend on federal equity-based grants may be forced to scale back.<sup>39</sup>

The cancellation of these grants represents more than a budgetary shift; it is a direct challenge to the “*We the People*” ideal of universal civic preparedness and participation. It further divides the house, to use Lincoln’s metaphor, because “*We the People*” applies only to those who can afford it. If we truly want to keep the republic, we must treat civic education as the essential infrastructure of our nation—just as vital as our bridges and our power grids.

## Our Civic Recession and the Future Direction

Tragically, these cuts come at a time when civic knowledge is critically low. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress are staggering. In 2022, the most recent assessment, only 22 percent of students performed at or above the “proficient” level—and 31 percent scored “below basic.”<sup>40</sup> This means nearly 80 percent of our young people are entering adulthood without a deep understanding of how their government operates.

One of the most dangerous misconceptions that my students often hold is that local elections don’t matter. While the president dominates the headlines, it is the city council, school board, and state legislature that decide the quality of the roads, the funding for schools, and the laws governing safety.<sup>41</sup> Yet, the data show a massive participation gap. While presidential elections often see turnouts around 65 percent,<sup>42</sup> municipal elections frequently see turnouts as low as 15 to 27 percent.<sup>43</sup> When we neglect local ballots, we give up our voice to a tiny, nonrepresentative fraction of the population.

This is why developing students’ civic knowledge ought to be a requirement, not an elective. Currently, civic education in the United States is a patchwork of inconsistency. As of 2025, only 36 states and the District of Columbia required at least one civics or government course to graduate high school,<sup>44</sup> and as of 2024, a mere seven states required a full year of study.<sup>45</sup> Even more concerning is the lack of hands-on civics; as of 2018, 11 states included a civic action project or experiential learning component like Project Citizen in their standards<sup>46</sup> (but in 2025, 39 states and the District of Columbia at least incentivized service learning by offering credit<sup>47</sup>). Without a PBL requirement, civics is a dry affair of memorizing names and laws rather than a living exercise of power. When students are required to complete a project, they gain agency. They realize they don’t have to wait until they are 18 to have a seat at the table.

In a time defined by rapid information exchange and challenges, the ability to collaborate, think critically, and solve problems is the new “literacy.” When students take part in programs like Project Citizen and We the People, they move beyond passive absorption of facts into the active roles of constitutional scholars and policy analysts. And when they learn civic SEL, they are prepared to work with people who have very different perspectives, beliefs, and values. The types of experiential learning offered by the Center for Civic Education are the bridge between the classroom and the community, ensuring that the next generation knows about the government *and* how to work it by coming together for the greater good.

Ultimately, integrating Project Citizen and We the People, along with civic SEL, into high school courses for all students would create a resilient republic. Given the endless struggles over allocation of resources, when students successfully advocate for a wellness block or a new turf field, they are managing the “mischiefs of faction” just as Madison envisioned. They are learning to deal with the tension between the individual and the state. By making civic education a rigorous, project-based requirement, we ensure that the “We” in “We the People” remains inclusive,

# Requiring rigorous, project-based civic education ensures “We the People” remain capable of self-governance.



informed, and capable of self-governance. This is how we answer Franklin’s challenge: not with a textbook, but with a generation of practiced, virtuous citizens ready to lead.

**A**s we mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Madison’s Federalist No. 51 remains the structural blueprint for our survival. Madison famously cautioned that “if men were angels, no government would be necessary.”<sup>48</sup> By teaching my students that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition,”<sup>49</sup> I am framing their roles as citizens—not as spectators, but as the necessary friction in the constitutional machine. They are the ultimate check on power, the force that stops any one faction from silencing “We the People.”

The story of civic education in America is still being written, and every day in classrooms like mine, students are wielding their pens and honing their voices. The future of our democratic society relies on how well prepared they are to participate as informed, thoughtful citizens. Programs like We the People and Project Citizen offer young people more than just knowledge; they nurture the habits, skills, and confidence essential to a thriving democracy.<sup>50</sup> This is particularly vital in the face of our modern challenges.

If we are to keep the republic, we must invest in the next generation’s civic learning. This means ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or zip code, are empowered to shape our nation’s unfinished story. With or without federal support, the movement for rigorous, inclusive, hands-on civic education must continue. We do not just teach history; we prepare the people who will make it. ★

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/grindrod](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/grindrod).

# Igniting Democratic Imaginations



By Peter W. Cookson, Jr.

**A**t this joyful yet perilous moment in America's history, as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence while fighting democratic backsliding,<sup>1</sup> I find it comforting to visit the National Mall in Washington, DC, which draws its inspiration from the broad sweep of American history. At the western end of the Mall is the Lincoln Memorial. Lincoln gazes east on the Capitol, where the question of whether we will keep our republic looms. I take refuge in the south chamber, where the Gettysburg Address is inscribed, declaring "that government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln understood that democracy is our guardian angel and our anvil against tyranny. He also understood that the poetry and promise of the American experiment in self-governance is ignited by



the democratic imagination in our classrooms. According to his law partner, William Herndon, Lincoln believed "that universal education should go along with and accompany the universal ballot in America; that the very best, firmest, and most enduring basis of our republic was ... the thorough and the universal education of the great American people; and that the intelligence of the mass of our people was the light and life of the republic."<sup>2</sup>

I began my career as a social studies and history teacher in a rural Massachusetts public school. I have fond memories of classes about the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and our struggles to live up to our founding ideals of liberty and justice. Those days seem far away now. Today, the very foundation of our republic, which once seemed so sturdy and reliable, feels unstable and fragile. In 2025, the Pew Research Center found that "just 17% of Americans now say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right."<sup>3</sup> In a 2025 survey of American political attitudes conducted by Johns Hopkins University and Public Agenda, 84 percent of respondents said "democracy is either in crisis or facing serious challenges."<sup>4</sup> We struggle in confusion, unsure of the future and unable to find

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safety or common sense in today's political and social environment. Our democratic imaginations are adrift on a sea of doubt and distrust.

## Inspiring Young People

I believe we need to move beyond civics and history lectures alone if we want to inspire young people about the beauty and necessity of democracy. We need curricula built on big ideas about the world we live in. Disconnected facts are not inspiring. Big ideas about the power of democracy to lift the human spirit and create a vibrant, just society cause imaginations to soar. The work of neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang reveals that what she calls *transcendent thinking* has the power to transport us from here and now to the future and everywhere else.\* When young people are offered opportunities to time travel in the company of big ideas, the experience “seems to literally build their brains.”<sup>5</sup> Igniting the democratic imagination is fueled by connecting deeply and meaningfully with others. A democratic imagination is not a thing to possess; it is a gift we share with each other. It is an invitation to come together to create a society where everyone is somebody. It is not a fixed mental structure of mind;



it is a fluid and energizing process of cognitive and emotional experimentation. The democratic imagination draws strength and purpose from a conviction that equality and justice are the pillars of a good society.

In the fall of 2025, the Harvard Kennedy School published the results of its most recent youth poll. The findings are deeply disturbing:

Young Americans are sending a clear message: the systems and institutions meant to support them no longer feel stable, fair, or responsive.... Their trust in democracy, the economy, and even each other is fraying—not because they are disengaged, but because they feel unheard and unprotected in a moment of profound uncertainty. Listening to them, fully and without precondition, is essential if we hope to rebuild that trust—one of the defining challenges of our time.<sup>6</sup>

Inspiring and enabling young people to embrace and celebrate democracy is a defining challenge we cannot ignore. If we

\*To learn more about transcendent thinking, see “When Students Think Beyond the Moment” in the Spring 2026 issue of *American Educator*. [go.aft.org/nps](http://go.aft.org/nps).



# The poetry and promise of the American experiment in self-governance is ignited by the democratic imagination in our classrooms.

fail to inspire our students today, democracy will fail tomorrow. As the former University of Pennsylvania president and ambassador Amy Gutmann noted, “Liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect are not self-evident or self-perpetuating. They must be carefully taught or else opposing values—authoritarianism, plutocracy, intolerance, bigotry, and hatred—will dominate our societies.”<sup>7</sup>

The history of the United States is not without its blemishes and shameful moments, but throughout the 250 years since the nation's founding, generations of Americans have been inspired by the ideals and principles of democracy. We need to engage students in ways that touch their heads and their hearts. They need to feel that the story of America is their story—and therefore, the stories we share in our classrooms must embrace all who call this land home, whether their families have been here for thousands of years, were forced to come, or strove to arrive. They all deserve classrooms alive with the excitement of learning and inspired by the ideals of democracy.

## Igniting Democratic Imaginations

In the last several years, I have visited dozens of high-performing schools serving low-income communities across the South and Northeast. I have learned a great deal from the educators in these schools about how students' democratic imaginations can be ignited. Nearly all of these schools are underfunded. Very often, food is in short supply in students' homes. New curriculum materials are rare. Technology is often outdated. What is not in short supply is teachers who truly believe in the American dream and are fiercely committed to the ideals upon which American democracy is founded. Their commitment and belief are enacted in their classrooms and throughout their schools, where student voice is celebrated. Languages other than English can be heard in the halls and classrooms. History and social studies courses are brought to life through biographies, stories, debates, plays, and civic-minded projects. Students enroll in internships with community organizations, and new programs are developed to help students get ready for success after graduation. Families are invited to join in learning.



Mental and physical health services are provided. In these schools, each child is recognized as somebody, and democracy is a way of life.

A recent survey by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) revealed that 63 percent of young people had a “passive appreciation” of democracy, 31 percent expressed “dismissive detachment,” and 7 percent reported “hostile dissatisfaction.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than “preach the value of democracy,” CIRCLE recommends four levers of change:<sup>9</sup>

- Engage young people in leading changes to our democratic institutions so they work for youth and are more responsive to their needs.
- Invest in access to opportunities for civic learning and engagement and in support for youth to acquire the skills and values necessary for democratic participation....
- Focus on efforts to address differences by socio-economic status and disparities in support for civic development.
- Create opportunities for collaboration and collective action that leverage young people’s strengths, like the belief in democracy of youth who passively appreciate it and the urgency for action of youth who are dissatisfied with it.

Perhaps a fifth lever of change is awakening students’ democratic imaginations.

## Big, powerful ideas should be our educational North Stars. Grappling with them is how students develop their understandings of the world.

with the story of our country’s founding. He walked back and forth, asking questions and listening to his students as they discovered together the fascinating story of how the American Revolution turned the world upside down.

The teacher read the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. Many of his students work in wheat and soybean fields before and after school. Many have limited English skills. Many of their families come from Central

America. Many are hungry every night—but he captured their imaginations. He broke them into small groups to answer the question, “What does ‘all men are created equal’ mean?” The students began to talk with each other. The excitement level in the classroom shot up with students asking questions about what *equal* means and why people should be treated with respect. These students’ democratic imaginations came to life in a freewheeling, collective, and joyful conversation with history, society, and each other.

### Some Guiding Principles

In my experience, the art of igniting democratic imaginations rests on certain commitments and approaches to learning.

- *Foster positive democratic relationships.* Top-down classrooms with rigid rules breed conformity and social anxiety. The most lively and informative history and social studies classes I have seen are those where students connect with each other and with the teacher. As one teacher at a school I visited said, “relationships are everything.”
- *Challenge students with big ideas.* Big, powerful ideas, such as “all men are created equal” and “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,”<sup>11</sup> should be our educational North Stars. Grappling with big ideas is how students develop their understandings of the world.<sup>12</sup>
- *Engage students in deep, sustained reading as the cornerstone of learning.* There is growing evidence that students’



### A Passion for Possibility

The educational philosopher Maxine Greene once said, “Imagination ... is the capacity to break with the ordinary, the given, the taken-for-granted and open doors to possibility. One way of describing it is as a ‘passion for possibility.’”<sup>10</sup> One of the schools I visited in North Carolina used trailers for classrooms, not an ideal setting for inspiring students. But to the young middle school history teacher who was leading a spirited discussion of the American Revolution, it was a perfect setting to learn about democracy. The classroom was decorated with posters of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Tubman, and Martin Luther King Jr. Books were scattered about everywhere. The teacher was on fire

attention spans are getting shorter and shorter (though they can still be developed).<sup>13</sup> Students are reading less and less, and books and original documents are being replaced far too often by AI-generated texts and videos. The democratic imagination thrives on rigor and truth. Especially as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, students should be immersed in reading and discussing it, along with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

- *Celebrate democratic heroes.* Today, the federal government is trying to erase much of American history. Abraham Lincoln reportedly said, “history is not history unless it is the truth.”<sup>14</sup> Students need to know we have a long and glorious past of people who have fought for democracy and for the idea of equality against great odds. When real history speaks, we listen and learn.
- *Break down the division between school and society.* Developing a democratic imagination happens by interacting with the world. Through intentionally structured projects, educators can support students in joining with other students around the world to propose solutions to the world’s most urgent challenges—like the shortage of drinkable water<sup>15</sup> and lack of equitable access to vaccines as global warming intensifies droughts and increases disease transmission.<sup>16</sup>
- *Cultivate community as the home of the democratic imagination.* Schools are communities, and through them we should celebrate the power of us. Assemblies with local and national speakers followed by vigorous student-led discussions are one way to weave a shared culture of excitement, friendship, and purpose. Another is community-service projects like get-out-the-vote campaigns and soliciting donations to food banks.



- *Practice peaceful conflict resolution.* Anger has become a way of life for too many of us. Democratic processes are meant to resolve differences through negotiation, compromise, and tolerance. If students do not develop these dispositions through debates, discussions, reading, and writing, they are likely to default to amplifying anger rather than mitigating it.

Becoming a democratic citizen—a person who values liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect, as Gutmann describes it—is a lifelong process. Educators are the stewards of the future; schools are the home of democracy.

**Becoming a democratic citizen is a lifelong process. Educators are the stewards of the future; schools are the home of democracy.**

### **Our Robust Republic: The View from the Classroom**

In 2024, the research organization Economist Intelligence Unit found that “only 45% of the world’s population lives in a democracy, 39% under authoritarian rule, and 15% in ‘hybrid regimes’ that combine electoral democracy with authoritarian tendencies.”<sup>17</sup> Today, the United States is becoming increasingly fragmented and is drifting toward a dystopian authoritarianism.<sup>18</sup>

This trend toward authoritarianism is global. According to Freedom House, “eighty percent of the world’s people live in countries or territories that are rated Not Free or only Partly Free.”<sup>19</sup> If this trend advances unchecked, there is a real risk that democracy will wither and pass into history.

Our children are caught in the crossfire of our political wars. If we can turn our classrooms into communities of conscience and ignite students’ democratic imaginations, we can be on the road to robust republics that welcome all.

Solidarity is our bulwark of hope, but time is short. The economist Nouriel Roubini warns us the future will be shaped by how we meet the enormous challenges awaiting us, including massive debt, climate change, technological disruptions like artificial intelligence, aging populations, and geopolitical clashes among great powers.<sup>20</sup> I would add to this list, in big and bold letters, the preservation of public education and democracy—which for me are represented in the enduring symbol of the yellow school bus. Because the foundation of American democracy is public education, attacks on public education are attacks on democracy. We all need to get on the yellow school bus. It is the only way we can arrive together at our destination: a robust republic that will carry us into a democratic future. ★

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/cookson](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/cookson).

# Teaching America at 250



This summer's 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence is a monumental milestone. It provides a unique opportunity not only to celebrate the achievements and innovations of Americans over the centuries but also to reflect on the unfinished work of our democracy. Teaching students about the forces and tensions that shaped the nation's creation—and highlighting the voices and experiences of those who have historically been excluded from this narrative—can help students better understand and think critically about the founding ideals that still guide and challenge us today.

Share My Lesson's new curated collection, "America at 250: From Revolution to Republic," includes nearly 100 resources to help educators and students consider the country's origin story; the creation of its founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; and the many people who were central to the nation coming to be. Here, we highlight several of the most recent additions to the collection.

## Exploring the Revolution

What was life like in the 13 British colonies? What issues, events, and leaders were key

to the Revolution against Great Britain and the creation of an independent new nation? These questions are the focus of "From Colonies to Independence," a nine-part history and geography unit intended for students in grades K–2, available through SML partner Core Knowledge. For grades 3–5, Core Knowledge also has "The Thirteen Colonies," which considers each colony individually, including how and why they were established and the challenges that colonists faced.

Two resources for older students invite deeper discussion of the complexities and impacts of the Revolution. In the Project Look Sharp unit "Causes of the American Revolution," students in grades 7–12 analyze historical evidence and media sources on the Revolution from multiple viewpoints—including those of the colonists, King George III, patriots, loyalists, enslaved people, and Native Americans—to learn how economic pressures and colonial resistance inflamed the conflict. And "Ken Burns' The American Revolution Explores the Beginnings of the Nation's Democracy," from SML partner PBS News Hour Classroom, encourages students to examine how the war reshaped ideas about democracy and national identity,

and why these ideas remain critical to democratic governance today.

## Examining the Promise of the Founding

Teaching honestly about the nation's founding means celebrating its animating democratic ideals while acknowledging the contradictions embedded in them—such as that "all men are created equal" with "unalienable rights"—as well as our continued struggles to implement them. Those contradictions and struggles are highlighted in two new resources well suited for older students.

"America at 250" is a new chapter of journalist Judy Woodruff's long-running "America at a Crossroads" television series, provided by PBS News Hour Classroom for students in grades 7–12. In the series, Woodruff explores how the concept of being "American" has evolved since the nation's founding and what it means today, particularly in light of the divisions and political rhetoric of recent years. Part 1 considers George Washington's vision for the country he helped to create and how his evolution on slavery informs his legacy. Part 2 places the nation's struggle for independence alongside Black Americans' fight for equality in Boston schools. In Part 3,



where they are persuaded not to love or hate the country but to fully understand it and their agency to spur change. And in “Back to the Beginning: Early American Literature for Today’s Students,” Amber Chandler, who teaches middle school English language arts, shares how students can learn more about the values undergirding our democracy while also discovering a broader range of American literature than what is typically included in historical inquiry.

Of course, key to teaching a complete history of the United States and encouraging democratic engagement is highlighting the experiences of those whose voices have been traditionally marginalized or excluded. For dozens more resources focusing on the contributions and perspectives of Asian, Black, immigrant, Indigenous, Latine, and LGBTQIA+ communities, visit the new SML collection, “American History: Teaching Missing Narratives.”

Finally, tune in this July for SML’s Summer of Learning webinar series (July 21–30), which will include free, for-credit sessions that explore the 250th anniversary. For more details and to register, visit [sharemylesson.com/sol26](https://sharemylesson.com/sol26).

Do you have resources you’d like to share? SML makes it easy! And if you have ideas or requests, reach out to [content@sharemylesson.com](mailto:content@sharemylesson.com).

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM



**Back to the Beginning: Early American Literature for Today’s Students**  
[go.aft.org/ae0](https://go.aft.org/ae0)

**American History: Teaching Missing Narratives (Collection)**  
[go.aft.org/t08](https://go.aft.org/t08)

Woodruff interviews Pulitzer Prize-winning author and historian Joseph Ellis on who the Founding Fathers excluded in their vision of freedom and equality, and how that exclusion has informed US history. Part 4 brings this discussion to the present day, with the Trump administration’s attempts to erase challenging elements of the nation’s history in order to limit and reshape the history students are taught.

This resource may be especially powerful when paired with “We the People: Expanding the Teaching of the US Founding Inquiry,” by SML partner Facing History & Ourselves. Over the five lessons in this unit, students in grades 9–12 grapple with the gap between the founding ideals and the lived realities of injustice to consider a central question: “How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?”

## Engaging Students in Democracy

Teaching honestly about the founding of the United States is critical in any moment, but particularly so now that the health of our democracy is in serious decline. How can educators commemorate the 250th anniversary with students in a way that cultivates recognition of democracy as an ongoing project in which students are needed participants? Two educators who frequently contribute to SML give tips grounded in what works in their classrooms.

In “Teaching American History at 250: Hope, Honesty and the Work of Democracy,” Sari Beth Rosenberg, who teaches high school history, emphasizes the importance of creating classrooms that are safe spaces for students to think, question, and learn—

## Recommended Resources

**America at 250: From Revolution to Republic (Collection)**  
[go.aft.org/kti](https://go.aft.org/kti)

**From Colonies to Independence**  
[go.aft.org/z3b](https://go.aft.org/z3b)

**The Thirteen Colonies**  
[go.aft.org/a2b](https://go.aft.org/a2b)

**Causes of the American Revolution**  
[go.aft.org/91x](https://go.aft.org/91x)

**Ken Burns’ The American Revolution Explores the Beginnings of the Nation’s Democracy**  
[go.aft.org/4ik](https://go.aft.org/4ik)

**America at a Crossroads: America at 250**

★ **Part 1: George Washington’s Vision for American Identity Tested 250 Years Later**  
[go.aft.org/f21](https://go.aft.org/f21)

★ **Part 2: Boston’s Role in America’s Founding and Its Struggle to Meet Its Ideals**  
[go.aft.org/t7y](https://go.aft.org/t7y)

★ **Part 3: As America Turns 250, Historian Joseph Ellis Examines the Founders’ Promise and Their Failures**  
[go.aft.org/42f](https://go.aft.org/42f)

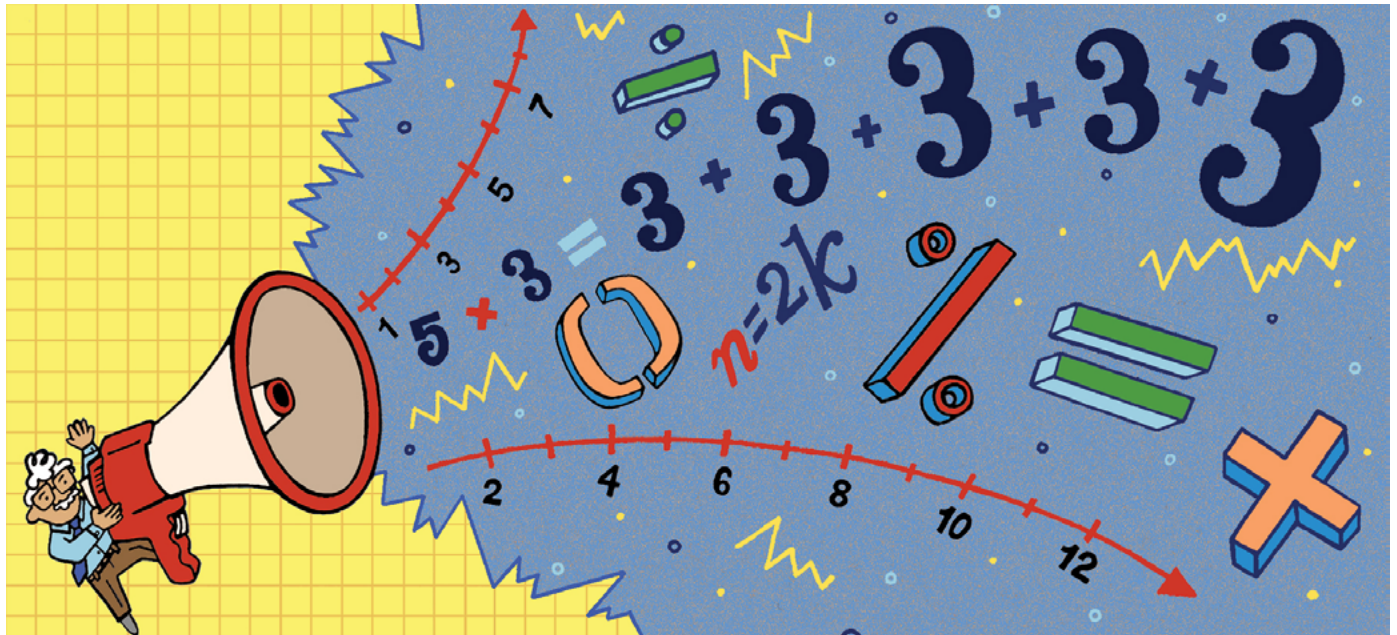
★ **Part 4: Americans Divided on Nation’s History as 250th Anniversary Nears**  
[go.aft.org/vof](https://go.aft.org/vof)

**We the People: Expanding the Teaching of the US Founding Inquiry**  
[go.aft.org/h2y](https://go.aft.org/h2y)

**Teaching American History at 250: Hope, Honesty and the Work of Democracy**  
[go.aft.org/irv](https://go.aft.org/irv)

# Definitions in Mathematics

A 19th-Century Innovation That Supports Math Learning Today



By Jeremy F. Alm

Let's talk about definitions in mathematics. Unlike definitions you'd find in a dictionary, which are *descriptive*, definitions in mathematics are *prescriptive*: They declare that something is so, by fiat. When we mathematicians and mathematics educators make declarations like "A positive integer is called *semiprime* if it is the product of exactly two (not necessarily distinct) primes," we are endowing with meaning the term *semiprime*.

Such a definition is neither an empirical observation nor an edict from on high; it required building consensus throughout the mathematical community on its exact wording—a process that is often messy and fraught. Modern mathematical definitions are intended to be both useful and precise, not just decorations on classroom walls.\* Let's look at each of those features, *useful* and *precise*, in turn.

## Useful Definitions

When I say that definitions should be useful, I mean that they should serve as the foundation for reasoning in mathematics. Here

\*For a lighthearted introduction to the importance of useful and precise definitions in a professional development or preservice course, see this activity for defining what a sandwich is (and is not): [go.aft.org/32g](http://go.aft.org/32g).

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is an example. An integer  $n$  is called *even* if it can be written as 2 times an integer—i.e., if  $n = 2k$  for some integer  $k$ . Students often ask whether zero is even or odd. Apparently, at least in my experience as a mathematics professor, many students have been told that zero is neither even nor odd, which is incorrect. The definition of *even* will help us resolve this. Zero is even if  $0 = 2k$  for some integer  $k$ . Can you think of such an integer  $k$ ? My students usually can: use  $k = 0$ , so  $0 = 2 \times 0$  shows that zero satisfies the definition of *even*.

To illustrate how a definition can be "correct" but less useful, let's consider an alternate definition of *even*: An integer is even if it is divisible by 2. This isn't wrong, but it is perhaps less clear whether or not zero is divisible by 2. It is, of course, but we would need to rely on a definition of "is divisible by" that itself is useful.

The idea that definitions are the "starting point" for our reasoning is often misunderstood. Definitions are the foundation for our deductive reasoning, so they are critical throughout our reasoning process, not just in the beginning. This point is illustrated rather humorously in many places on social media, with parents mocking some aspect of the Common Core. For example, in one YouTube video (available at [go.aft.org/kwx](http://go.aft.org/kwx)), a parent is baffled that a child's response,

$$5 \times 3 = 5 + 5 + 5,$$

was marked incorrect. The correct answer is  $3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3$ . (The video doesn't show what the prompt was, but it may have

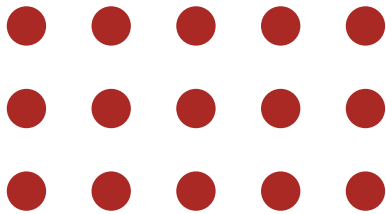
been something like, “By the definition of multiplication, what is  $5 \times 3$ ?”) The parent’s argument is that both sums are equal to 15: “Does it really matter? It’s the same answer. They’re all right.” Of course, both are equal to 15. But how do we define *multiplication*?

A very common (pun intended) way to define  $5 \times 3$  is “five groups of three,” which means  $3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3$ . And in fact, this makes the response  $5 + 5 + 5$  incorrect. If the point of the question is to test whether students know the definition, then  $5 + 5 + 5$  must be considered incorrect. The fact that  $3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3 = 5 + 5 + 5$ —and the fact that we can know this without calculating either sum—is one of the earliest interesting theorems in the elementary school math curriculum, namely that whole number multiplication is commutative.

To see that  $5 \times 3 = 3 \times 5$ , first we use the definition of multiplication to rewrite each product as a sum:

$$3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3 = 5 + 5 + 5.$$

Now represent the sum  $3 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 3$  using a grid of dots, five columns of three dots:



By rotating the grid by 90 degrees, we can see that this very same grid also represents  $5 + 5 + 5$ . This is a line of reasoning that elementary school students can follow.

Many of the comments on the YouTube video referenced commutativity of multiplication. Most blamed Common Core for all that ails us. None made any mention of the definition.

One thing that stood out from both the video and the comments was a focus on getting “the answer” in the quickest way possible. No attention was paid to justifying the reasoning involved in being able to explain the answer.

## Precise Definitions

To explain what I mean by the claim that definitions should be precise, let’s consider the concept of percentage. A Google search

of “define: percentage” returned exactly the sort of imprecision I am talking about:

- “a rate, number, or amount in each hundred”
- “any proportion or share in relation to a whole”
- “an amount, such as an allowance or commission, that is a proportion of a larger sum of money”

“A rate, number, or amount in each hundred”? That gets at the idea, but we can do better. Here’s how mathematicians define *percentage*: The number  $N$  percent means  $\frac{N}{100}$ .

How is this better? Let me illustrate with a question that I have asked of many people—and to which no nonmathematician has ever given a correct response: What percent of 17 percent is 31 percent?

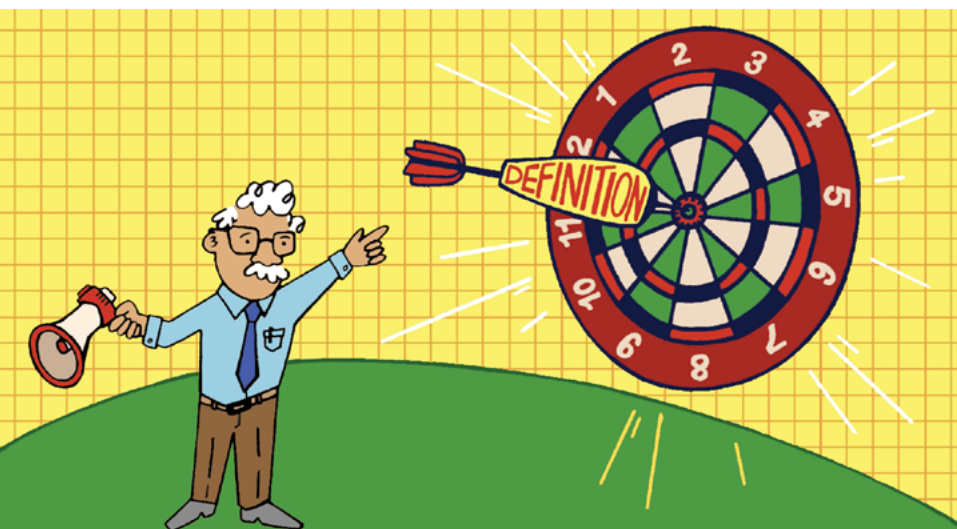
In my experience, nonmathematicians try to intuit their way to an answer, since they have been told that they need to “understand” percentages; if percentages are “amounts in each hundred,” then I guess there’s some work to be done to understand.

Instead, let’s translate using the definition, while acknowledging that “What” stands for an unknown, which we’ll call  $N$ ; “of” means “multiply”; and “is” means “is equal to”:

$$\frac{N}{100} \times \frac{17}{100} = \frac{31}{100}.$$

Now the perplexing question is demystified. (The solution is  $N = \frac{3100}{17}$ , by the way.) Also notice some other things, like “200 percent of 5” is simply  $2 \times 5$ , and 100 percent is nothing more or less than the number 1.

When considering how precise definitions would be used in the classroom, a skeptic might counter that such definitions, and precise language in general, tend to increase cognitive load for students. This is almost certainly true when the definitions are introduced. One must put in effort to learn the precise language of mathematics. But once the definitions have been learned, they reduce cognitive load for students, just as knowing the definition of percentage makes figuring out “What percent of 17 percent is 31 percent?” easy. The broad point here is that the mathematics curriculum needs to reflect the logical structure of mathematics, which is reasoning based on definitions. That is the only way to prepare students for more advanced mathematical concepts. And so whatever pedagogy one adopts, it should be consistent with mathematical practice.



**The mathematics curriculum must reflect the logical structure of mathematics: reasoning based on definitions.**

## Definitions as Innovations

If we go back prior to the 19th century, we find that mathematics operated differently from today. Definitions were often imprecise and intuitive. Like in the case of defining a fraction as “a part of a whole” (instead of a certain type of point on the number line, which is how mathematicians define it\*), imprecise definitions can sound good and make people nod along, but as soon as you try to reason using them, their inadequacy is exposed.

Mathematicians in the 19th century noticed the power of precise definitions, and this led to a revolution in the way that mathematics was done. This revolution was remarkably successful and actually made mathematics much more accessible. A good definition is a tool designed to be used; in the hands of researchers and students alike, it contributes to success. Working with a well-formulated definition empowers the user, as illustrated with the definition of “percent” and as has been borne out in professional mathematics since the revolution.

Because the K-12 mathematics curriculum consists of mathematics that was developed prior to the 19th-century revolution, it has generally not reflected the changes that made mathematics more reliable and user-friendly.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the Common Core has brought definitions and, more importantly, *reasoning based on definitions* into the curriculum. But there is still a long legacy of argument by analogy, circular reasoning, and other practices that lead students to believe that mathematics isn’t supposed to make sense; it’s just something you must accept. (I will address these harmful practices in future articles.)

### Implications for Teachers

In math education, there is tension in the supposed dichotomy between *procedural fluency* and *conceptual understanding*. But I am suggesting a different narrative: Definitions encapsulate essential features of examples of concepts.<sup>2</sup> Procedures are based on definitions, as are the explanations of why those procedures work.

In the classroom, definitions should follow examples that motivate them, and all reasoning should be based on definitions.

\*In an upper-level university mathematics course, one would use a more abstract definition. The number-line definition is equivalent and is appropriate for K–6.

So there should be no dichotomy. When people say that conceptual understanding should be emphasized before procedural fluency, I think they are recognizing that definitions should be motivated by discussions of the examples that inspire them, and that the procedures should follow the definitions.

Perhaps discussions of “concepts vs. procedures” could be resolved by attending to the role that useful, precise definitions play, and then we could put reasoning front and center in our classrooms instead of “answers.” ■

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/alm](http://aft.org/ae/summer2026/alm).

## Defining Odd

Given the definition of *even* above, one might be inclined to define an *odd integer* as one that cannot be written as 2 times an integer. This definition works, but could it be more useful and precise? Mathematicians define an odd integer to be one that can be written as one more than an even integer:  $n$  is odd if it can be written  $n = 2k + 1$  for some integer  $k$ . But with either definition, there’s some work to be done. If we start with “odd means not even,” then we have to show that “odd implies *can be written as*  $2k + 1$ .” If we start with “odd means *can be written as*  $2k + 1$ ,” then we need to show that every integer is either even or odd.

Let’s do the latter. Let an integer  $n$  be called *odd* if there is some integer  $k$  such that  $n = 2k + 1$ . We will show that if an integer is not even, then it is odd. This might seem obvious, but really it’s just familiar—so familiar it doesn’t occur to us to question it. But for students who haven’t known this “obvious” fact for years, it is not familiar and not obvious.

OK, let’s get to work. Assume  $n$  is an integer that is *not* even. Then any even integer is either larger or smaller than  $n$ . Let  $2k$  be the largest even integer smaller than  $n$ . (So, if  $n$  is 7,  $2k$  would be 6.) Since  $n > 2k$ , there is some integer  $x > 0$  such that  $n = 2k + x$ . Let’s consider what  $x$  might be.

Can  $x$  be 2? No, it can’t, because if  $x = 2$ , then  $n = 2k + 2 = 2(k + 1)$ , which would make  $n$  even, which by assumption it is not.

Can  $x$  be greater than 2? No, it can’t, because if  $x \geq 3$ , then  $n \geq 2k + 3 > 2k + 2$ , and  $2k + 2$  is an even integer less than  $n$  but *bigger* than  $2k$ . Since we picked  $2k$  to be the largest even integer less than  $n$ , this can’t be correct.

So, the only possibility left is that  $x = 1$ .

Therefore  $n = 2k + 1$ , and we have shown that if an integer isn’t even, then it’s odd. Hence every integer is either even or odd.

Note that we have relied on the definitions of *even* and *odd*, and we reasoned carefully at each step.

Would I recommend the above proof for a K–6 classroom? Of course not. But teachers who understand this reasoning can use their expertise to provide an age-appropriate explanation. What we don’t want is to tell students “Every integer is either even or odd” without any explanation based on the definitions.

–J. F. A.



# The **Fight for Union Rights** in the **University of Wisconsin** System



By Jon Shelton

**O**n September 18, 2025, 74 of my fellow union leaders from across the University of Wisconsin (UW) system and I converged in the state capital to rally for a voice in the UW system. Though higher education workers in every other state around Wisconsin have the right to collectively bargain, we do not. Our ongoing fight began in 2011 when the then-newly elected governor, Republican Scott Walker, rammed Act 10 into law despite protests that drew tens of thousands of working people. Act 10 forces preK–12 teachers, technical college faculty and staff, and almost all state employees to hold *annual* certification elections for the “privilege” of collective bargaining

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that is restricted *solely* to base wages and is capped at the rate of inflation. As a result, most public employees are unable to negotiate healthcare benefits, pensions, or working conditions.

For those of us serving the UW system, Act 10 goes further: We can’t even certify our elected union leadership to negotiate with management over anything.

But we’re still fighting for a say in how our campuses are managed and how our students are served—and we’ll continue until we win. Republicans in Wisconsin could not take away our First Amendment rights or our right to form unions (even if they are not recognized as such). Today, AFT-Wisconsin has members on all 13 campuses in the UW system with autonomous, locally elected leadership. Our ultimate goal is to win full collective bargaining rights so we can ensure university resources are allocated to supporting students and to providing fair wages, benefits, and working conditions for faculty and staff. For now, we regularly call on campus administrators to exchange ideas on salaries and working conditions, a process often referred to as “meet and confer.”



Our goal is to **win full collective bargaining rights** to ensure that university resources **support students** and provide **fair wages, benefits, and working conditions** for faculty and staff.

While meet and confer is a step short of collective bargaining, it ensures that faculty and staff have a seat at the table as administrators make decisions about the allocation of campus resources. Though meet and confer consists of a nonbinding series of meetings, it has nevertheless been viewed as nothing but a threat by most chancellors, who, from what I've observed, want to keep every ounce of managerial discretion for themselves.

### We Will Not Back Down

As if revoking our collective bargaining rights were not bad enough, extremist Republicans in Wisconsin also enacted a series of brutal budget cuts between 2011 and 2018 (the year that Walker lost his bid for a third term as governor). Democratic Governor Tony Evers, who took office in 2019, has tried to replace some of the roughly \$1 billion lost to Walker's war on "woke" professors, but the Republican-controlled legislature remains committed to Walker's agenda. Just a few years ago, for example, Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos withheld funding for UW employee raises and for capital projects, demanding that everyone whose work promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) be fired. At the same time, the legislature cut another \$32 million from the UW budget because that's what they guessed the UW system spent on DEI efforts. (Evers saved 188 DEI positions by veto but was unable to restore the funding.<sup>1</sup>)

Seeing these attacks on higher education and the rights of working people, I've spent the past decade becoming more and more active in my union. I joined the fight in 2013, when I became a professor of democracy and justice studies at UW-Green Bay. In 2014, I began serving the first of four terms as vice president for higher education of AFT-Wisconsin, and in 2022, I was elected president of UWGB-United, the faculty and staff union at UW-Green Bay. In 2025, I was elected president of AFT-Wisconsin. I sketch my personal journey simply to make one point: AFT-Wisconsin will not back down from this fight. No matter how long it takes, we will eventually win the voice we deserve on our campuses, and we will use it to create the learning and working conditions necessary to restore the UW system to its former place as one of the best public universities in the United States.

### Our Meet and Confer Battles

Over the past 15 years, thousands of UW faculty and staff have traversed paths similar to mine—becoming interested in the union, developing skills as dedicated activists, and taking on leadership positions. Sadly, our drive comes from repeatedly enduring the consequences of poor decision-making by UW chancellors.

For example, in 2018, the administration at UW-Stevens Point sought to eliminate several humanities majors in the face of over a decade of decreased funding. And in 2023, the chancellor at UW-Oshkosh sought to eliminate over 200 positions to deal with a budget shortfall. In each case, our locals fought back, mostly defeating Stevens Point's "Point Forward" proposal<sup>2</sup> and organizing a no-confidence vote in the Oshkosh chancellor—in no small part because he refused to meet with us—that ultimately ousted him.<sup>3</sup> Though we made some wins in these arenas, it was clear that we will continue to face these attacks until we build more power on our campuses.



The silver lining has been that since 2011, hundreds of new members have joined our UW locals. Building on that strength, we've been finely honing the tools we can use outside of collective bargaining to have our voices heard. In September 2023, we held a statewide higher education summit, convening leaders from almost all of our local UW unions. That November, a group of six locals formally asked their campus administrations to engage in a regular "meet and confer" relationship. Every one of those chancellors either ignored us or said no.

So we took action. At UW-Green Bay, the local held a week-long "demonstration election" on campus. Union activists held in-person voting in public spaces, asking colleagues to drop by and vote in support of meet and confer. The result, in a public vote count, was almost 200 "yes" votes to only one "no" vote. Other locals built on the meet and confer campaign. The Teaching Assistants' Association at UW-Madison played an essential role in mobilizing faculty and staff to push for paid parental leave. Even though the local does not formally have meet and confer, the pressure brought was so great that the administration finally agreed to it in April 2024, with the policy going into effect in July.<sup>4</sup> By the summer of 2024, another four locals had asked their administrations to formally engage in meet and confer.

Still, administrators and chancellors across all 13 campuses largely ignored us, so in August 2024, we ramped up our tactics. We decided to go above our chancellors to the UW system's Board of Regents. Almost all of the regents are appointed by the governor (the two exceptions are the state superintendent of education, who is elected and has an automatic seat on the board, and a representative of the Wisconsin Technical College System Board). Regents serve seven-year terms; by 2024, almost all of them had been appointed by Governor Evers. AFT-Wisconsin members had fought hard to help Evers win his 2018 and 2022 elections. He had campaigned on the importance of worker voice as well as ensuring that the UW system is fully funded and that students have the resources they need to succeed. Given our shared values, we believed the regents would be immediately favorable to meet and confer.

We held an action outside the Board of Regents meeting that August with UW union members from around the state,<sup>5</sup> garnering a great deal of media attention.<sup>6</sup> Our intent was to announce to the regents that we would be asking them to pass a policy mandating that our chancellors meet with us.

Much to our surprise, only one regent was supportive: State Superintendent Jill Underly has not only understood the importance of meet and confer but also helped our cause immensely by educating other regents. Still, her colleagues on the board remained silent. We weren't sure whether they didn't want to talk with us or they wanted to see the governor support it first. Naively,

we again expected a breakthrough in September after Evers announced his support of meet and confer.<sup>7</sup>

Ramping up yet more, in October we launched an email writing campaign, in which UW workers added their personal stories detailing why we need meet and confer to a template email sent to every single regent. We sent hundreds of these emails. As one member from United Faculty and Academic Staff (which is on the Madison campus) put it,

If you share any of my concerns about the collective political moment in which we find ourselves and blatant, persistent attacks on democracy, I hope you recognize the need and opportunity in this moment to chart a different course for our institutions—one where we trust and follow the lead of staff, faculty, and students; share power; problem-solve collectively; and prioritize impact over hierarchy and bureaucratic precedent. We have nothing to lose by working together and leveraging the voices of those who know their university from the inside out and are already volunteering time and labor to work towards change for the good of all of our campus community members.

A member from UW-Whitewater United wrote,

During my own time in graduate school, we mobilized to make sure that graduate workers would be able to hold on to the benefits that they earned. Since coming to Wisconsin, I've become even more aware of issues that can and have affected our ability to deliver on these things to our students and each other. I'm a firm believer that employees ... [must] have a seat at the table to ensure that conditions are being met effectively and to the benefit of all.

We also sent a public letter to the regents that was signed by a number of state legislators (including two gubernatorial candidates as of this writing, Representative Francesca Hong and Senator Kelda Roys) and other prominent supporters.<sup>8</sup>





We're **still fighting for a say** in how our **campuses are managed** and how **our students are served**—and **we'll continue until we win.**

### The Power of Solidarity

As it became clear that even with Evers's support this would not be an easy fight, we developed a statewide plan, drawing on our solidarity throughout AFT-Wisconsin and with the AFT national union. At our statewide virtual kickoff in October 2024, we were joined by AFT President Randi Weingarten, who helped inspire our members by putting our efforts in the context of national politics; she emphasized the importance of workers having a voice in Wisconsin no matter the outcome of the presidential election. And in December, we learned that we won one of only three AFT Real Solutions grants awarded for higher education. That \$60,000 grant allowed us to hire an additional field organizer.

By the spring of 2025, we were able to engage in several inter-related campaigns, which was necessary because although a few regents were willing to meet with us, many remained unresponsive. To make ourselves harder to ignore, we attempted to engage in direct action. Inspired by the tactics of Michael Moore in *Roger & Me*,<sup>9</sup> we sought a meeting with Board of Regents President Amy Bogost,<sup>10</sup> only to encounter a locked hallway preventing us from even coming near the board's office, which is at the top of one of the highest towers on a UW campus. The inaccessibility struck us as a metaphor for the ways administrators across the state had ignored the needs of their workers.

Undeterred, we held actions at individual regents' places of employment, showing up to ask for meetings.<sup>11</sup> We also ran a public-facing campaign to ask Evers to appoint our own candidates for the board when two vacancies came up that spring.<sup>12</sup> Though a technicality\* prevented the governor from making the appointments we wanted, he appointed one of our candidates to the Wisconsin Technical College System board,<sup>13</sup> and the two new regents he appointed in 2025 have been very responsive when we've asked for meetings.

In the summer of 2025, most of the regents—including Bogost—finally began to meet with us. Soon after the start of the school year, we hosted a strategic action to pressure the regents to put meet and confer along with union recognition on the agenda for their October meeting. To ensure we were heard and seen, we began with a rally outside the Board of Regents office just before its September meeting began, then took dozens of members inside for the beginning of the meeting and walked out silently once the meeting started.

Unfortunately, we're still waiting for the board to act. Throughout the fall, the regents were consumed by two very important (and deflating) challenges after Republican legislators used the budget process to micromanage faculty workloads and UW system administration restricted campuses' freedom to enact their own general education curricula.

Meet and confer has not yet made it onto the Board of Regents' agenda, but we have a few more meetings before this fall's all-important election, and we anticipate getting the regents to pass this policy in the coming months. None of us thought it would take this long to get here, and we are still going to have to put some pressure on the board to get this over the finish line. Once we get there, it's going to take even more work to establish productive meet and confer processes and relationships, but this is one more step to building the system of higher education we—and our students—deserve in Wisconsin. ■

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/shelton](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/shelton).

\*By state statute, there must be a regent in each of our eight congressional districts, and neither of our preferred candidates would have filled a vacant district.



# The Road to Reading for English Learners



By Linda Cavazos and Claude Goldenberg

**A** recent controversy in the reading world is whether findings from reading research, sometimes referred to contemporaneously as the “science of reading,” apply to students who are not proficient in the language they are learning to read. In the United States, these students are known as English Learners (ELs), emergent bilinguals, or multilingual learners. These terms all have slightly different

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meanings, but they are generally used interchangeably. We’ll use ELs for simplicity. However we refer to them, critics claim that not only does the “science of reading” not apply to ELs, but it is also detrimental to their literacy development.<sup>1</sup>

The controversy is unnecessary, even harmful, as it obscures important information and understandings that would help educators better serve their ELs. Research from the United States and around the world demonstrates that what we know about how children acquire literacy when they know the language they are learning to read is just as relevant for students who are learning the language as they are learning to read and write it.<sup>2</sup>

There is an important qualification, however. Although learning to read, according to neuroscientist Kenneth Pugh, is based on “cognitive universals”<sup>3</sup> that do not vary depending on whether one is bilingual or monolingual, there is a significant difference: If you’re learning to read in a language you don’t yet know, you need to learn the language as you are learning to read it. Gaining facility with written language (literacy) requires understanding and being able to produce the language.

Reading instruction for ELs must therefore include English language instruction that directly supports the acquisition of English literacy skills and, more generally, advances English language development to increasingly advanced levels of proficiency.\* This is necessarily more complex than learning to read in a language one already knows.

Learning to read in a language one already knows is very well described by the “Reading Rope” developed by literacy researcher Hollis Scarborough 25 years ago.<sup>5</sup> This insightful metaphor (which is available for free at [go.aft.org/3b9](http://go.aft.org/3b9)) is an elaboration of the “Simple View of Reading,”<sup>6</sup> which proposed that reading comprehension (more generally, reading success, skill, or ability) is the result of two distinct sets of skills: “decoding” and “oral language comprehension.”

The Reading Rope goes several steps further than the Simple View by distilling a large body of research into a comprehensible representation of what individuals must learn and be able to do to become successful readers. Like the Simple View, the Reading Rope conceptualizes two principal sets of skills: “word recognition” and “language comprehension.” Note that “word recognition” is a more inclusive concept than “decoding” and overlaps with language comprehension, since recognizing a word requires knowing something about it besides how it’s pronounced (which is all that decoding provides). If you know the word, or even that it is a word, you can recognize it once you’ve decoded it. If you don’t

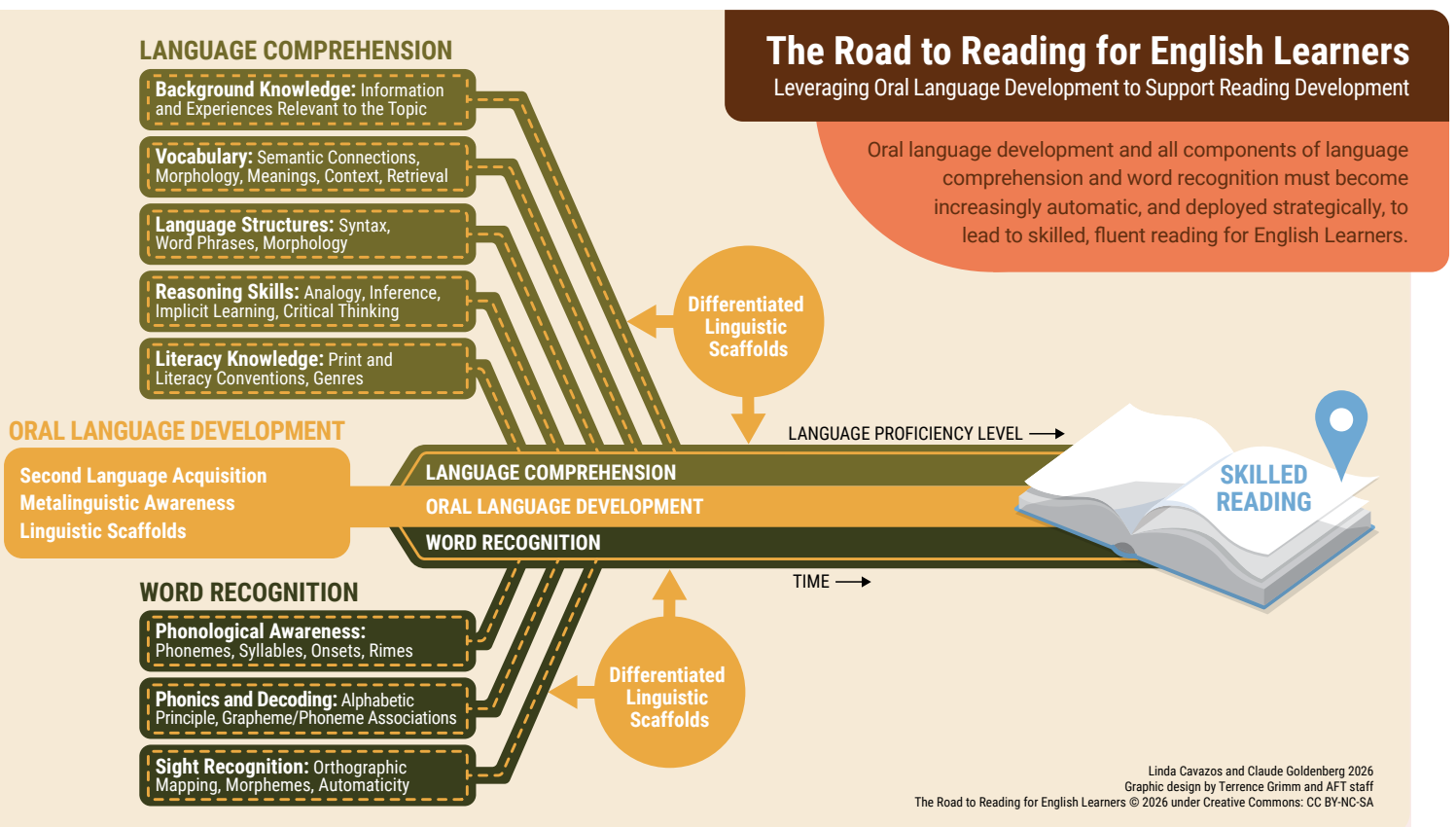
know anything about the word, decoding only provides you with the pronunciation according to orthographic rules or patterns.

The Reading Rope has become one of the defining images in contemporary discussions of reading education. We wanted to find a visual way to represent the process of ELs learning to read English that is as compelling and helpful as Scarborough’s Reading Rope is for students who already know the language in which they are learning to read.

Our earliest attempt to create such a visual was relatively straightforward: We layered yellow “threads” within the rope strands to represent English language supports, or scaffolds, for literacy instruction.<sup>7</sup> A simple example of this support is to teach ELs the meanings of the words that are used to teach phonemic awareness or phonics. In this way, lessons would simultaneously build English oral language skills (vocabulary) and English literacy skills (phonemic awareness or phonics). But we soon learned that the Reading Rope’s copyright owner (the publisher Guilford) would not agree to adaptations, so we had to develop a new approach.

We therefore decided to reconceptualize the metaphor as distinct lanes converging into a road, retaining some components of the Reading Rope while modifying and adding others, all of which educators should recognize. We named the graphic the “Road to Reading for English Learners” (see below). The goal was to create a model that represents what is universally true for learning to read, with an overlay that as clearly and completely as possible communicates the additional teaching and language supports needed for ELs’ English literacy development (or for anyone learning to read in a language they are simultaneously learning to speak and understand).

\*To be clear: We are not advocating English-only literacy instruction for ELs. Far from it. We are both advocates for bilingual education that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy.<sup>4</sup> The fact, however, is that a large majority of ELs are instructed primarily in English, and even those who receive bilingual instruction will learn to read and write in English as they learn to speak and understand it.



## Pressing Ahead in Challenging Times

On top of Immigration and Customs Enforcement striking fear into immigrant families across the nation, the Trump administration's funding cuts and retrenchment on civil rights protections (all of which are beyond the scope of this article) are challenging the education of over five million English Learners (ELs) in US schools, directly jeopardizing their literacy development. The current administration's proposed elimination of Title III funding—the sole federal grant for language acquisition—threatens vital supplemental services, such as specialized reading intervention and targeted teacher training. Furthermore, dissolving the US Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition would strip away essential federal oversight and technical resources. Since resources were already inadequate for the growing EL popu-

lation, these reductions create an impossible burden on districts, disproportionately hindering ELs' equitable access to education and their fundamental path to reading proficiency.

As researchers and former bilingual teachers, we are pressing ahead in helping educators deliver the supports that ELs need, especially in language and literacy development. But we want to acknowledge that these are challenging times in our nation's public schools. In the years to come, we hope and expect that together we'll win greater funding and protections for ELs. In addition, while this article offers guidance on literacy instruction for ELs, educators can find the AFT's guidance on supporting immigrants at [aft.org/immigration](http://aft.org/immigration).

—L. C. and C. G.



## The Road to Reading for English Learners

Our model preserves the core, complementary duality of the reading process—word recognition and language comprehension—while framing the entire concept within the context of language acquisition. Scarborough's original rope metaphor assumes that students are proficient in the language they are learning to read and builds on their existing language proficiency to teach them to read.

To address the language gap for ELs, our model structurally integrates two nonnegotiable sets of supports (highlighted in yellow in the graphic). One is oral language development, which represents a comprehensive English language development curriculum necessary for helping ELs become fully English-proficient orally and in literacy. The other comprises differentiated linguistic scaffolds to help build English literacy skills acquisition, for example, by providing English vocabulary instruction so that students learn and practice decoding with words they comprehend.

These structural innovations and conceptual additions are essential for ELs. Oral language development is a key primary component. Unlike the Simple View and models that followed, which assume oral language proficiency as a foundation, our model requires explicit, systematic instruction in oral language development as a prerequisite for *and* ongoing partner to literacy development. Differentiated linguistic scaffolds are not offered as external supports but are an essential, interconnected part of

instruction for every subskill across both the word recognition and language comprehension lanes.

Our model acknowledges that academic English proficiency develops over time and depends on a student's current level. Research consistently shows it typically takes four to seven years of quality instruction for ELs to reach the advanced academic language proficiency necessary for school success.<sup>8</sup> This extended timeline, much longer than the time required to acquire social English proficiency, reflects the high cognitive demand of mastering complex academic vocabulary and grammar. It's important for teachers to keep this multiyear gap between social and academic English in mind; if they don't, they may not appreciate the progress that students are making.

Understanding an EL's specific proficiency levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing is critical for effective literacy instruction because it forms the basis for academic achievement.<sup>9</sup> This assessment helps educators distinguish between reading difficulties rooted in language proficiency and those indicating a distinct reading challenge. This knowledge must guide targeted, differentiated linguistic and academic support to help ELs become proficient readers.

## Unpacking the Road to Reading for English Learners

Let's examine how to integrate oral language development and differentiated linguistic scaffolds into the language comprehension and word recognition lanes, which are at the heart of literacy acquisition and development. Throughout all language and literacy instruction, the needs of ELs should be emphasized using differentiated linguistic scaffolds that support their reading growth.

Empirical evidence for many of the features we describe here is inconsistent.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as a group, these features help communicate the types of support ELs are likely to need as they acquire the English language skills required for success in English literacy and in school academics more generally.

## Oral Language Development

Separating oral language development as a primary, distinct lane reflects the crucial reality that ELs are developing the language

of instruction alongside literacy skills. This development must be systematic, goal-oriented, and tied directly to the literacy skills and content being taught.

### Second Language Acquisition

Second language instruction for ELs must be based on principles of second language acquisition. All teachers of ELs should understand the stages ELs go through as they learn a second language. (Those who are not familiar with the stages can read about a commonly cited conception here: [go.aft.org/7ju](http://go.aft.org/7ju).) There are regularities in the developmental trajectory of second language acquisition that parallel first language acquisition,<sup>11</sup> although there are also differences between how first and second languages are acquired and develop.<sup>12</sup> ELs must receive language instruction aligned with or just above their current language skills to ensure understanding; if the language used is too advanced, they might not comprehend it without additional supports and context.

Therefore, two key instructional focuses for second language acquisition are setting explicit language goals for every lesson to guide students to the next level of proficiency, and recognizing that the home language serves as a foundation for learning English.<sup>13</sup> Teachers should support oracy development by providing rich language interaction and structured dialogue opportunities, such as using sentence frames (e.g., “I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ but also think \_\_\_\_\_.”) to encourage sophisticated academic language practice.<sup>14</sup>

### Metalinguistic Awareness

Equally important is the explicit teaching of metalinguistic awareness, which involves instructing ELs to think about and manipulate language forms consciously.<sup>15</sup> This encompasses:

- Cross-linguistic transfer: Teaching students to utilize connections between their home language and English, such as cognate awareness (e.g., *cartilage* and *cartilago*).<sup>16</sup>
- Contrastive analysis: Explicitly identifying, analyzing, and comparing linguistic features (sounds, grammar, and vocabulary) across the first and second languages to anticipate and address common areas of confusion or difficulty.

### Differentiated Linguistic Scaffolds

Differentiated linguistic scaffolds are pedagogical tools that make instruction comprehensible while maintaining the cognitive rigor of the task.<sup>17</sup> They are fundamentally integrated into the Road to Reading model, ensuring that the necessary rigor of foundational literacy skills is made accessible.\* Scaffolds are categorized into four types:

- Language: These scaffolds directly modify input and output. Examples include simplifying grammar and syntax, slowing speech, allowing more time for language processing, and using consistent language. Language scaffolds ensure that the instruction is comprehensible.
- Teacher: These scaffolds involve the teacher’s use of instructional strategies, such as consistently maintaining high

expectations in a safe, supportive environment; structuring flexible grouping (partners, triads, mixed-proficiency groups); controlling task difficulty; and leveraging ELs’ life experiences and cultural knowledge as instructional anchors.

- Classroom: These scaffolds refer to the physical and environmental features of the classroom. Effective classrooms are print-rich, featuring labeled objects (words and photos), bilingual word walls, multi-language libraries, and bilingual dictionaries with images and illustrations.
- Visual and concrete: These nonlinguistic scaffolds link language to meaning. They include pictures, graphic organizers (such as diagrams, charts, and graphs), real-life objects (*realia*), and manipulatives. The use of Total Physical Response is an important concrete scaffold (for details, see [go.aft.org/sml](http://go.aft.org/sml)).

What we know about how children acquire literacy when they know the language is just as relevant for students who are learning the language as they are learning to read and write it.

### Word Recognition

Instruction in the word recognition lane must be systematic and explicit yet, to the extent possible, build on transferable orthographic features of the EL’s primary language. ELs need to understand the meanings of the words they are decoding and the function of the letters in words to recognize the utility of what they know and can transfer from their first language.

### Phonological Awareness

Instruction in phonological/phonemic awareness must be provided explicitly in the language(s) of instruction, although phonemic awareness acquired in one language transfers to phonemic awareness in another.<sup>18</sup> When taught in a second language, the gradual release approach can be used, but the level of focus must be differentiated:

- For students learning English, instruction should focus on awareness at the phoneme level of words (e.g., phoneme blending, segmentation, and manipulation) because English has a deep, phoneme-based orthography.
- If learning in Spanish,<sup>†</sup> once students have learned the five vowels—each of which has one and only one associated phoneme—instruction proceeds by introducing one consonant at a time to build syllables, which are then joined to form words. The transparency of Spanish orthography makes an explicit

\*For an article with many examples of linguistic scaffolds, see “Supporting English Learners in General Education Classrooms” in the Winter 2025–26 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/winter2025-2026/august](http://aft.org/ae/winter2025-2026/august).

<sup>†</sup>Although we recognize and value the hundreds of languages students speak, we include tips for Spanish because it is the most widely spoken home language of ELs in the United States.

focus on phoneme awareness less necessary, though some students will still need it.<sup>19</sup>

Teachers must use definitions, visuals, demonstrations, and other strategies to ensure ELs understand the words used to teach all word recognition skills.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the language used to talk about reading and reading instruction, such as *blending*, *segmenting*, and *rime*, cannot be assumed but must be explicitly taught.<sup>21</sup> ELs might not naturally understand words such as *blend* or *segment* when used to describe letter-sound relationships. Assuming they know these concepts when in fact they do not can lead to confusion and slow reading progress.

Phonemic awareness instruction for ELs learning to read in English should be explicit, systematic, and multimodal, while strategically leveraging their home language.<sup>22</sup> Use manipula-

For effective decoding, instruction should include hands-on activities such as magnetic letters, word-building, and finger-tapping to reinforce the connections between the sound, the visual letter, and the act of writing. Words used for decoding practice, especially in decodable texts, should be familiar to students. Explicitly teach the meaning of any unknown words, including cognates (words that look alike, mean the same thing, and come from the same origin), before asking the student to sound them out. This practice ensures that ELs are not just sounding out words but are connecting the spelling and pronunciation of decoded words to achieve orthographic mapping, then associating the mapping to word meanings to put the written word into long-term memory. A word becomes immediately recognizable without needing to be decoded letter by letter after one, several, or many exposures to the written word, depending on a reader's skill.<sup>25</sup>

### Sight Recognition

For ELs, as for all students, sight recognition—the quick and automatic identification of words, sometimes called instant or “heart” words (i.e., words learned by heart)<sup>26</sup>—is closely linked to understanding the alphabetic principle, orthographic patterns, and word pronunciations and meaning. A growing bank of these words is essential for successful, fluent reading.

Teachers should promote sight recognition by having ELs initially decode words using their knowledge of grapheme-phoneme relationships, then verify accuracy with context and pictures to ensure ELs understand the words' functions



tives like tokens or Elkonin boxes (which you can learn more about at [go.aft.org/vdy](http://go.aft.org/vdy)) to represent phonemes, allowing students to segment and blend sounds. Teachers should be aware of possible pronunciation differences and accept approximations, a close but not exact word, as students learn to hear and produce new phonemes.

### Phonics and Decoding

Phonics and decoding instruction for ELs, as for any student, must be explicit, systematic, and tied to meaning. This systematic approach involves directly teaching letter-sound connections (grapheme-phoneme correspondences) in a carefully sequenced order, starting with the simplest patterns.<sup>23</sup> In English, decoding instruction is complex and demanding, requiring clear teaching of syllable types (closed, open, VCe, R-controlled vowels, vowel teams, and C-le) to support both decoding and encoding. The focus is on mastering the alphabetic principle and achieving orthographic mapping.<sup>24</sup> In Spanish, because orthography is more transparent, syllables are usually learned quickly after the vowels are taught and individual consonants are introduced one by one, shifting the main decoding focus to multisyllabic words. Spanish phonics often emphasizes teaching letters to form syllables first, then combining syllables to make words and read connected text.

Phonics and decoding instruction for ELs, as for any student, must be explicit, systematic, and tied to meaning.

and can anchor them to sight-word recognition.<sup>27</sup> This method strengthens the essential link among a word's pronunciation, spelling, and meaning. Teachers should teach both high-frequency words (phonetic and irregular) and high-utility words (complex academic vocabulary). Most words, with few exceptions (e.g., *of*, *who*), have some phonetic features that conform to orthographic patterns, so decoding is relevant for irregular words as well. Teachers need to point out the features of these words that do not follow orthographic patterns yet still connect spelling to pronunciation by using orthographic mapping then associating that mapping with the words' meanings.

### Language Comprehension

The language comprehension lane demands more strategic skills. This instruction is more open-ended and focuses on discourse,

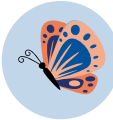


requiring the ongoing and extensive use of linguistic scaffolds throughout its components.

### Background Knowledge

The acquisition and activation of background knowledge are essential for bridging the comprehension gap often faced by ELs due to limited exposure to academic content in English and the absence of their experiences in most textbooks. Instruction must begin by activating the students' existing knowledge—often using visuals, *realia*, or home language support—and making connections to ELs' lived experiences to validate their cultural assets and build a bridge to new academic concepts. Engaging ELs in discussions about the topic and asking scaffolding questions will help identify and connect existing knowledge to new concepts.<sup>28</sup> Teachers can enhance ELs' background knowledge by providing introductory information through various modalities (e.g., orally, text, pictures, anchor videos, and graphic organizers) to actively develop their conceptual understanding. Using graphic organizers is a vital visual scaffold for organizing complex facts.<sup>29</sup>

### Vocabulary

Vocabulary instruction is a crucial point where language learning and literacy intersect. Effective strategies include giving a clear, student-friendly definition,<sup>30</sup> the part of speech, and a visual for each new word.<sup>31</sup> When possible, teachers can support understanding by using a cognate or a simple definition in the home language. (See the figure below for a vocabulary word card for ELs with the recommended components.) Teachers can also model using the word in sentences and, to reinforce retention, provide ELs with plenty of practice using it orally and in writing, including incorporating it into new sentences and conversations.<sup>32</sup>

<b>organism</b> ( <i>organismo</i> )	
<i>noun</i> a living thing	
A bee is a small <b>organism</b> .	

In addition to explicit teaching of individual words, morphological awareness should be a key component of vocabulary instruction for ELs. Explicitly teaching common affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and roots helps ELs decode and infer the meanings of a vast number of unfamiliar words, allowing them to rapidly expand their vocabularies, especially in academic contexts.<sup>33</sup> For example, teaching the prefix *un-* helps a student quickly unlock the meanings of words like *unhappy*, *unfamiliar*, and *unacceptable*, which builds their sense of control over the language

and encourages independent learning. Instruction should be systematic, focusing on high-utility morphemes that appear across multiple academic subjects (e.g., prefixes such as *un-* and *re-* and suffixes such as *-tion* and *-able*) before students are asked to apply them independently.<sup>34</sup> When students already know a morpheme in their home language, they can use it to figure out the meaning of a new English word.

The acquisition and activation of background knowledge are essential for bridging the comprehension gap often faced by ELs.

### Language Structures

Language structures focus on the explicit teaching of syntax and semantics—the rules that govern sentence structure and language meaning. Strategies for ELs must help make these abstract concepts concrete by, for example:

- Helping ELs form sentences using newly learned vocabulary and allowing them to manipulate familiar words using sentence frames (e.g., “The author suggests that \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”).
- Explicitly teaching semantic awareness tools, such as homophones (e.g., *plain*, *plane*) and synonyms (e.g., *important*, *essential*, *critical*).
- Focusing on increasingly complex yet useful language structures. Simple sentence manipulation, such as identifying the subject and verb in an action using visuals (e.g., “Who is talking on the phone? José is talking on the phone.”), is a fundamental step for developing language skills.

Teachers should focus on helping ELs identify and use cohesive devices (e.g., transition words like *however*, *consequently*, and *in addition*, or referents like pronouns) that link ideas across sentences and paragraphs to create fluent, meaningful text. This instruction helps ELs move beyond simple sentence construction to grasp how complex thoughts are organized in academic discourse, which is essential for both understanding sophisticated texts and producing coherent writing.

### Verbal Reasoning

Verbal reasoning involves inference, metaphor, analogy, and critical thinking. For ELs, instruction must be tied to robust oral language development to support the necessary reasoning process, often using conditional or comparative language (e.g., *if/then*, *on the other hand*).<sup>35</sup> Ideally, teachers will:

- Explicitly teach inferencing terms frequently found in questions (e.g., *most likely*, *mainly show*, *probably*, *figure out*).
- Use scaffolding questions to help students make inferences, such as “What might have happened? It might \_\_\_\_\_.”

using simple, concrete examples (e.g., “I think it probably rained” when looking at a wet sidewalk).

- Explicitly teach literary devices and figures of speech, including metaphors, similes, and idioms, as these are often culturally bound and nonliteral.

### Literacy Knowledge

Literacy knowledge includes print concepts, genres, and conventions. Strategies should be consistently modeled and made concrete. Use read-alouds and shared reading daily to explicitly teach print direction (left to right, top to bottom), the relationship between written and spoken language, and the use of punctuation. Culturally relevant texts increase ELs’ motivation to read because they can relate to or have similar experiences when multicultural characters are portrayed positively. It’s also helpful to incorporate books of different genres into the classroom library to enhance understanding of text structure. Using practical literacy tools, such as word-family games (e.g., BINGO, where clues are provided through definitions to connect oral vocabulary with written words), can also be effective.

Teachers should explicitly teach print concepts that may differ across languages, such as the directionality of writing or the function of various punctuation marks. Instruction should include focused comparison of text structures across genres (e.g., narrative vs. informational) to help ELs organize their thinking and anticipate content when reading different types of texts. Making these abstract concepts concrete through modeling and visual examples is essential.

to a fundamental shift in instructional design. The clear depiction of a separate oral language development lane and the pervasive, nonnegotiable role of differentiated linguistic scaffolds have resonated with practitioners seeking a research-based and linguistically aware road map for their students.

This positive reception underscores a crucial need for a conceptual imperative that aligns the universal cognitive principles of reading with the practical, developmental realities of students learning a new oral language simultaneously with its written form. By explicitly factoring in language proficiency levels and the time required for language development, the model attempts to provide educators with guidance to set realistic expectations and deliver effective, goal-oriented, differentiated instruction to advance ELs toward skilled, fluent reading and English proficiency.

The Road to Reading for English Learners is not an auxiliary tool but a conceptual imperative for aligning the established



The Road to Reading for English Learners represents what is universally true for learning to read, with an overlay that communicates the additional supports needed for ELs’ English literacy development.

Our attempts to introduce the core tenets of the Road to Reading for English Learners to nationwide audiences have received very positive feedback, confirming the educational community’s readiness for a framework that structurally integrates language acquisition with established reading science. Educators and administrators across the country have widely acknowledged the model’s value in moving the discussion of EL literacy beyond mere adaptation

pedagogical requirements of ELs learning to read in a language they are simultaneously learning to speak and understand. By depicting a separate oral language development lane and distinct differentiated linguistic scaffolds to support reading acquisition, the model elevates the discussion of EL literacy from mere adaptation to fundamental instructional design.

The model focuses on the essential task of providing the linguistic bridge that enables ELs to access knowledge of universally recognized cognitive skills. By explicitly addressing students’ language proficiency levels and the time required for language development, the Road to Reading for English Learners provides educators with a clear, comprehensive road map. It applies equally to teaching reading in any alphabetic language, providing an instructional framework that respects the orthography of the written language while ensuring all lanes are systematically taught and pulled together to promote skilled, fluent reading. The Road to Reading for English Learners offers a scientifically sound and linguistically aware adaptation of core reading tenets, smoothing the path to literacy for ELs. ■

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/cavazos\\_goldenberg](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/cavazos_goldenberg).

# Levelling Up Reading Instruction

How to Teach Reading with Challenging Texts



By Timothy Shanahan

**O**ur kids do not read well. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, approximately 30 percent of students read well below their grade levels—it varies a bit by age—and another 30 percent only demonstrate “partial mastery of the knowledge and skill that are fundamental for proficient work at a grade level.”<sup>1</sup>

I do not want to mislead. Almost all our kids are learning to read. They are not, however, learning to read well enough to safeguard their access to opportunity in 21st-century America. How well they read will have a major influence on their eventual educational attainment,<sup>2</sup> family income levels,<sup>3</sup> employment,<sup>4</sup> health status,<sup>5</sup> degree of social participation and civic involvement,<sup>6</sup> and

ability to avoid or prevent a plethora of social ills.<sup>7</sup> Reading scores tick up or down from time to time (the COVID disaster has had a depressing impact). However, the most accurate broad characterization would be that achievement has languished for more than a half century. Generation Alpha reads neither appreciably better nor worse than the Baby Boomers.

After decades of reform initiatives, how can this be?

American children are being prevented from doing better in reading by a longstanding commitment to a pedagogical theory that insists students learn best when they are taught with—and limited to—books they can already read well. The “instructional level” or “instructional reading level” is a theoretical construct meant to describe the appropriate student-text match that teachers should aim for so that learning will be maximized. The claim is that if students are taught with books at their supposed “instructional level,” then they will make the greatest learning progress.<sup>8</sup> Teachers have been led to believe that this approach is research-based and that challenging students with harder books will be damaging: stultifying learning, imposing disfluency, and requiring word guessing rather than reading.<sup>9</sup> These cautions have become so commonplace that, in my experience, most teachers are shocked to discover their flimsy evidentiary base.

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What if teaching with such books does not improve learning? What if it offers no advantages while encumbering teachers with lots of testing duties and students with pejorative labels—segregating them and limiting their exposure to grade-level language or content? Even worse, what if the so-called instructional level holds kids back, suppressing learning and leading to other unfortunate consequences?

## From Leveled Readers to Challenging Texts

Instructional-level theory holds that if students are to be successful learners, they must work with texts that they can already read with few errors (90 to 95 percent accuracy) and with at least 75 percent comprehension.\* In addition, certain student-text matches are supposed to be advantageous for learning, students are thought to learn best when grouped with others at the same reading level, and limiting difficulty is claimed to be motivating.<sup>10</sup>

This approach constrains the amount of teaching by severely limiting the gap between what students can already do and what instructional-level texts necessitate. Differentiated instruction is achieved by assigning students to books of different levels, which is why so many students now are taught with below-grade texts.<sup>11</sup> The use of such books ensures that students will not be asked to deal with language complexity much beyond what they can already negotiate proficiently and limits the depth and complexity of content to which they will be exposed. Teaching with instructional-level books, according to proponents of this theory, is supposed to focus on guided reading practice, supplemented with a spoonful of vocabulary teaching, some practice answering questions thought to elicit certain cognitive responses, and instruction in cognitive strategies<sup>12</sup> (that are virtually useless with texts that do not challenge students). Student progress is gauged by the students' steady march through the levels. Students are expected, for example, to work with level G texts until they can perform at the instructional level with level H books. That is what the theory recommends, but implementation is not so pristine, and research and practice have exposed a plethora of problems.

The instructional level was originally espoused to ensure that everyone learned, despite their individual differences. It does seem to do this; that is, most kids learn something when taught at their instructional level, but greater progress is possible with more challenging texts. For instance, a recent analysis of 27,814 American schools whose students enter below grade level reported that of these, only 1,345 schools managed to accomplish better than average learning gains. One of the distinguishing features of these champions? They teach English and math at grade level, rather than trying to reduce the curriculum to the students' already low performance levels.<sup>13</sup>

It is time to bring reading instruction—text placement, curriculum design, differentiation, and classroom organization—more in line with empirical research findings concerning what works and the social demands of a pluralistic society. That means teaching most children with grade-level texts rather than trying to match books to their current reading levels—even when that would mean teaching many at their supposed frustration levels.

\*To learn more about the history and research foundation of the instructional-level approach, see "Limiting Children to Books They Can Already Read" in the Summer 2020 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/summer2020/shanahan](http://aft.org/ae/summer2020/shanahan).

**S**tudents need to learn to read and comprehend difficult texts they cannot easily grasp on a first attempt.

## Teaching Reading with Challenging Texts

Students need to learn to read and comprehend texts—even complicated and difficult texts that they cannot easily grasp on a first attempt. To accomplish that, reading instruction must engage students in dealing with such text demands without telling them what the text says or reading it to them.

There is more to supporting reading comprehension than making sure students can recognize the words. Text, whether easy or challenging for a given student, includes both linguistic and conceptual information. The linguistic features of text require decoding and interpretive efforts, such as making sense of word meanings, sentence structure, cohesive relations, and discourse structure. The conceptual features are the ideas themselves. Some ideas are more familiar to students, and others pose a challenge because of students' lack of relevant prior knowledge. Some ideas are more complex than others, and shallowness or depth of information—sparseness or extensiveness—play significant roles in promoting or preventing comprehension.

Also crucial for comprehension is that the information the author has coded into text includes affordances. Examples of affordances are things like precise diction, plain syntax, unambiguous cohesive links, explicit revelations of structure, repetition, symbolism in a literary novel, the relations between words and graphics in a science text, author efforts to explain concepts in ways likely to be understood by novices, and so on. Providing students with instructional-level texts limits their exposure to text affordances that they cannot already utilize or figure out largely on their own.<sup>14</sup> The use of complex text for teaching reading brings those text affordances and all potential barriers to understanding them—such as word recognition or unfamiliar expository discourse features—to the forefront.

Texts that students cannot easily comprehend on their own present obvious opportunities for learning since any barrier to understanding can be a beneficial target of instruction. Unlike with instructional-level teaching, the idea is to make sure that students confront authentic barriers to comprehension, rather than avoiding them. Directed or guided reading is then aimed at helping students identify and surmount these barriers, ensuring comprehension through the students' own actions.<sup>15</sup> This instruction has two goals: to enable students to conquer a formidable text and to develop a set of insights, skills, strategies, and abilities that will allow them to read other such texts successfully on their own in the future.

## The Basics of Teaching with Challenging Texts

There is not yet an extended body of research or teacher lore pertinent to the daily decisions that teaching with challenging



texts requires. Existing research is sufficient for determining that exposure to more challenging texts is beneficial,<sup>16</sup> but not for providing detailed guidance for the best ways to implement them. Accordingly, here I share a brief list of repurposed, well-studied approaches to facilitate student learning from grade-level text. I include some practical considerations for directed or guided reading lessons based on my five decades of experience, logic, and what I hope is intelligent guesswork. In the next section, I offer more detailed recommendations for comprehension supports for struggling readers.

**1. Read the texts ahead of time.** Unless the teacher has already read the text the students are being asked to take on, it is nearly impossible to anticipate the problems students might have or what advice or direction should be provided to support learning. Unlike with instructional-level texts, comprehension can go far afield when students are struggling with a text. The teacher must be able to head off these problems before they capsize an entire lesson.

Start with identifying potential barriers to understanding the text features (or affordances) described above.<sup>17</sup> It may help to take on one feature at a time. Your ability to spot these barriers will improve with experience. Then, when teaching these lessons, pay attention to how they turn out. There will be surprises both ways, features that cause unanticipated confusion, and those you thought would be barriers that turn out not to be. The simplest way to know for sure if the complexity of a particular feature is a barrier is to query students. Be ready to show them how to break down sentences and connect the ideas.

**2. Differentiate teaching, not curriculum.** The instructional-level theory starts from the premise that some students should learn different things and that we must accept that many students won't reach the same grade-level outcomes as their peers. This is, in essence, differentiation of the content. Differentiation of teaching is something else altogether. All students learn the same thing but not necessarily in the same way; teaching is altered to ensure success.<sup>18</sup> A teacher, for instance, might seat some students nearer where she can reach them because of concerns about attention. Another example is the whole class lesson that gets through to some kids and not others; the teacher might pull some students aside for another run through—simplifying explanations or adding new examples—to make sure they all reach the intended outcome.

**3. Comprehension is essential—and enabled with support.**<sup>19</sup> Students benefit from taking on texts that they cannot initially read well but that they transform into ones they can comprehend *through their own efforts*. Research shows that the greater the disparity between reader and text, the more assistance and support will be necessary.<sup>20</sup> The scaffolds teachers provide must be instructive; their purpose is to help students comprehend the text at hand, but also to provide them with generalizable insights and actions that can be applied to other texts in the future.

Theoretically, no matter how hard a text, it can be successfully scaffolded so that there is no chasm between student and text that cannot be overcome. Practically, however, scaffolding someone to read a difficult text takes time in real classrooms with real kids. There can be gulfs too wide to bridge successfully with available resources. If fluency practice with the text is provided prior to the lesson, you might be able to guide students with even more challenging texts. The bigger the gaps, the more likely that fluency and word reading supports will be needed.

**4. Directed reading should include rereading.** When a text is easy, readers can plumb its depths with a single read. However, when a text is difficult, it may be necessary to read it and reread it, or to reread key portions. Directed reading lessons need to include both returns to the text to address key affordances that students need to be conscious of as well as barriers that tripped them up and disrupted comprehension. It can also make sense—after the discussion—to go back and reread the whole text again. This should allow students to gain a fuller understanding and more coherent memory of the text content<sup>21</sup>—increasing learning while providing a more successful and coherent grade-level reading experience. Rereading can also lead to real satisfaction when students see how well they can now understand a challenging text.

**5. Monitoring success is critical.** Teachers should be sensitive not only to students' responses to the difficulty of text but also to incomprehension and miscomprehension. Questions should be used to reveal failures to comprehend, and each comprehension failure should elicit instruction, taking students back into the text to see if the problem can be solved and providing explanations for how to use context, make a connection, or generate a reasonable inference.<sup>22</sup>

One way to monitor success is to evaluate student performance with rereading. Is their ability to handle those familiar texts improving? It can also be useful to evaluate performance with comparable grade-level texts that they have not yet tried. How are their fluency and comprehension with those? Sometimes later in the year, I like to take students back to an earlier text that presented a great challenge. Having them take another swing at such texts can make their progress especially apparent, while revisiting some barriers that may continue to interfere with their comprehension.

**6. Not all texts need to be at the same level.** Students should learn to read grade-level text. That means that many students will need to read texts that are challenging for them. It should not mean that they read *only* such texts. Learning and development are best supported by a mix of easy and more challenging

tasks.<sup>23</sup> Students need opportunities to consolidate their learning gains; switching among demanding texts that require a great deal of teacher scaffolding and simpler ones—including markedly easier ones—allows for such consolidation.<sup>24</sup> This variation in text difficulty also likely plays an important role in motivation, keeping kids' heads in the game.

**7. Beginners do not need harder texts.** When it comes to teaching students with challenging texts, there is no research with children earlier than second grade. That means there is no clear evidence that this is a good idea with beginning readers. Furthermore, there are strong theoretical reasons to suspect that young students may not be well served by especially hard texts.<sup>25</sup> The reason for this has to do with the role of decoding in reading. What makes texts difficult for beginners are not the linguistic or conceptual demands but the words and students' ability to translate those from print to pronunciation.<sup>26</sup> Once students have mastered these basics, then more challenging texts can be beneficial.<sup>27</sup> (Of course, kindergartners and first-graders can still be challenged to enhance their comprehension abilities, but that should happen through shared reading—teachers reading books to children—and discussions, not through the texts these young students are trying to read.)

### Supporting Struggling Readers

What of those students who can decode reasonably well but who still struggle to read the words in their textbooks? Teachers need to provide helpful support to ensure maximum progress. Study after study has demonstrated that teaching can facilitate students' interactions with challenging texts. Specifically, the scaffolding a teacher provides can transform potential failure into pedagogical success. Teachers can convert frustration-level text into text that is appropriately challenging by providing explicit word reading support, including teaching sight vocabulary (words students learn to recognize without sounding out) and meaning vocabulary (words with different meanings in different contexts);<sup>28</sup> teaching strategies that improve reading fluency with the text (such as rereading);<sup>29</sup> and providing various comprehension scaffolds.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike with the instructional-level approach, the assumption is not that students will make largely automatic gains from reading texts at a certain level, but that *with instruction*, grade-level texts will be productive.

### Word Reading Supports

All students should spend time studying words and parts of words. The kind of explicit word instruction that makes the best sense during the upper elementary grades is an amalgam of morphology, spelling, and phonics.<sup>31</sup> However, as valuable as such teaching can be, it is not likely to be sufficient to enable struggling students to read grade-level texts used in their daily lessons.

Teaching words from frustration-level texts is a crucial support for many students.<sup>32</sup> Most reading programs encourage preteaching words with their main focus on explaining word meanings rather than supporting the students' ability to read those new words. Research supports both teaching a wide array of grade-level vocabulary to improve reading comprehension generally<sup>33</sup> and selecting words from a specific text to teach prior to reading to enhance comprehension of that text.<sup>34</sup> At least one study

## Teachers can prepare students to read a text by explaining what the structure of the text is, how to recognize it, and why it matters.

showed this approach enabled students to comprehend texts that were significantly above grade level.<sup>35</sup>

Preteaching challenging words may improve the readability of the text, but teaching students how to use context to resolve word meanings is also essential. Context instruction can have a positive impact on reading comprehension and can be well taught through guided practice with text.<sup>36</sup> Words that the author defines explicitly or that can be figured out from context should not be pretaught. Scaffolding challenging words may take the form of a demonstration that includes pointing out key information to help students grasp word meanings and encouraging rereading.

### Oral Reading Fluency Training

Fluent readers are able to read text accurately, with automaticity (without conscious attention to word reading), and with prosody (reading that sounds like language with proper pausing and intonation). Guided oral reading practice with repetition and feedback can have a positive impact on reading fluency,<sup>37</sup> and gains are greatest when reading practice is with texts that students cannot already read fluently.<sup>38</sup> This improvement in fluency affects reading comprehension too.

There are several ways that fluency training can be implemented. The key is to provide this support with the grade-level texts from which the students are to be instructed. In two studies in which frustration-level texts paid off in more learning, students engaged in paired repeated reading, with the lower readers spending about 15 minutes per day reading text portions to their better-reading classmates, who provided feedback and support.<sup>39</sup> Many other studies provided both silent and oral repeated reading opportunities without feedback, and still others used choral reading or reading while listening to improve performance with the texts.<sup>40</sup> Personally, I tend to favor repeated reading but with close teacher supervision. The teacher monitors both the reading and the partnering by moving from pair to pair for observation and guidance.

### Reading Comprehension

Because of the complexity of reading comprehension, the scaffolding provided during directed reading lessons must be responsive and varied. Consider just a few of the potential barriers that readers must negotiate to comprehend a text: sentence structure, text structure, and prior knowledge.

Texts with more complicated sentence structures are measurably harder to understand. However, even relatively simple



sentence structures may be a problem for elementary school students, which argues for greater attention to sentence comprehension.<sup>41</sup> Approaches that make sense for teaching students to translate frustrating sentences into comprehensible ones include sentence combining instruction,<sup>42</sup> paraphrasing,<sup>43</sup> and sentence breaking (or parsing sentences into smaller chunks).<sup>44</sup> Sentence structure support should be provided during and after reading, rather than before, so that students face the challenge and accomplish what they can before receiving assistance.

The recognition of top-level organizational text structure plays an important role in comprehension and memory. Poor readers have difficulty identifying story structure; teaching students how text structure works and how to use story maps have been effective in improving comprehension.<sup>45</sup> Teachers can prepare students for reading a text by explaining what the structure of the text is, how it can be recognized, and why it matters—and demonstrating how to read such a text. Another possibility is to provide students with a story map or graphic organizer that guides the identification of key structural information. Scaffolding should include elaborated student feedback, providing not just the right answer, but showing students how to recognize and use the information to overcome barriers to comprehension.

Prior knowledge is used before and during reading, and scaffolds that encourage its use throughout the reading of challenging texts are a good idea. Dividing a text into shorter sections and then interleaving reading and discussion can accommodate accessing knowledge. After students read a portion, the teacher may ask relevant inferential questions that require students to fill in gaps or make connections. *Knowledge building*, which may be necessary when students lack relevant prior knowledge, can be scaffolded by having students read multiple texts on the same topic.<sup>46</sup> Such text sets may have a variety of readability levels; this allows students to scaffold their own comprehension by reading easier texts to increase knowledge, which renders the harder texts more readable.

## A Note on Motivation

The instructional-level concept claims that there are particular levels of difficulty that will interfere with learning and lower the motivation or persistence of all students. However, research shows that individuals differ greatly in their ability to tolerate frustration.<sup>47</sup> While most students are likely to do well while being taught with grade-level texts, there are others who may react negatively. But negative impacts can be attenuated. If students find a text interesting, novel, or authentic, or if they have some choice in the matter, then difficulty does not matter or matters less.<sup>48</sup> Foster-

ing adaptive, proactive behaviors, such as goal setting, also leads to fewer negative outcomes and greater resiliency. Relaxation exercises may help, too.<sup>49</sup> And, much as it is possible to scaffold students' learning of words, fluency, and comprehension, it is possible to scaffold more appropriate emotional responses to frustration.<sup>50</sup> The following suggestions are not exhaustive but should go a long way toward providing students with a positive and nurturing learning environment.

- 1. Apprise students of the situation.** If students think difficulty is due to task demands, they respond differently than if they attribute it to their own incompetency.<sup>51</sup> Let students know that you are intentionally placing them in texts they will not already be able to read well, and that your purpose—through a series of lessons—is to enable them to do so.
- 2. Scaffold success.** Match the amount and type of scaffolding to the circumstance. If students are struggling to read a text fluently, then teaching words and guiding repeated reading makes sense. Preview the texts to try to anticipate problems. Tailor comprehension questions to reveal likely failures to understand. When misunderstandings are uncovered, return to the text to guide students' efforts to figure it out.
- 3. Foster improvement awareness.** How we talk to students about what they are doing and the implications of their efforts matters.<sup>52</sup> It can be useful to set aside time at the end of a lesson to have students appraise themselves and their progress. Consider asking, "What were you able to do with this text at the end that you couldn't at the beginning?"

The idea of expecting students to read long, complex, unfamiliar texts is far from common in American reading instruction, which has more often tried to shield students from such experiences.<sup>53</sup> It is important to remember that while instructional-level teaching works in the sense that most students taught with books at their instructional level make some learning progress, it places severe limits on the literacy attainment of large numbers of students who would do better if taught with more demanding texts.

Instead of all the student testing aimed at determining reading levels, the management of leveled book collections, and the juggling of instructional groups, teacher efforts would better be expended on anticipating barriers to understanding, recognizing failures to comprehend, and guiding students to surmount these barriers. We must turn those comprehension failures into opportunities to learn. They should be the basis of our teaching. Such work is challenging, of course, but also particularly rewarding. It is more heartening to teach students to read better than to observe their reading practice with texts that allow little room for improvement.

It is time that we dedicate ourselves to ensuring that every child has the greatest opportunity to accomplish the highest levels of literacy. It is time to throw off the ideological cloak that claims that matching texts to student reading levels maximizes literacy, and to don new pedagogical garments more in line with a science of reading. Leveled reading instruction, indeed, levels lives. 🌱

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/shanahan](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/shanahan).

# Care Is a Muscle

Strengthening Trauma-Informed Practices to Enhance All Students' Well-Being



By Chelsea Prax

**L**earning about, talking about, and making meaning of stressful, harmful, and traumatic experiences can be upsetting. The goal of this article, and the textbook from which it is drawn, is not to upset anyone, yet readers (and participants in the paired AFT professional learning course) may experience unpleasant and even triggering moments. This article is designed to share information and to help readers understand skills to promote children's health and well-being. The research reviewed here focuses on ways of thinking and acting that help people—who may or may not have an illness—tilt toward wellness no matter their starting point. This text does not offer strategies to manage, treat, or cure illness. Rather, the strategies elevated here are *universal, tier 1 approaches*—good for all adults in school to use with all students all the time.

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Most educators understand intimately that students' mental health poses incredible challenges and opportunities at school. Mental health is one of educators' top priorities for work on children's well-being.<sup>1</sup> Trauma-informed educators go further than naming the problem by learning and practicing key skills to positively promote children's mental health and overall growth. They strive to

- understand the ways unaddressed stress and adversity undermine mental health;
- prevent further traumatization by proactively introducing and sustaining protective factors so students learn to navigate issues and grow, rather than shut down;
- effectively support students experiencing unpleasant feelings and human responses to distress (see the sidebar on page 40 for common experiences students may have after traumatic events);
- identify students who may benefit from more intensive supports;
- coordinate warm and safe learning environments for all students; and
- balance powerful bonding with ethical boundaries so relationships are sustainable, reciprocal, and ultimately effective in shifting toward well-being.

Being trauma-informed demands considerable reflection on your worldview, practices, and impacts (not just intentions). Trauma-informed education offers an important lens to support young people—but it also has limitations. Sometimes, being trauma-informed means focusing only on harm, injury, and traumatic effects. Related programming can seem to say, “You are the worst thing that ever happened to you,” which is a deficit-based, harmful message.<sup>2</sup>

We cannot risk focusing on the treatment of traumatic effects rather than fostering possibility or well-being. The absence of disease doesn’t constitute health. The absence of violence does not constitute peace. And the reduction of pathology—anxiety, anger, fear, sadness, distrust, and triggers—doesn’t constitute well-being—including hope, happiness, imagination, and trust. Everyone wants to be happy, not just have less misery.<sup>3</sup>

Educators have opportunities every day to help students enhance their well-being and boost their happiness by facilitating positive experiences and de-escalating stressful scenarios. Let’s take a look at how to do both.

## The strategies elevated here are good for all adults in school to use with all students all the time.

### Facilitate Positive Experiences

Unmitigated trauma leads many young people to strengthen their internal emergency response systems. They are quick to assess how power, status, and rank influence social situations; quick to label stressful occurrences as threatening; and quick to retreat from or to aggress against perceived threats. The intense brain activity needed for the stress response can look like less practice in mental activities that are essential to learning, such as nuanced information processing, complex problem-solving, and setting and pursuing long-term goals. As a result, students grappling with trauma often have lower academic achievement, higher rates of chronic absenteeism or dropping out, and lower self-esteem. Protective factors are important to prevent traumatic events from having these kinds of lasting traumatic effects. Here, we explore the ways that educators’ everyday practices can promote healing.

### Protective Factors

A combination of protective factors can enhance a child’s ability to cope with or bounce back from harmful traumatic effects. These factors include<sup>4</sup>

- academic achievement and extended learning opportunities;
- appropriate interventions before, during, and after challenges;

- cognitive skills such as problem-solving, responsible decision-making, and perspective-taking;
- community that respects and celebrates students’ identities and cultures;
- consistent practices and predictable routines;
- physical and emotional safety;
- physical and mental health;
- positive instructional strategies;
- relationships with caring and supportive adults;
- restorative behavior supports that teach skills such as taking responsibility and making amends;
- sense of agency (“I can make meaningful choices”);
- sense of belonging, mastery, and purpose; and
- social and emotional competence, which entails:
  - self-awareness (identify emotions and develop accurate self-perceptions);
  - self-management (manage stress and feelings, control impulses, and use diverse coping strategies);
  - social awareness (take others’ perspectives, empathize, and appreciate diversity);
  - relationship skills (communicate, help, and cooperate for healthy relationships); and
  - responsible decision-making (identify problems, evaluate, reflect, and act with consideration for the well-being of oneself and others).

### Students’ Growth Potential

Children’s willingness to engage in learning is experience-dependent.<sup>5</sup> In contexts with rich relational connections, emotional support, and collaboration, students are more likely to de-escalate into the calm and concentration that ground strong, lasting learning. In contrast, in competitive, stressful, agitated environments, students are more likely to withdraw, become distracted, and act out.<sup>6</sup> Resilience is a skill set, an ability to adapt successfully—not a trait.<sup>7</sup> Trauma-informed educators help students develop resilience that attunes their brains, bodies, and behaviors for healing.<sup>8</sup>

### Healing Gestures

Research strongly supports the following five regular practices to show young people love and care, bring protective factors to life in the classroom, and help students develop resilience.<sup>9</sup>

- 1. Listen:** Encourage and model active and supportive listening. A positive school climate is one with norms that support respectful listening among all members of the community. Create processes that allow students to share and be heard. Remain curious and ask supportive questions.
- 2. Comfort:** Create predictable routines and transitions for children so they know what to expect. Establish safe and cozy spaces where students can calm down when they are upset. Respond with kindness and compassion when a child is escalated or triggered. Use grounding techniques such as yoga, meditation, breathing games, and affirmations to help students learn and practice emotional regulation, social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and anger management. Try playing music or ringing a meditation bell to signal that it’s time to transition.



- 3. Collaborate:** Plan for students to work together during in-school and after-school activities. Facilitate peers sharing strengths toward a common goal using agreed-upon rules and expectations. Demonstrate to students that group work can help identify multiple solutions to problems and that some might be more effective than others. Teach problem-solving skills and encourage working through conflicts together. Teach nonviolent resolution skills and model a problem-solving process rather than just giving students answers. Notice when children are frustrated and offer supportive guidance. When possible, help them identify other sources of support in school, in the community, and at home.
- 4. Inspire:** Demonstrate a belief in your students' potential, create a climate of achievement by setting high standards, and provide a positive example as a role model through the ways you approach tasks and relationships. Help children identify their natural talents or abilities and use them in the classroom. Connect children to after-school programs such as theater, dance, and sports, and to opportunities to join in community service. Create opportunities for children to learn about different career paths and take on leadership roles inside and outside the classroom. Explore their future goals and engage them in short- and long-term goal setting—and establish realistic, achievable goals. Build community by inquiring about friend networks and helping students identify friends who make them feel happy and confident.
- 5. Celebrate:** Recognize student efforts and encourage positive interactions between young people and their peers, as well as other educators. Engage children in open-ended free play. Point out their talents and strengths and offer more opportunities to build on these skills, including with small wins and incremental progress. Publicly recognize and praise children when they are doing things right. When you need to redirect their behavior, do it privately and calmly. Greet children by name and offer rounds of applause or high fives as encouragement. Take children's concerns seriously and offer validating statements. Tell them that you like them and why you think they're special.

These healing gestures are great examples of how trauma-informed education is good for all students. While crucial for children and youth who have experienced traumatic events, it

is beneficial for everyone (including our adult colleagues) when we establish a climate of respect; ensure our interactions with students are affirming, encouraging, and validating; identify and reinforce children's areas of strength; and give positive reinforcement when they show skills like perseverance and focus. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, when children have setbacks or frustrations, we must do our best to praise their efforts and help them figure out next steps.

## De-Escalate Stressful Scenarios

Despite our best intentions or proactive and preventive efforts, conflict and tension still occur in learning environments. Stressful and traumatic events cause emotional and behavioral escalation. In the face of any stressor, the body activates the stress response and circulates stress hormones that affect a variety of body functions. A severe stress response happens to everyone *sometimes*. Young people are more susceptible to poorly controlled escalation because they're still growing mechanisms to manage it. One effect of trauma is to "train" the body to activate the stress response more often and more intensely.<sup>10</sup> Thus, helping students

In one season of my life, I was trained as an English teacher and worked with high school students. The strategies I learned for supporting English language learners (ELLs) were *good teaching* for all my students—and especially helpful for ELLs.

After working as a teacher, I went on to earn a master's degree and certification in public health. One of my favorite concepts from that training is on universal primary prevention, or the good stuff we can do for everyone, all the time, to promote well-being—without knowing anything about their current health status or future risk profile. The trauma-informed practices we review in this book are akin to those good teaching practices for ELLs and are almost entirely universal primary prevention. In other words, these are best practices for all children, all the time—and they are *especially* helpful for young people grappling with trauma.

The AFT is committed to building educators' skills in trauma-informed practice. Research shows that these strategies and initiatives directly promote students' mental health. Additionally, a trauma-informed lens has been linked to improved school safety and staff satisfaction. It has even been associated with students' liberation, in which they identify justice challenges, learn models for transformation, dream new ways of being, and strategize to move toward better outcomes for all. Embracing trauma-informed practices requires educators to move through comparable processes, better equipping them to model and guide students in liberatory learning experiences of their own.

This text is a companion to the AFT's graduate-level professional learning course, also titled CARE-FULL. Here, I endeavor to offer a clear, practical synthesis of relevant research, as well as provocative and key ideas that challenge the "center" and the "margins" of our contemporary society. Course participants review and process the information within the book in realistic contexts. They use case studies, discussions, role-plays, videos, interactive analysis, and more to practice and strengthen the skills discussed in the book. To learn more about the course, including how to request workshops through your local union, visit [aftpd.org/courses/care-full](http://aftpd.org/courses/care-full). And to purchase a copy of the book, visit the AFT's online store: [go.aft.org/5h2](http://go.aft.org/5h2).

—C. P.

learn to de-escalate is helpful for all students and especially healing for students with trauma.<sup>11</sup>

## Phases of Escalation

Trauma-informed educators understand how students can be triggered into emotional and behavioral escalation, which changes their readiness to learn as well as their coping approaches.<sup>12</sup> The following five phases of escalation are helpful for recognizing when students feel triggered.

# Helping students learn to de-escalate is helpful for all students and especially healing for students with trauma.

**1. Calm and engaged:** Many pedagogical engagement strategies assume that students are calm and engaged. In this phase, students are not escalated; rather, we tend to see them on task, following rules and meeting expectations, and responsive to positive affirmation. They are usually excited to learn and initiate positive, socially constructive behavior. Within the brain, the cortex (the “active learning center”) is responsive to engagement and challenges, including those that require planning, reasoning or logic, imagination, and complex communication.

At this phase, students show focus, contentment, confidence, problem-solving, and patience. They generally respond well to new information, big ideas, and constructive feedback. Students who are calm and engaged easily make eye contact and are relaxed throughout their bodies. They also collaborate well and tend to have fun with large-scale projects, including working with partners and groups.

**2. Agitation:** When triggered or stressed, students may first show agitation. As the body initiates the stress response, chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline can interrupt the cortex. Agitated students find it challenging to access old memories and form new ones, establish and respect boundaries, understand consequences, inhibit their impulses, or imagine constructive solutions. This phase is marked by students being distracted and switching between being off- and on-task as well as in and out of group or partner activities. Students may also leave their seats (or spaces) and talk with others about unrelated content or ideas.

**3. Acceleration:** If agitation is not resolved and a stressor is insufficiently addressed, students may accelerate. At this phase, stress hormones intensely call the brain away from active learning functions in the cortex and toward the mid-brain, which is more responsible for things like emotions and

visual and auditory processing. Students may show avoidance, withdrawal, and escape behaviors, such as lack of eye contact, head on desk, covered ears, hunching, or turning away. They may flush, with their skin turning red or darker. Their bodies may show tension, such as with veins emerging on the forehead or temples. Accelerating students exhibit high distractibility, such as asking tangential or unrelated questions. They often pair desirable behaviors with inappropriate ones and seek attention or confrontation, such as by arguing or using profanity. Overly simple thinking at this phase makes it difficult for students to perceive nuance and constructive options, so educators may hear language that suggests an “us vs. them” or “me vs. you” mentality.

**4. Peak distress:** At this phase, which is also called the rage phase, a student’s stress hormones are disrupting the cortex, midbrain, and even brainstem. The brainstem is responsible for breathing, temperature regulation, hunger and thirst signals, and raw alarm and threat assessment, as well as sleep routines. Students who reach peak distress may show extreme crying, clumsy and erratic movement, flushed skin, and ragged, rapid, or irregular breathing, including hyperventilation. Enraged students minimally use and respond to language. They may shout, have rapid or incomplete speech, or fail to answer clearly or at all to verbal prompts. Consistent with a severe stress response, students may try to run away or leave the situation. They may also make loud noises or aggressive suggestions or gestures, or attempt to destroy, which can include self-harm.

**5. Recovery:** As the body starts to process stress hormones, students often take a deep breath or a few gasping breaths. This signals the beginning of a return to equilibrium, not arrival to calm or readiness to learn. As students continue to de-escalate, their brains and bodies recover from the strain of the stress response. They may be fatigued and thirsty and have a strong desire to reconnect with a trusted adult. Cortisol can take up to five hours to return to baseline levels; water and a snack can help. In this phase, students may be confused, wandering, staring, fidgeting, or sleepy.



## Contagious Calm

For many educators, students' emotional and behavioral escalation is assumed to be misbehavior, a deliberate step away from the values and norms of the learning community. Such personal interpretations of behavior—that students are motivated to bother or deliberately upset daily goals, rather than that they are reasonably responding to a perceived threat—usually trigger adult escalation.<sup>13</sup> Reacting to these misconceptions often unfortunately further triggers students, creating a whirlwind of escalation where each party mirrors and amplifies the other's distress.

Trauma-informed educators practice self-regulation, such as by incorporating mindful moments and grounding activities into their routines. Regular mindfulness practice increases the brief time between a stressor and an action, helping to transform educators from reactive to responsive.<sup>14</sup>

At every phase of escalation, trauma-informed educators invite students to mirror de-escalating, nonverbal strategies. These include

- breathing deeply, deliberately, and regularly;
- connecting with a calm gaze that shows caring;
- disengaging and decreasing stimuli;
- opening palms and making them visible to indicate a willingness to listen and collaborate;
- practicing patience;
- providing a warm, safe, and comforting space;
- relaxing their jaws, eyes, and shoulders;
- stabilizing their stances and taking up appropriate space, with their faces, shoulders, and hips pointing forward while staying upright (this can include kneeling for easy eye contact);
- stating boundaries simply; and
- vocalizing authority with a low, resonant tone.

**T**his article (and the related textbook and course) focuses on building educators' skills—especially among folks who are *not* social workers, counselors, psychologists, or clinicians, or who are not trained to address mental health. Learning more often leads to wanting to do more and better for students. Yet it's important to understand that when it comes to trauma, some types of “doing more” can cause harm.<sup>15</sup>

For example, this article does not prepare readers to analyze or process trauma narratives. Being a trauma-informed educator does *not* require knowing any details of a student's story. Furthermore, *soliciting* trauma narratives—also called being a “trauma detective”<sup>16</sup> and “trauma chasing”<sup>17</sup>—can be harmful. For people with enduring effects of trauma, talking about trauma does not always make it better and can lead to deeply unsettling experiences, like dissociation, flashbacks, and re-traumatization.

Equity-centered, trauma-informed educators do not aim to heal, fix, or save students. Rather, they understand the power of being one of many caring adults in a child's life as essential to health and healing. Becoming a trauma-informed educator means embracing kindness, improving practices for positive psychology, and exuding warmth, among other things. We owe students these things because we understand and respect our role in their human development. They do not owe us a reciprocal debt of thanks; we should not expect them to repay us with

our preferred attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs. Practice expressing gratitude for students' strengths, capacity, and potential as a way of inviting authentic rather than transactional gratitude into the school community.

## Establish Healthy Boundaries

Students with trauma often have boundary issues; they benefit from educators stating and holding clear boundaries and expectations.<sup>18</sup> Setting and assessing boundaries is not a one-time event. Trauma-informed educators can and should

- support students who are struggling to self-regulate on a tough day, feeling sad or angry, or feeling challenged to relate to peers;
- use authentic relationships and social-emotional engagement strategies;
- facilitate connections by building bridges, removing barriers, and clearing paths between students and supports;

**Regular mindfulness practice increases the brief time between a stressor and an action, helping to transform educators from reactive to responsive.**

- reflect on the social and emotional dimensions of their work, and identify opportunities to improve their practice, such as by expanding and universalizing accommodations;
- talk and share generally about how stress and trauma can impact our brains, bodies, and behaviors to normalize this science and these realities for students; and
- acknowledge human responses, including strong and unpleasant emotions, and introduce and review vocabulary and strategies to label and regulate feelings.

In addition to setting boundaries, it's important for trauma-informed educators to know when to ask for help. Make a referral to specialized instructional support personnel—such as a school nurse, psychologist, or social worker—or community-based specialists if an individual student needs

- assistance to process traumatic memories in depth;
- acute care during a mental health crisis;
- screening for a behavioral health challenge—including mental illness and substance misuse;
- diagnosis or labeling of an experience and its effects; and
- help to create a personalized plan to improve or manage their mental health.

Many educators report time pressure as a stressor as they struggle to balance many tasks with limited time and resources.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, working to become more emotionally vulnerable with students and cultivating spaces for psychological safety can make it easier for young people to ask for help with things that exceed educators' professional skill set or capacity. It is important to set intentions and vocalize boundaries, such as on your time, when your work is overwhelming or leading to unmanageable exposure to violence. When trauma-informed educators protect themselves, they are ensuring that they'll remain in the profession—and that they'll be able to support students—for years to come. ■

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2026/prax](https://aft.org/ae/summer2026/prax).



## Common Traumatic Experiences After Traumatic Events

**Feeling anger:** Some people feel angry about the event or about the things that happened afterward. Other people just feel angry all the time, at everything and everybody. Both responses are normal and will get better as people begin to digest what happened to them.

**Feeling shame:** Sometimes people are ashamed about what happened to them. Sometimes, stress can make people feel bad about themselves, like they're a bad person or that no one likes them. This makes it harder to be friendly and to have fun with others. Keeping feelings a secret makes it more difficult for shame to go away. Having control over whether and to what extent they talk about a traumatic event and the emotions that it stirs up can help students feel better. Educators can prepare to thoughtfully receive these narratives, such as by acknowledging and accepting any emotions the student displays in sharing, and by practicing the healing gestures outlined above.

**Feeling guilt:** People can feel guilty about what happened or about something they did or did not do. Sometimes they blame themselves for things they couldn't control. They may also feel guilty for upsetting others. Guilty feelings can make it hard to talk about what happened.

**Feeling sadness, grief, or loss:** Sometimes stressful or traumatic events include losing someone close or something important. This can make people feel sad and down.

**Feeling tension and having nightmares or trouble sleeping:** After something scary or upsetting, it takes a while to figure out exactly what happened and what it means. After severe stress or traumatic events, people tend to keep

thinking about what happened in order to digest it. This can take a long time. Nightmares are one way of digesting what happened.

**Feeling afraid for seemingly no reason:** This occurs because people remember what happened or because they are thinking about what happened. Other times it occurs because their bodies are so tense they start feeling scared.

**Anxiety and thinking about it all the time:** This is another way to digest what happened. Just like having nightmares, thinking about the traumatic event all the time is a problem because it makes people feel upset.

**Avoidance and wanting to not think or talk about it:** It is upsetting to think about a past stressor, and doing so can lead to diverse emotions. Avoidance makes things easier, but only for a little while. Avoiding situations that remind people of what happened can help them feel better right then. But avoidance may keep them from doing normal things that are an important part of life. It's important to digest what happened sooner or later.

**Vigilance and being on guard; feeling like something bad is about to happen:** After something bad happens, it makes sense to be prepared for another bad thing. But people can spend so much time waiting for the next bad thing to happen that they don't have time or energy for other things in their lives. Also, it is scary to think something bad is going to happen.

**Not being able to remember parts of what happened:** Stressful events can be so awful that people's memories don't function as

usual. Sometimes it gets easier to remember later on, and sometimes it gets harder. This can be frustrating, but it is normal.

**Having trouble concentrating:** With the nervousness people tend to feel and the time spent thinking about what happened, it can be hard to concentrate on schoolwork or even on what friends or family say.

**Jumping when there is a loud noise:** This is one way that people's bodies signal they are prepared for action in case something else happens. As people begin to feel calmer, this goes away.

**Having physical health problems and complaints:** Stress affects the body as well. People sometimes get sick more often or notice pain and discomfort more often when they have been under stress.

**Feeling out of control:** If a lot of these common reactions are problems for people, they can start to feel out of control or even "crazy." Don't worry, though; these are all normal reactions, and there are ways to feel better.

*This list should be used for awareness and understanding. Screening students for traumatic effects and labeling or diagnosing for related conditions or illnesses are the responsibilities of clinicians and therefore are not covered in this text.*

—C. P.

This sidebar was adapted from L. Jaycox, A. Langley, and K. Dean, *Support for Students Exposed to Trauma: The SSET Program* (RAND Corp., 2009), [go.aft.org/eb1](https://go.aft.org/eb1).

# The AFT's Trauma Counseling for Members: Frequently Asked Questions

## Q: What is trauma counseling?

**A:** Trauma counseling is an innovative form of mental health care that provides confidential therapy after a traumatic incident. Through the AFT trauma counseling benefit, you can be matched with a therapist any time in the one-year aftermath of a covered incident and use phone, video, and sometimes in-person visits to access help when you need it.

## Q: Who is eligible?

**A:** All AFT members who are either actively employed or on a leave of absence and who have experienced a covered traumatic incident are eligible to receive this benefit. Retired members and agency fee payers are not eligible for this coverage.

## Q: What is covered and when?

**A:** You are covered 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, if the incident involves any of the following: domestic violence, aggravated assault, sexual assault, mass shooting, terrorism, or a FEMA-declared major disaster. Coverage also includes incidents in your workplace if you are traumatized by contracting an infectious disease, witnessing a violent incident, bullying, harassment, threats, or secondary traumas. Secondary traumas are incidents that happened to another person but are having an impact on you. Examples include the death of a student or the suicide of a colleague.

Counseling must begin within one year following a covered incident. The benefit offers up to 21 sessions of therapy.

## Q: What does this cost?

**A:** There is no cost to you; this is an AFT-paid benefit for eligible members.

## Q: How do I sign up? How can I trust that this service is confidential?

**A:** Members can gain access to the program through the AFT Member Benefits portal: [aft.org/members-only](http://aft.org/members-only). This requires registration with an AFT Member ID; after that, you will work directly with the provider. (If you need your AFT Member ID, complete this form and we'll send you a registration link: [go.aft.org/lcs](http://go.aft.org/lcs).) Your employer will not be notified that you have sought or received this service. Additionally, your information is fully protected under federal regulations.

## Q: Why am I required to submit a claim to receive benefits?

**A:** Trauma counseling is provided through an insurance program, and submitting a claim is the process to request benefits—like requesting healthcare benefits through your health insurance company.

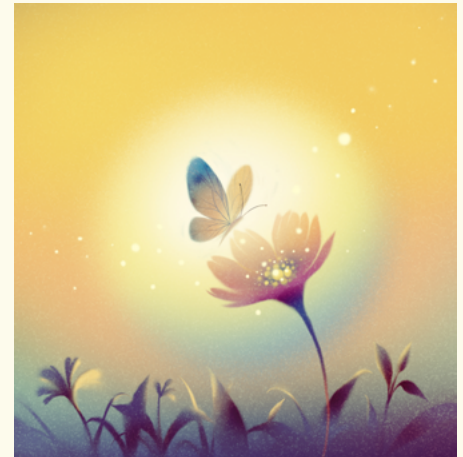
## Q: Is this different from an employee assistance program?

**A:** Yes. The counselors in this program have all received specialized training in post-traumatic care.

## Q: If I use trauma counseling, can I also receive benefits from workers' compensation, my employer, and/or counseling through my insurance?

**A:** Yes, this trauma benefit is in addition to those benefits. If you are already working with a counselor, you may be able to use this benefit to receive post-traumatic care through that counselor.

## Q: When is this benefit not available?



**A:** Coverage ends if you are no longer an AFT member actively employed or on a leave of absence.

## Q: Do I need to enroll?

**A:** Working AFT members are automatically enrolled.

## Q: Is there a waiting period?

**A:** No. Once you successfully register at the AFT member portal, you are immediately eligible to receive this benefit.

## Q: How do I find a therapist who is covered by this trauma counseling benefit?

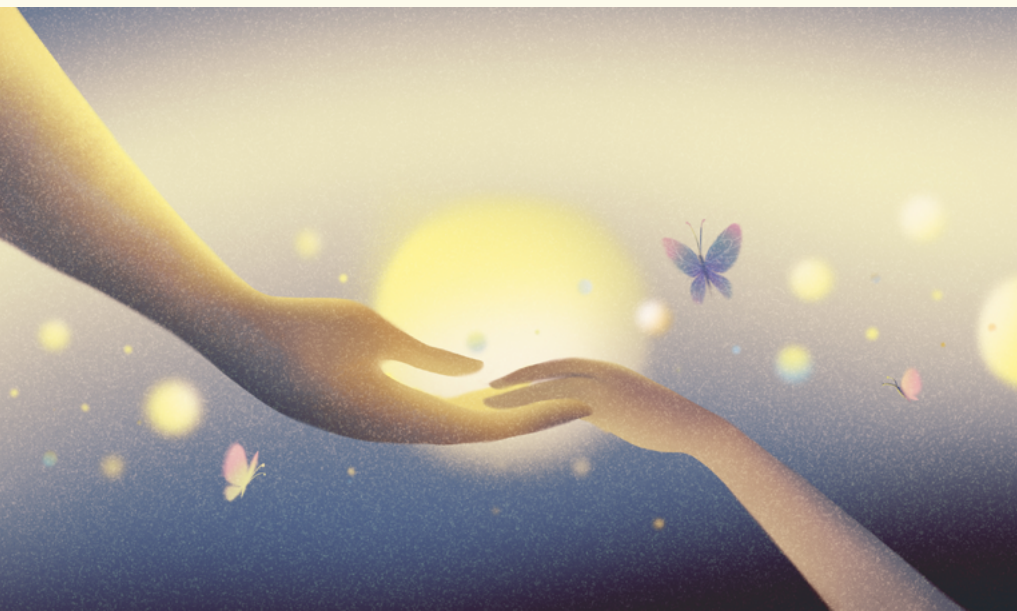
**A:** You don't have to find a therapist. The trauma counseling program will connect you. It has identified high-performing therapists across the United States. Each is a master's level or higher licensed therapist, is trained in post-traumatic incident mental health care, and has undergone an extensive background check. If you are currently working with a therapist or have a preferred therapist, you may use this benefit to compensate them directly.

## Q: What if I don't have time to see a counselor?

**A:** Because this counseling is facilitated by today's technology, you have great flexibility in setting up your sessions, which can occur 24/7 from anywhere. Of course, sessions must be scheduled at times agreeable to both parties.

## Q: How do I file a claim?

**A:** Claims can be filed directly on the trauma counseling page reachable via the link at [aft.org/members-only](http://aft.org/members-only). Under plan resources, members will find a Submit a Claim tab to provide more information.



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## FIGHT FOR AFFORDABILITY

Being part of a union means having support when life gets harder. Through the AFT's new **Fight for Affordability** campaign, members can access tools, videos and resources to help navigate medical debt, credit card debt, debt collectors and other financial challenges—including support and protections many people don't realize they're entitled to.

Visit



[aft.org/affordability](https://aft.org/affordability)

## Constitutional Rights & Know Your Rights Trainings



Fear and misinformation are putting students, families and communities at risk. **Educators are being asked difficult questions every day:** What are our rights? What happens if immigration enforcement agents enter our schools, campuses or hospitals? How do we protect the people we serve?

**The AFT's Constitutional Rights and Know Your Rights trainings help answer those questions with clear guidance, trusted resources and practical support.** Through multilingual materials and community partnerships, these trainings have already reached thousands nationwide—helping members, students, patients and families navigate immigration enforcement encounters safely and lawfully.

Schools, colleges, healthcare facilities and public institutions must remain places of safety, care and dignity—not fear.

Learn more or request a training:

[aft.org/immigration](https://aft.org/immigration)

