Education
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AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

Healthy, Happy Teens

The Benefits of Distraction-Free Learning and Screen-Free Friendships

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

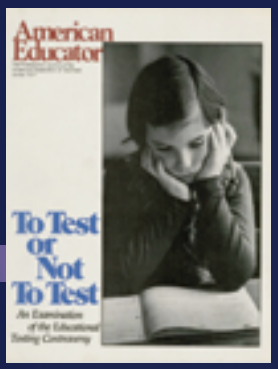
50 Years of *American Educator*

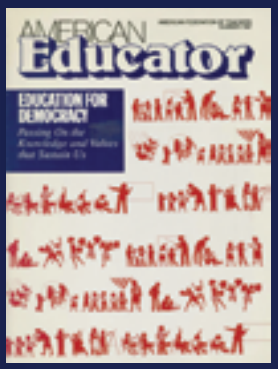
Celebrating the Teachers Who Keep Our Democracy Strong

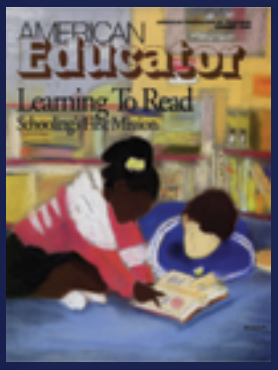
For five decades, the AFT has published *American Educator* with one purpose at its core: to champion and support the nation's public school teachers. This anniversary is a tribute to you—the educators who meet immense challenges with skill and heart, who pour love into every student, and whose work shapes the future of our democracy. Fifty years in, we're still here to lift up your voice, honor your expertise, and celebrate the extraordinary impact you make every day.

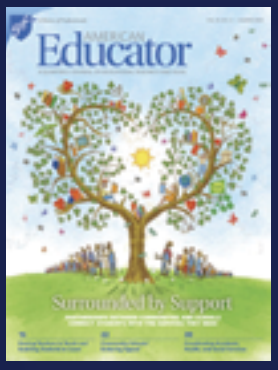
Check out our archive, with hundreds of articles available for free, at aft.org/ae!

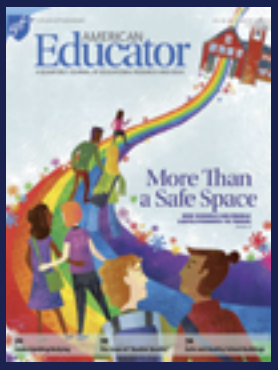
Our issues index extends back to the 1980s, and our author and subject indexes help you quickly find what you need to enrich your teaching, meet your students' needs, revitalize our communities, and reclaim the promise of America.











Our Fight for Affordability

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

TRAVELING THE COUNTRY, talking with our members, it's clear why there is so much anger. Beyond ICE terrorizing people and President Trump's expensive war in Iran, which the AFT opposes, *working people are hurting*—being crushed by rising costs. And our AFT/Protect Borrowers survey of more than 7,500 AFT members released in February shows just how deep the affordability crisis goes.

The survey results are heart-wrenching: Members relying on food pantries. Unable to afford gas to get to work. Delaying retirement to help their adult children pay for housing. Forgoing medical care. Fearing foreclosure. Taking on second and third jobs. Despite Trump's promises to "bring prices down, starting on day one," more than half reported being *worse off* financially since he returned to office.

As one member put it, "I cannot sleep, [I am] waking up worrying about money. I have to charge groceries on my credit card to buy food for my child.... I'm a stressed-out mess."

It is not their fault. These workers are doing everything right—working hard, caring for their families—yet life keeps getting more and more expensive. At the grocery store, the pharmacy, the gas pump. It's real. Anybody pretending that it isn't—from the president on down—does not know how to walk in the shoes of regular Americans.

What happened to the American dream? If you work hard and play by the rules, your family should have a decent life, and the next generation should have a real shot at doing even better.

It's far from the golden age the current president has promised and promoted. We are seeing more and more working folks, including our members, rely on debt to get by. Over the past year, families paid an average of $1,700 because of Trump's tariffs. The Republican tax bill last summer gave $1 trillion in tax cuts to the top 1 percent of households, while cutting social programs like Medicaid. The typical age for first-time home buyers is now 40, a historic high. Medical debt is a leading cause of bankruptcy.

AFT

Let's elect lawmakers who get that working people are suffering and will do something about it.

Trump has called affordability "a con job." He's walked away from this crisis and from millions of struggling Americans.

The AFT is stepping up to meet this challenge. We must fight against letting the chance at a decent life slip away. That's why we launched our Fight for Affordability campaign (visit go.aft.org/0gd for details). It's a three-pronged campaign:

- *Empowering our members:* Our work tackling student debt secured hundreds of millions of dollars in relief for AFT members. Now we're taking on the challenge of helping our members navigate *other* debt and cost-of-living issues that stand in the way of a better life. We've created real-life tools and strategies—from online financial literacy clinics, to ways to appeal a medical bill, to guidance on avoiding financial traps like "buy now, pay later."
- *Advocacy:* We're demanding that Congress and the president take concrete steps to address affordability and inequity: rein in healthcare costs, put buying a home in reach again, and fight the current Gilded Age–level inequity. Enough of the rich getting richer while the middle and working classes suffer. We have been working on a federal working-class tax cut—paid for by the multimillionaires who should be paying their fair share. When we mobilize, progress is possible; remember, just over a year ago we helped pass legislation restoring earned Social Security benefits to millions of American workers penalized by a federal loophole.
- *Collective bargaining:* Our relentless fight for a better life for all has made the AFT the fastest-growing union in the country. Contracts matter, like the new one United Educators of San Francisco negotiated with *premium-free* health insurance for members and their families after a four-day strike. Then there are recent groundbreaking first-contract wins in higher education in Maryland and Michigan, including raises, stable health insurance, and pathways to promotions.

Of course, mobilizing and voting matter. Seven million people participated in the last "No Kings" protests across the country. Join in to ensure a huge turnout for the next "No Kings" day on March 28 (see go.aft.org/nokings). Our message: It's time for the federal government to help people forge a better life, not create fear and chaos. We'll carry that momentum into November's midterms, to elect lawmakers who get that working people are suffering and will do something about it.

Our union is showing up in *all* these different fights for the America we envision. (We're fighting in the courts too, as you'll see in the article I wrote with Todd Wolfson on page 34.) What could be *more* American than people being able to take care of their families and having a shot at the American dream again? That's what this campaign is all about. I hope you'll be a part of it. It's the fight of our lives, for a better life for all. ■

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OUR MISSION

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

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NADIA RADIC

Distracted by Design

Smartphones Harm Children's Mental Health and Learning—But We Can Fight Back

By Jonathan Haidt

At the turn of the millennium, technology companies based on the West Coast of the United States created a set of world-changing products that took advantage of the rapidly growing internet. Some of them helped people to connect and communicate, and therefore it seemed likely they would be a boon to the growing number of emerging democracies. But the tech industry wasn't just transforming life for adults. It began transforming life for children too. Children and adolescents had been watching a lot of television since the 1950s, but the new technologies were far more portable, personalized, and engaging than anything that came before.

Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at the New York University Stern School of Business. He has cofounded a variety of organizations and collaborations that apply moral and social psychology to help important institutions work better, including LetGrow.org, Heterodox Academy.org, ConstructiveDialogue.org, and EthicalSystems.org. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he has written more than 100 academic articles and several bestselling books, including The Happiness Hypothesis *(2006),* The Righteous Mind *(2012), and* The Coddling of the American Mind *(2018). This article is adapted, with permission, from his 2024* New York Times *bestseller* The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, *published by Penguin Random House.*

There was little sign of an impending mental illness crisis among adolescents in the 2000s.[1] Then, quite suddenly in the early 2010s, things changed. Mental illness went up in many countries between 2010 and 2015 for Gen Z (and some late millennials) while older generations were much less affected. Why was there a synchronized international increase in rates of adolescent anxiety and depression?

The oldest members of Gen Z began puberty around 2009, when several tech trends converged: the rapid spread of high-speed broadband in the 2000s, the arrival of the iPhone in 2007, and the new age of hyper-viralized social media. The last of these was kicked off in 2009 by the arrival of the "like" and "retweet" (or "share") buttons, which transformed the social dynamics of the online world. Before 2009, social media was most useful as a way to keep up with your friends, and with fewer instant and reverberating feedback functions it generated much less of the toxicity we see today.[2] A fourth trend began just a few years later, and it hit girls much harder than boys: the increased prevalence of posting images of oneself, after smartphones added front-facing cameras (2010) and Facebook acquired Instagram (2012), boosting its popularity. This greatly expanded the number of adolescents posting carefully curated photos and videos of their lives for their peers and strangers not just to see, but to judge. As a result, Gen Z is the first generation to have gone through puberty hunched over smartphones and

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NADIA RADIC

tablets, having fewer face-to-face conversations and shoulder-to-shoulder adventures with their friends.

Children have been drawn powerfully to screens since the advent of television, but they could not take those screens with them to school or when they went outside to play. Before the iPhone, there was a limit to the amount of screen time a child could have, so there was still time for play and face-to-face conversation. But the explosion of smartphone-based apps such as Instagram in the exact years in which Gen Z teens and preteens were moving from basic phones to smartphones marked a qualitative change in the nature of childhood. By 2015, more than 70 percent of American teens carried a touch screen around with them,[3] and these screens became much better at holding their attention, even when they were with their friends. By 2022, a third of teens said they were on one of the major social media sites "almost constantly," and 46 percent of teens reported that they used the internet "almost constantly."[4]

Predatory Practices

For businesses that earn revenue based on displaying ads alongside user-generated content, there are three basic imperatives: (1) get more users, (2) get users to spend more time using the app, and (3) get users to post and engage with more content, which attracts other users to the platform. One way that companies get more users is by failing to enforce their own rules prohibiting users under 13.

Younger users are particularly valuable because the habits they form early often stick with them for life, so companies need younger users to ensure robust future usage of their products. They therefore view the loss of market share among younger users as an existential threat.[5] Documents brought out by the whistleblower Frances Haugen* show that Meta has long been trying to study and attract preteens and has even considered how to reach children as young as four.[6]

As for the second imperative, one way that companies get users to spend more time on their apps is by using artificial intelligence to select what to put into a user's feed. Based on the time users spend viewing different kinds of content, AI then serves them more such content.[7] Technology designers long ago learned that reducing effort increases time spent, so features like autoplay and infinite scroll encourage increased consumption of content.

In 2010, we didn't know smartphones and social media had so many harmful effects. Now we do.

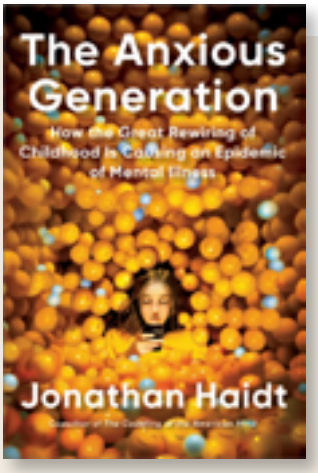
To achieve their third objective—incentivizing users to post more content—platforms take advantage of the fact that adolescents are highly sensitive to social status and social rewards. Features like Snapchat "streaks" gamify social interaction by encouraging users to send a picture to their friends every day in order to not break a publicly visible streak. Another example is setting people's privacy settings to public by default, so that whatever they post becomes content for the largest possible pool of users.

Minors should be protected from products that are designed to addict them. I wish that companies would treat children and adolescents with more care on their own, but given market incentives and business norms, it is likely to take legislation to force them to do so.

Schoolhouse Blues

The evidence that phones in pockets interfere with learning is now so clear that in August 2023, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)

*For a Q&A with Frances Haugen and two young leaders of Design It For Us, see "Fighting for Safer Social Media" in the Spring 2025 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/7tv.



This book tells the story of what happened to the generation born after 1995,[1] popularly known as Gen Z, the generation that follows the millennials (born 1981 to 1995). Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and unsuitable for children and adolescents. Succeeding socially in that universe required them to devote a large part of their consciousness—perpetually—to managing what became their online brand. This was now necessary to gain acceptance from peers, which is the oxygen of adolescence, and to avoid online shaming, which is the nightmare of adolescence. Gen Z teens got sucked into spending many hours of each day scrolling through the shiny happy posts of friends, acquaintances, and distant influencers. They watched increasing quantities of user-generated videos and streamed entertainment offered to them by autoplay and algorithms that were designed to keep them online as long as possible. They spent far less time playing with, talking to, touching, or even making eye contact with their friends and families, thereby reducing their participation in embodied social behaviors that are essential for successful human development.

Children need a great deal of free play to thrive. The small-scale challenges and setbacks that happen during play are like an inoculation that prepares children to face much larger challenges later. But for a variety of historical and sociological reasons, free play began to decline in the 1980s, and the decline accelerated in the 1990s. I propose that we view the late 1980s as the beginning of the transition from a "play-based childhood" to a "phone-based childhood," a transition that was not complete until the mid-2010s, when most adolescents had their own smartphone. My central claim in this book is that these two trends—overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world—are the major reasons why children born after 1995 became the anxious generation.

–J. H.

For the endnote, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/haidt.

Written for kids and early teens, *The Amazing Generation* is a companion guide packed with surprising facts, a graphic novel, interactive challenges, and secrets tech leaders don't want kids to know. It will help our children use technology as a tool while they focus on real-life friendships, freedom, and fun.

issued a report that addressed the adverse effects that digital technologies, and phones in particular, are having on education around the world.[8] The report acknowledged benefits of the internet for online education and educating some hard-to-reach populations, but noted that there is surprisingly little evidence that digital technologies enhance learning in the typical classroom. The report also noted that mobile phone use was associated with reduced educational performance and increased classroom disruption.[9]

Additional evidence that phones may be interfering with education in the United States can be found in the 2023 National Assessment of Educational Progress (otherwise known as the nation's report card), which showed substantial drops in test scores during the COVID era, erasing many years of gains. However, if you look closely at the data, it becomes clear that the decline in test scores began earlier.[10] Scores had been rising pretty consistently from the 1970s until 2012, and then they reversed. COVID restrictions and remote schooling added to the decline, especially in math, but the drop between 2012 and the beginning of COVID was substantial. The reversal coincided with teens trading in their basic phones for smartphones, leading to a big increase in attention fragmentation throughout the school day.*

What Governments and Tech Companies Can Do

There are four main ways that governments and tech companies could improve the virtual world for adolescents.

1. Assert a Duty of Care

In 2013, the British filmmaker Beeban Kidron made a documentary called *InRealLife*, about the lives of teens in the online world. What she learned about the ways tech companies exploit adolescents alarmed her. After much consultation, she developed a list of design standards that tech companies could adopt that would make time online less harmful to children and adolescents. The list came to be called the Age Appropriate Design Code (AADC), and it was enacted in the United Kingdom in June 2020.

The code was revolutionary for asserting that companies have some moral and legal responsibility for how they treat minors. They have a duty to design their services in the "best interests" of children (defined as anyone under 18). For example, it is usually the case that the best interest of the child is served by setting all defaults about privacy to the highest standard, while the best interest of the company is served by making the child's post visible to the widest audience possible. The law therefore requires that the default settings for minors be private; the child must make an active choice to change a setting if she wants her posts to be viewable by strangers. Same thing for geolocation data; the default should be that nobody can find the location of a child from a post or from the use of an app, unless the child elects to make such data public. Another stipulation: Platforms must be transparent and clear about what they are doing, explaining their privacy policies and the nature of parental controls in language (or perhaps videos) easy for children to understand.

While the code applied only to services offered in the UK, the law has already had two broader effects. First, many of the tech companies decided that it wasn't worth the difficulty to offer different products in different countries, so they made a few of the changes globally. Second, the state of California adopted its own version of the AADC, which was passed into law in 2022, and other states have since passed their own versions.[11] Of course, it makes little sense for individual US states to enact laws about something as sprawling and placeless as the internet. It would be far preferable for the US Congress to act, and there is now strong bipartisan support for several important bills, such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA),† which includes many ideas from the AADC.[12]

2. Raise the Age of Internet Adulthood to 16

In the late 1990s, as the internet was becoming a part of life, there were no special protections for children online. Companies could collect and sell children's data without the knowledge or consent of their parents. In response, the US Federal Trade Commission recommended that Congress enact legislation requiring websites to obtain parental consent before collecting personal information from children. Representative (now Senator) Ed Markey from Massachusetts drafted such a bill, and he defined a child as anyone under the age of 16, for data collection purposes.‡ The e-commerce companies of that era objected, and they teamed up with civil liberties groups who were concerned that the new bill would make it harder for teens to find information about birth control, abortion, or other sensitive topics.[14] In the negotiations over the bill, a compromise was reached that the age would be lowered to 13. That decision had nothing to do with adolescent brain development or maturity; it was just a political compromise. Nonetheless, 13 became the de facto age of "internet adulthood" for the United States, which effectively made it the age of internet adulthood for the world. Anyone who is 13, or at least says they are, can be treated as an adult for the purposes of data acquisition. In addition, the bill, known as COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act), failed to impose any obligation on companies to verify anyone's age. They were only required to avoid collecting data from users when they had direct evidence that the user was under 13.

3. Facilitate Age Verification

There is not, at present, any perfect method of implementing a universal age check. There is no method that could be applied to everyone who comes to a site in a way that is perfectly reliable and raises no privacy or civil liberties objections.[15] But if we drop the need for a universal solution and restrict our focus to helping parents who want the internet to have age gates that apply to their

*Since I published *The Anxious Generation* in 2024, evidence has continued to mount that social media use among children harms cognitive development, reading achievement, family relationships, and mental health. See, for example, go.aft.org/x1v and go.aft.org/kjw.

†In October 2025, more than 400 organizations, including the AFT, sent a letter to leaders of the US Senate and House of Representatives imploring them to pass this bill and pledging that they "will not rest until KOSA is law." For details, see go.aft.org/ebv.

‡In December 2025, Australia became the first country to raise the age—from 13 to 16—at which youth can create social media accounts and to require the companies that create the apps to enforce the law.[13]

children, then a third approach becomes possible: Parents should have a way of marking their child's phone, tablet, and laptop as devices belonging to a minor. That mark, which could be written either into the hardware or the software, would act like a sign that tells companies with age restrictions, "This person is underage; do not admit without parental consent."

A simple way to do this would be for Apple, Google, and Microsoft—who create the operating systems that run nearly all of our devices—to add a feature to their existing parental controls. In Apple's iOS, for example, parents already set up family accounts and put in birth dates for their children when they give them their first iPhones. The parent already gets to choose whether to allow the child to download only age-appropriate apps, movies, and books from Apple's own services. Why not just expand that ability so that a parent's choice is respected by all platforms for which age restrictions are appropriate or required by law?

Apple, Google, and Microsoft could create a feature, let's call it "age check," that would be set to "on" by default whenever a parent creates an account for a child under the age of 18. The parent can choose to turn age check off, but if on is the default, then it would be very widely used (unlike many features in current parental controls, which many parents don't know how to turn on). If age check is left on, then when anyone uses that phone or computer to try to open or log in to an account, the site can simply verify by communicating with the device to answer two questions: (1) Is age check on? If so, then (2) Does the person meet our minimum age? (For example, 16 to open or access a social media account, 18 to access pornography.) This kind of device-based verification offers a way that parents, tech companies, and platforms can share responsibility for age verification.

4. Encourage Phone-Free Schools

All schools, from elementary through high school, should go phone-free to improve not only mental health but academic outcomes. Governments at all levels could support this transition by allocating funds to pay the small cost of buying phone lockers or lockable pouches for any school that wants to keep phones out of students' pockets and hands during the school day. Departments of education at the state and federal levels could support research on the effects of phone-free schools, to verify whether they are beneficial for student mental health and academic performance.

Mountain Middle School in Durango, Colorado, went phone-free back in 2012, at the start of the mental health crisis. The county around the school had among the highest teen suicide rates in Colorado when Shane Voss took over as head of school. Students were suffering from rampant cyberbullying, sleep deprivation, and constant social comparison.[16]

Voss implemented a cellphone ban. For the entire school day, phones had to stay in backpacks, not in pockets or hands. There were clear policies and real consequences if phones were found out of the backpack during school hours.[17] The effects were transformative. Students no longer sat silently next to each other, scrolling while waiting for homeroom or class to start. They talked to each other or the teacher. Voss says that when he walks into a school without a phone ban, "It's kind of like the zombie apocalypse, and you have all these kids in the hallways not talking to each other. It's just a very different vibe."

The school's academic performance improved, and after a few years it attained Colorado's highest performance rating. An eighth-grader named Henry explained the effect of the phone ban. He said that for the first half hour of the school day, his phone is still in the back of his mind, "but once class starts, then it's just kinda out the window and I'm not really thinking about it. So it's not a big distraction for me during school."[§]

In 2010, teens, parents, schools, and even tech companies didn't know that smartphones and social media had so many harmful effects. Now we do. In 2010, there was little sign of a mental health crisis. Now it's all around us. We are not helpless, although it often feels that way because smartphones, social media, market forces, and social influence combine to pull us into a trap. We're all trying to do our best while struggling with incomplete knowledge about a rapidly changing technological world that is fragmenting our attention and changing our relationships. Each of us, acting alone, perceives that it's too difficult or costly to do the right thing. But if we can act together, the costs go way down.

You shouldn't have to compete for your students' attention with the entire internet.

If you're a teacher and you're fed up with the social chaos and learning disruption caused by smartphones and social media, link up. Legislation to rein in tech companies and ban cellphones in schools is needed, but you don't have to wait. Talk to your fellow teachers and urge your school's leadership to reconsider the policy not just on phones, but on all devices that let students text each other or check social media while they are sitting in your class. You shouldn't have to compete for your students' attention with the entire internet. See if your school can coordinate a message to parents asking them to support change. If teachers speak with a unified voice and ask parents for help educating their children, the odds of success are high. ■

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/haidt.

[§]If your school has adopted or is considering new cellphone policies, you can gauge their effectiveness for free using the *Toolkit for Assessing Phones in Schools*. For more information, see go.aft.org/gr5.

AFT Book Club with Jonathan Haidt

For a compelling overview of *The Anxious Generation*, watch AFT President Randi Weingarten interview Jonathan Haidt in the August 2025 episode of the AFT Book Club. In this free, on-demand webinar, available at go.aft.org/z00, Haidt provides striking evidence of the rise in anxiety and depression—and offers educators and families concrete ways to pull children away from screens and back into the joys of building relationships in real life.

—EDITORS

Bell to Bell

New York's Cellphone Ban Is Enriching Classrooms and Allowing Kids to Be Kids






"The constant use of personal electronics—not just phones, but earbuds, watches, and other distractions—is impacting our students' ability to focus, connect with their fellow students, be present in reality, and engage in authentic learning." That's how New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) President Melinda Person summed up the harm caused by allowing cellphones and related devices in our schools. Last year, she led a successful fight for state-level legislation banning such devices "bell to bell," ensuring that students would have at least seven hours a day to be kids, build relationships, and engage fully with their teachers and classmates. (You can read about that fight here: go.aft.org/f9v.)

To find out how bell-to-bell distraction-free learning has changed New York's schools, we spoke with three local union leaders. Matt Haynes, president of the Tri-Valley Teachers Association and member of the NYSUT board of directors, has 20 years of experience teaching English, primarily to eighth-graders. Chris Kazim, president of the Port Chester Teachers Association, has been a high school special educator and social studies teacher for 17 years. Kevin Toolan, president of the Patchogue-Medford Congress of Teachers and member of the NYSUT board of directors, has over 20 years of teaching experience in elementary and middle grades and is currently mentoring new teachers.

–EDITORS

EDITORS: Let's start by looking back at the rise of smartphones and related devices.

KEVIN TOOLAN: When I started teaching in the early 2000s, the computer was a big, heavy box. We were lucky if we had two to four in our classrooms. They were slow and didn't connect to the internet. Ever since cellphones became widespread, our students have been distracted. Before this year's ban, phones were buzzing throughout the day, whether texts from parents and friends or notifications from apps. Students were constantly trying to sneak a look at a notification or send a message. And if they couldn't look, they seemed to be thinking about looking.

In addition, the hallways were filled with students wearing AirPods and scrolling—not talking to each other. Then COVID hit, with everyone on screens all the time. Post-COVID, my district allowed phones in the lunchroom and hallways. Our kids were zombies. They didn't answer questions or talk to each other. They were distracted. It's tempting to say "withdrawn," but I don't think that's accurate because they would communicate through their phones.

We've had—and still have—problems in early elementary school. The children don't have phones, but they seem to be addicted to screens—especially the four- and five-year-olds. They expect, even demand, to be rewarded with screen time. We have to teach them how to play games like Go Fish. Games are not only fun, they reinforce academic skills like counting and support developing social skills like taking turns and being gracious win or lose.

CHRIS KAZIM: I started as a teaching assistant at Port Chester High School in 2007, around the time the first iPhone was released. Things changed quickly a few years later when the iPhone 4 came with a front-facing, or selfie, camera; apps like Instagram took off.

I knew something was wrong in 2015. After a meeting, I was a few minutes late to class, and I walked into silence. All 15 kids were on their phones. I looked at them and said, "No. Stop." I changed the rules midway through the game. From that day forward, all phones went into a box or caddy in my classroom at the start of class, and

PHOTOS BY BRUCE GILBERT

they picked them up at the end. The first few weeks were tough. It was a major change for my students. But they got used to it, and they paid more attention.

Going forward, I shared this strategy with my co-teachers. As a special education teacher, I've co-taught with more than seven teachers over the past decade. This policy has transformed every classroom. A few years ago, a student asked me to write a college recommendation letter. When I asked them why, they didn't say the usual things about inspiring them to study history or become a teacher. They said, "You're the only teacher in my whole high school career who asked me to put my phone away and took it away from me during class." They added, "US History wasn't my favorite class, but it was by far the class where I was most focused."

MATT HAYNES: I'm in a very small rural school district with just one pre-K through 12 building serving about 830 students. We didn't even have reliable cell service or Wi-Fi until about 10 years ago, and phones in school didn't start to be a problem until after COVID. When we returned to in-person learning, all of the high school students had to have a phone—and the right phone, just like they had to have the right clothes. It became another source of peer pressure, even among kids who wanted to do well academically. A few years ago, my district required middle schoolers to keep their phones in their lockers, but our "policy" in high school was that teachers could decide—that pitted teachers against each other in the students' eyes.

When Chris (who I met a few years ago) told me about the student who asked for the recommendation letter, I was inspired to make my high school classes phone-free. I tried it last year in my speech class, which provides college credit. These are motivated students, so they complied, but it obviously caused a great deal of anxiety. I explained that I can't teach well with my phone in my pocket—I can't help wondering who is texting, etc.—and I wanted them to have 40 minutes without distractions too. By the end of the course, most students were happy with the policy because it allowed them to focus. I'm grateful to Chris for spurring me to make this change.

But from my experience, allowing phones anywhere in school is detrimental. I'll never forget one afternoon as I was leaving school: I saw one of our girls' varsity sports teams sitting on the floor in a circle. No one said a word because they were all on their phones.

CHRIS: I'll second what Matt said about COVID and share another example. In the spring of 2022, I stopped a class of almost 30 juniors a little early. Their phones were in the caddy, so they didn't know what to do. They didn't know how to socialize in person. Pre-phones, you wouldn't have been able to hear yourself think in a room of juniors in the spring.

EDITORS: Tell us a little more about the challenges you faced before the bell-to-bell ban.

CHRIS: As union president, I asked for a cellphone ban for three years. Starting in September 2024, we implemented a high school policy during class time, but that only addressed academics. Students also need to be off their phones between classes and at lunch for their social and emotional development and wellness. Before this year, hallways were quiet, cafeterias were quiet. Everyone sat around the table eating their food, looking at their phones. Children aren't developing their attention spans. They are so used to these 3- to 30-second TikToks that we can no longer show full-length videos.

MATT: I agree. My philosophy as a teacher has been that although I'm here to teach English, my number one job is to be a positive role model and foster character education. After COVID, there was something different. Kids lacked the ability to socialize, and at times it seemed like they lacked empathy and compassion. It has gotten better over the past few years, but we still have a lot to do teaching them to be good human beings.

My master's is in educational technology. Earlier in my career, I remember how exciting it was to get my first laptop cart and then to upgrade to each student having a Chromebook they could bring home. We needed them during the pandemic, but I've gone the opposite direction recently. We mostly use pencil and paper, and we engage in small- and large-group discussions. I have to teach students things like how to show that they are paying attention—to have the courtesy of looking at the speaker.

CHRIS: I see teachers using technology every day because we restructured our pedagogy during COVID, but I also have gone back to pencil and paper. I think this transition with the bell-to-bell law in New York state is difficult for current high school students because we haven't been very good at explaining the real purpose and the research behind it to the students. We haven't explained the benefits of socializing in person and developing their verbal communication academically and socially.

KEVIN: Our school district provides every student a laptop. They haven't been a distraction because we also have software called Lightspeed Classroom that allows teachers to see and control what students are doing on their laptops. Teachers can display students' screens on their presentation boards, so everyone knows immediately if a student has, say, hopped on websites other than what the teacher has asked them to use.

MATT: That's a great idea.

KEVIN: Yes, it's very helpful, but before the bell-to-bell ban, phones remained a challenge. Looking at this from the teachers' perspective, it's impossible to compete with kids' favorite apps. What do you do when a student keeps taking their phone out? Do you take the phone? Well, it's a $1,000 item. Many of my members didn't want that responsibility.

Using their own money, some teachers bought shoe organizers to have a dedicated place for phone storage. But what if it falls and screens crack? Others bought charging stations, which the students

thought were cool, though charging effectively left them phone-free for that class period.

Teachers had to resort to tricks like this because we had no support from administration and thus no mechanism to take a phone away from a child or to handle a parent who was upset about their child's phone being taken during class. Understandably, many teachers gave up.

CHRIS: I agree that teachers can't compete with apps, and I also had many members who didn't want the responsibility of taking students' phones. As I've tried to build support for phone bans over the years, many people outside the classroom, like administrators and parents, have said that educators have to teach good behavior, including putting phones away during class. I'd tell them that I agree 99 percent of the time—we do a lot of character education—but this is different. Phones are addictive; we have to think of them like nicotine.

EDITORS: Getting legislation passed is never easy. How did you and NYSUT contribute to winning the bell-to-bell ban?

KEVIN: NYSUT's president, Melinda Person, led this charge. From listening to educators across New York, she knew that students' academic, social, and emotional development were being harmed. After some initial efforts to share what she was hearing, Melinda convened a really powerful conference in September 2024 called Disconnected that lifted the voices of educators, parents, students, and healthcare and law enforcement professionals. To me, that conference felt like a turning point. Many members of NYSUT's board of directors agreed, so we planned a series of regional Disconnected conferences to draw more people into the fight to remove cellphones and related devices from the school day.

By January 2025, Melinda had secured the support of New York's governor, Kathy Hochul, and by March we were hosting our Disconnected conference on Long Island. Wanting to ensure as much support as possible, we brought many teachers, administrators, local legislators, and students to our regional conference, and some of my students spoke. That day, a superintendent told me, "I wasn't going to come. I have a K–8 district, and we've got this under control. But thank you for bringing me to the conference because I see that I have to be part of the solution." He saw that every district has to unify; if we all go dark during the school day, then students don't have anyone to communicate with, making implementation easier in the places where phones have been a problem.

One added benefit of the Disconnected conference in September was that I met with representatives from Yondr, which sells secure pouches for students' phones. They provided samples for my district, and soon I had support from the middle and high school principals and the PTA. Most parents I spoke with believed their kids weren't on their phones at school, but they were concerned about safety. The Yondr pouches help because parents can keep their child's location app on. So if we evacuate the school, we won't open the pouches until everyone is safe, but parents can still track where their children are going.

Parents' fears were also alleviated by law enforcement. Many officers have explained that it is safer for students to not be distracted during emergencies. Students and educators need to give their full attention to following the officers' directions. In addition, students texting parents during an emergency can slow down the response. If parents are rushing to the scene, then emergency vehicles may get stuck in traffic.

After our regional conference, it seemed like everyone agreed that we had to create distraction-free schools even if the legislation didn't pass. Still, we thought the statewide ban was the best strategy, so many of my members wrote letters to their representatives and advocated for the ban on social media.

CHRIS: That was a great summary, so I'll just add that both Matt and I spoke about our experiences at a regional Disconnected conference led by NYSUT and President Person, and in March of 2025 we had a meeting of local legislators at NYSUT's Tarrytown regional office. Winning over parents in my area was fairly easy at first, but this year the concern around contacting their children during the school day continued. As in Kevin's district, their main concern was contacting their children during a crisis. We didn't buy Yondr pouches, but establishing communications policies just like in the pre-cellphone era was sufficient to address concerns.

MATT: One last thing: Every year NYSUT hosts an advocacy day in Albany called Committee of 100 when educators from around the state speak to legislators at the capitol, and this became one of our talking points during the last couple of years. As for parents, like Chris's district, we don't have Yondr pouches, but all our families needed was a clear communications plan for emergencies.

EDITORS: How is this school year different, now that the bell-to-bell ban is being implemented?

MATT: It's going really well—much to our surprise, honestly. Kids are being kids again. I've had very few issues with students trying to sneak peeks at their phones. Students see it as far more serious when I tell them they aren't just breaking a school rule, they are breaking a state law.

One great thing about teaching in a small school is that I teach every single student in eighth grade, and since we have all grades in one building, high schoolers come back to visit me. Some 10th-graders had lunch in my room recently, and they asked if I had playing cards. I searched in the back of my desk and found some Harry Potter playing cards that are about 20 years old. The students thought they were new because no one had touched them in many years. For me, it was great to see these 10th-graders laughing and playing cards.

And, in contrast to Chris's silent class years ago, I recently had a class become rambunctious. In my college-credit speech class with seniors, we wrapped up a few minutes early. I had to respond to an email, and soon the class was incredibly loud. I stopped myself from yelling at them, realizing this was a wonderful moment. They were acting like regular teenagers.

KEVIN: It's going great in my district too. This past summer, the superintendent and I met with the high school senior class president and the general organization (i.e., student government) president to get their input on what they needed for this transition. They requested cards, Jenga, and board games in the cafeteria, along with allowing more students to leave the lunchroom to go to the library. They also wanted a basketball court. It's important to us to honor student voice, so we did all three. The games and policy change were in place at the beginning of the school year, and the basketball court was finished in November.

Throughout the fall, I met with high school students about this change. Some thought it was terrible, but most said it wasn't as bad as they thought it would be. I think that doing this statewide has been crucial; students aren't missing anything because no one has a phone during the day.

In the beginning of the school year, some students altered their Yondr pouches by cutting a line in the bottom to slide their phone out or shoving bits of eraser into the locking mechanism so it didn't hold well. We charged them $35 for each pouch they tampered with, so those efforts ended quickly.

CHRIS: Walking around the common areas like the cafeteria, the flagpoles (which are a popular hangout when the weather is good), and the library, I see groups of students in conversations—not looking at screens. That wouldn't have happened last year. So it's going well for us overall, but I'm advocating for a change to our district phone storage policy to eliminate backpacks as storage at the high school, because the distraction and temptation are still by their sides. The number of requests for hall passes and bathroom breaks has skyrocketed. I guarantee it has to do with our cellphone policy, and it won't get better until we switch from backpacks to lockers.

KEVIN: I checked on requests to go to the bathroom also; ours have stayed pretty much the same. We would see an increase in bathroom requests if students were using that excuse to look at their phones. I also surveyed my members in October, asking how often they had to address a student with a cellphone. The vast majority—196 members—said one student or fewer per day. Only 10 members said they had to deal with one or more per day. Even better, 65 percent said they noticed a moderate or significant increase in engagement due to the phone ban. From what I've seen and from talking to my members, students are talking more, looking up more, and making more eye contact. The Yondr pouches and the fact that no student has their phone seem to be working.

My new goal as a union president is to reduce the impact of phones on my members. Before smartphones, we didn't have apps like ParentSquare, so all communication with parents and caregivers was either on the telephone or written. When teachers left work, they left work. We'd often bring home a pile of papers to grade to give students feedback, but we could do that while we sat at the doctor's office or our kid's baseball game.

Now, unfortunately, teachers' lives are being controlled by smartphones with communication apps; parents don't always recognize the end of the workday for teachers. So as we move to distraction-free classrooms because of the bell-to-bell cellphone ban, I'm trying to also encourage my members to set boundaries with parents and caregivers. Just like we're creating distraction-free classrooms, we need to set aside distraction-free family time after work.

MATT: I agree. I've always encouraged my members to protect their time away from work. But I have to learn to take my own advice. I recently mentioned to other local union presidents that I'm fortunate to have a long commute because that's when I am on the phone doing much of my work as president. Then one asked, "But should that be the expectation that as you're driving home, you have to be making these phone calls that really should be done as part of your work?" It made me think.

My New Year's resolution for 2025 was to focus on my daughter when I got home from work. Too often, I'd be on my phone trying to respond to messages while playing with her. Last spring, when she was in preschool, she told me: "No phones allowed here. No phones allowed." After that, I put my phone in my bedroom and turned the sound off—but I would still be tempted to check it. Now I leave it where I don't have access to it for the few precious hours before she starts getting ready for bed.

CHRIS: I love when I hit traffic on a Thursday afternoon and it takes me an hour and a half to get home because I can fit in more conversations and resolve more issues. But shutting it down is important for all of us, especially our students, to protect our mental health. As union presidents and as teachers, it's really tough, but we have to disconnect too. Our district also uses ParentSquare. I encourage the teachers who choose to use it to set up filters where messages that come in after a certain hour in the evening will be held until the morning.

For children and adults, our approach to smartphones today reminds me of seat belt use about 40 years ago, when New York state passed and enforced seat belt laws. Many people may have been hesitant with this change and requirement, but I think we're going to look back on this and wonder why we ever let young people have smartphones and why we as adults have allowed them to take so much of our time and attention. As a New York educator and NYSUT member, I'm very happy that this bell-to-bell state law was led by NYSUT President Melinda Person through her continued advocacy making sure that we do right for kids and for teachers.

MATT: I'll second that. I'm extremely proud of the work we've done as NYSUT. When I first heard we were tackling this, I wasn't sure if we could win. But Melinda kept pushing it, and she gave us as local presidents the strength to push it in our communities. I'm proud to be a small part of this because it is clearly benefiting our students. ■

ASK THE COGNITIVE SCIENTIST

Do Today's Kids Have Reduced Attention Spans?

By Daniel T. Willingham

QUESTION: I often hear that growing up with smartphones and other technology has "rewired" children's brains—and I see that my students in recent years have a much harder time paying attention than they did in the past. What does this "rewiring" mean? Are children today less able to focus attention?

ANSWER: There's been a great deal of research on this question in the last 10 years, and it appears that children's ability to control their attention has not been compromised, or if it has, it's a small effect and would not account for what educators feel they see in the classroom. But it's also possible that the problem is not that students *can't* pay attention, but rather that they often *don't want to*. I'll review some data here suggesting that digital entertainment has made children quicker to conclude that they are bored. There is also evidence that, compared to a generation ago, children are less willing to wait for fun—they want it immediately.

By the start of this school year, more than half of US states had enacted laws banning or regulating the use of cellphones by students in school, and most others are considering such measures.[1] Legislators suspect that cellphones have contributed to the dramatic increase in mental health issues among American teenagers, and they are also responding to the common-sense observation that phones are a potent distractor making it hard for students to learn.[2] A recent nationally representative survey showed that 72 percent of high school teachers call cellphone distraction "a major problem" in the classroom.[3]

Banning cellphones in school may remove the immediate source of distraction, but are educators facing a bigger problem here? Has the long-term use of digital technologies rendered many students unable to sustain their focus?

Some observers think so, most famously journalist Nicholas Carr, as described in his 2011 book, *The Shallows*.[4] Here's his two-part argument: First, the things we do on digital platforms often demand or encourage rapid shifts of attention. If you play an

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL ZWOLAK

action video game, your eyes dart around the screen in search of bad guys. On social media apps, you skim through your feed, scanning for interesting content. And whatever you find yourself doing on a digital device, another app always beckons, so your attention seldom alights anywhere for extended engagement. The second part of the argument is that, contrary to earlier scientific dogma, researchers now have evidence that the brain changes with experience, even in adulthood.[5] Considering both our habitual shifts of attention and the changeable brain, Carr surmises that you unintentionally train your brain to shift attention frequently, and eventually, you have no choice. You can't sustain focus.

Many teachers report seeing student behavior consistent with that hypothesis. In a 2024 survey, when asked whether their students' reading stamina had changed since 2019, 53 percent of third- through eighth-grade teachers said it had "decreased a lot."[6] Another 30 percent said it had "decreased a little." College professors assert that they see the same problem. Although we do not have data, recent articles[7] are filled with anecdotes about college students at elite universities having trouble sustaining attention to read book-length texts.*

Are teachers seeing evidence that Carr was right? Since 2010, a great deal of research has addressed the question of whether the use of digital devices lessens the ability to sustain attention, and as we will see, the evidence for that conclusion is weak. But that doesn't mean these devices have no effect on the ways children (or adults) pay attention. For example, it's possible that children still *can* pay attention, but they *choose* not to—perhaps because the immediate rewards of digital devices have rendered them less willing to sustain focus on challenging learning tasks. Or maybe students today experience boredom more often than children of the past because they unconsciously compare schoolwork to the enticing activities readily available on their cellphones. Let's look at the evidence.

Digital Content Directly Affects Attention

How could researchers determine whether extended use of digital devices leaves people unable to focus? A straightforward test would compare the ability to focus among students who engage in a great deal of digital activity and those who seldom engage in it. Many researchers have taken that tack. They often test children from infancy to about age six separately from older children, reasoning that the young brain is more vulnerable to change.

And the results? For both older and younger children, the average of dozens of studies reveals a modest negative correlation: More screen time is weakly associated with less ability to control attention.[8]

Now, this kind of study has an obvious limitation—it finds a correlation, but correlation is not causation. Thus, although one is tempted to conclude that digital activities negatively impact attention, it's also possible that children who have greater difficulty focusing their attention find digital activities more appealing than children who do not have such challenges.

Researchers have tried to address this problem by conducting longitudinal studies. That means they measure screen time and attention (at, say, age nine), and then measure them again in the same children months or years later. If more screen time at age nine predicts worse attentional control at age 11—even after accounting for the level of attentional control at age nine—that suggests screen time may contribute to later attention problems. Conversely, if worse attentional control at age nine predicts increased screen time at age 11, that indicates that attention difficulties may lead children to use screens more.

Using this method, most studies of younger (birth to pre-K) or older (K–12) children indicate that more screen time is probably causing poorer attentional control.[9] The size of the observed relationship varies, but on average, it's small.

Yet even with this improved research design, we cannot be confident that digital activities compromise attention. Other factors could be associated with "more digital activity," and these other factors may diminish attentional capacity (so digital activity itself is a bystander, not the culprit). More time with digital devices doesn't happen randomly; it tends to happen in certain contexts and with particular styles of parenting. Parents and guardians may allow their child more access to screens in an effort to improve their child's mood or behavior.[10] Or screen activities may keep the child occupied so the parent has time for their own pursuits.[11] Wealthy parents may have easier access to pastimes for their child that are not screen-based. In each case, it may be elements of the context that have the critical effect on attention, not digital activities per se.

When kids are distractible, it's natural to suspect attention is to blame.

We encounter the same questions about causality when we try to interpret outcome differences that seem attributable to the quality of digital content. Several studies have reported that the impact of screen time on the development of attention in young children depends on what kids *do* during that screen time.[12] These studies suggest that if parents choose educational content and interact with their child while they watch together, screen time doesn't affect attention, but attention is compromised if parents let children watch noneducational programming on their own. But again, if we were to compare parents who did and did not have the time and inclination to select programming and watch it with their children, their households would probably differ in many ways, not just the nature of screen time. So even the modest effect we see via longitudinal studies could overestimate the impact of digital devices on attention.

Still another type of research compares the attention of kids today to that of kids who grew up with more limited access to digital devices. This procedure is actually a closer fit to the way we usually talk about the problem. When we say, "Kids today just seem unable to concentrate," we're comparing them to our memory of what kids were like 10 or 20 years ago.

*For a detailed look at this issue, see "Beyond Excerpts: Teaching with Whole Books Boosts Comprehension and Engagement" on page 22.

Comparing kids today to kids 20 years ago can be done if the same test of attention has been in use for 20 (or more) years. That has happened because some mental measures have become standards, used for years and across many contexts. (Of course, if we see a difference in attention over time, we still can't be sure what caused it. Lots of things have changed in the last 20 years.)

One study reviewed the results of 179 research reports published between 1990 and 2021; in each study, researchers had administered the d2 Test of Attention, a widely used assessment.[13] In this paper-and-pencil task, the subject sees a sheet of figures and must cross out the targets—the letter d with two dashes over it. The nontargets are the letter d with one or three dashes or the letter p with one to four dashes. This task requires that subjects direct attention to specific visual features, inhibit responses to highly similar (but incorrect) items, and maintain focus on a long and repetitive task. Researchers found that children's performance from 1990 until 2021, on average, did not change. Adults actually improved slightly.

Students *can* pay attention, but if they get bored, they are quick to switch their attention to something else.

Another study examined performance on two working-memory tasks.[14] For one task, the subject heard a sequence of digits (for example, 9, 2, 4) and tried to repeat them in reverse (4, 2, 9). For the other task, subjects were asked to tap in reverse order a series of spatial locations on a computer screen. Data were collected from 1975 to 2016 for the digit task and from 1989 to 2016 for the spatial task, comprising over 135,000 participants in 1,754 samples. The results showed a small diminishment in performance across years for both the digit and the spatial tasks (with effect sizes of $d = -.06$ and $d = -.17$, respectively*).

What's the takeaway? It's clear that discerning whether digital activities compromise attention is a difficult research problem. Based on three different research strategies, we can only conclude that screen time *may* modestly degrade attention. We don't have strong causal evidence, and the correlation seems to come and go across studies.

This presents a paradox: Many teachers think that students are much more distractible than they were in the recent past, but research shows an effect that comes and goes and is modest when it is observed. How can we make sense of this contradiction?

Digital Content Changes How We Value Rewards

When kids are distractible, it's natural to suspect attention is to blame. But maybe the problem is not that they *can't* pay attention, but rather that they *don't want to*.

For many students, schoolwork is often challenging and not very engaging. One motivator to maintain attention is the promise of some later reward. That might be the satisfaction of understanding the content, the pride of receiving a good grade, or avoiding the disapproval of teachers or family members.

What makes students more or less willing to endure something unpleasant in exchange for an anticipated reward? How much they value the reward, obviously, but also how long they must wait for it. Immediate gratification is appealing because the same payoff seems less valuable if it's delayed.[16]

Here's the way researchers study this phenomenon. Let's say I offer you a choice: Would you prefer that I give you 10 dollars tomorrow, or 10 dollars a week from tomorrow? Virtually everyone would prefer the money sooner because you have an extra week to enjoy whatever you spend the money on.

Suppose I compensate you for waiting. You can choose between 10 dollars tomorrow or 11 dollars a week from tomorrow. You may figure that one extra dollar does not offer enough incentive to wait a week, and so you'd still pick the 10 dollars tomorrow. I can keep making offers—varying both the delay and the amount of money—to figure out your *delay discount rate*—that is, how much compensation would induce you to wait to get a reward. Some people hate to wait, and I might need to promise 20 dollars (versus an immediate 10 dollars) to get them to wait a week, whereas others would require only an extra dollar.[17]

A high delay discount rate is an aspect of impulsivity; a more impulsive person will grab a smaller reward that's available now, rather than waiting for a larger reward later.[18] One standard measure of delay discount rate is obtained by asking participants to answer about 30 questions like the one posed earlier ("Would you prefer 10 dollars tomorrow or 20 dollars in eight days?"[19]). Importantly, a high delay discount rate is associated with (but may or may not cause†) failure to finish high school[22] and poorer grades among college students.[23]

It's possible that the use of digital technologies has changed children's delay discount rates for the worse because instant gratification is such a prominent characteristic of digital activities. When you're on a phone or computer, there is little reason

*To give these effect sizes more meaning, here's an example of how they are measured: Imagine two rooms, each containing 100 adult men. The average height of the men in the two rooms differs slightly: 69.6 inches in one room and 69.1 inches in the other, although there's plenty of variation, with tall and short men in each room. The mean height of adult men in the United States is about 68.9 inches (almost 5'9"),[15] with a standard deviation of roughly 2.9 inches. To calculate effect size, you divide the difference between the two rooms—0.5 inches—by the standard deviation of 2.9 inches. That yields an effect size of about $d = 0.17$. Yet, if you saw these two groups of men side by side, do you think you'd notice the difference in height between the groups?

†For some tasks, social environment may interact with discount rate. For example, in a well-known demonstration, researchers showed that children responded to the famous marshmallow task differently depending on family wealth. Children from disadvantaged homes ate the marshmallow quickly, which can be interpreted as smart, not impulsive, if one lives in an environment of uncertainty.[20] But the relationship of impulsivity to life outcomes depends on the task and is often still present when family income is controlled for[21]—and for some of the relationships, such as drug use or obesity, the argument for rationality doesn't seem to apply.

to endure boredom because there is always something else you might do on the device. What's more, accessing that alternate activity is *easy*—you just keep scrolling, or you switch apps. Perhaps that impulsivity carries over to other activities. Students *can* pay attention, but if they get bored, they are quick to switch their attention to something else.

Some research supports this possibility. People who show "problematic use" of the internet generally[24] or of specific apps like Facebook[25] (as identified by self-report measures) show higher discount rates than average users. Of course, we're interested in more than problematic use. Do we still see a relationship between delay discount rate and digital activity among more typical users? The answer is a tentative "yes." A few studies show a consistent but still modest relationship (approximately an effect size of $d = 0.25$) between technology use and delay discount rate. These studies have used different measures of tech engagement, including self-reported screen time,[26] actual screen time measured on the device,[27] and self-reported time on social media.[28] Thus, the observed relationship with delay discount rate is not a quirk of which measure of digital-device use we happened to pick.

So, there is a possible causal chain that using digital devices increases the delay discount rate, and then the higher delay discount rate causes poorer academic performance. But the picture remains incomplete. As before, the available data are largely correlational. And delay discount rates may have not been measured in the best way. That is, researchers typically determine individuals' rates by asking them to answer questions about money. But when a student diverts their attention to their phone, they aren't getting a financial reward but rather one of information. If I delay getting a financial reward by a week, the money still has the same objective value, even if I think of it differently. But if a student delays reading a text message or checking social media, the information may lose value. Social information is perishable.

There is limited research on the subject, but one study of college students suggested that the value of money decays over the course of weeks, whereas information in text messages decays in hours.[29] Researchers may find that delay discount rates are a stronger predictor of distractibility if they measure discount rates for digital content. For example, one study showed that people's delay discount rate of the value of texting predicts their likelihood of texting while driving, whereas their delay discount rate for a monetary reward does not.[30]

Digital Content Changes Boredom Calculations

Perhaps the same content that was interesting enough to hold the attention of students a generation ago might be deemed boring by today's kids. It's easy to dismiss this account as an example of generational bias. Don't older people always think that they, as children, were superior to today's youth? But psychological theories of boredom suggest there may be more to it than that.

Contemporary theories of boredom emphasize its function.[31] Boredom alerts us that it's time to change activities because we judge that whatever we're doing now has less value than something else we might do. Theories vary in what they propose goes into our calculation of "value." For example, one theory suggests that we feel bored when we detect a mismatch between the current activity and our valued goals,[32] and another proposes that we experience boredom when we sense that we aren't learning anything.[33]

However "value" is calculated by the mind, if boredom's function is to prompt a change to a more fruitful activity, that implies the existence of a mental mechanism to calculate opportunity costs. The tediousness of the current task is based not only on the characteristics of the task, but also on an unconscious comparison with what else you might be doing. Thus, you feel more bored when another *available* activity is deemed more valuable than the current one.[34]

That sensitivity to context seems plausible, or even likely. For example, consider a student who finds a novel interesting when she's on an airplane and has forgotten to bring her phone. Might she not deem the same novel less interesting if she has her phone with her? She's bored because she (unconsciously) compares the interest of the novel to that of watching YouTube videos.

Research suggests the degradation of attention has been learned. And what is learned can potentially be unlearned.

Some research supports this proposal. In one experiment, subjects were led to a small room where they were told to sit for 15 minutes and "entertain themselves with their thoughts."[35] For half the subjects, the room was barren, containing only a desk, chair, filing cabinet, and chalkboard without chalk. For the other subjects, the room contained a laptop with an open web browser, a partially completed Lego puzzle, a partially completed jigsaw puzzle, sheets of paper with crayons, and chalk for the chalkboard. Participants in this room were instructed not to interact with the objects, but to just sit with their thoughts.

At the end of 15 minutes, subjects rated their experience on several scales, and the people who were in the room that held interesting activities reported significantly more boredom than the people who were in the empty room.

Compared to students a generation ago, students today may feel bored more often because they may nearly always find themselves in environments filled with fun activities they are not doing. In other words, students may unconsciously compare whatever they are doing to the fun activities available on the phones in their pockets.*

Attention is essential for reading deeply, solving problems, and thinking creatively.

Other correlational data are consistent with this idea. Much research shows a correlation between cellphone use and boredom:[36] People who report that they are frequently bored also report using their cellphones a lot. It's possible that causation moves in the other direction—that people who are easily bored turn to their phones more often to relieve their boredom. But there are also data showing that people feel more bored[37] and more distracted[38] *after* using their cellphones, perhaps because having recently used the phone is a reminder of how engaging digital activities are. Although only about a third of teens say they enjoy social media "a lot" and nearly two-thirds say they enjoy online videos "a lot,"[39] enjoyment only needs to be intermittent for it to create a powerful pull. People don't become compulsive gamblers because they always win, but rather because they sometimes win; many researchers have compared the thrill a teen gets from an occasional successful moment on social media to the occasional jackpot for a gambling addict.[40]

Implications

How might the results reviewed here influence the thinking of parents, educators, and policymakers when it comes to children and digital activities?

The first conclusion is both cheering and dispiriting. Digital devices do not seem to degrade students' capacity to pay attention, which is clearly good news. But at the same time, it's useful to know the nature of your enemy. Despite a paucity of hard data on the matter, I believe the overwhelming majority of teachers who say that it's more difficult to get students to stay on task than it was a generation ago. How are we supposed to address the problem if we don't know what's causing it?

I've offered two alternative explanations for what teachers have observed. Each is a variation on this idea: It's not that students can't pay attention, but rather that they more readily choose not to. The delay discounting story suggests that experience with digital devices makes students set a higher value to near-term rewards (e.g., watching a funny video) and a lower value to rewards they anticipate getting in the distant future (e.g., being well prepared for college or an apprenticeship). The boredom explanation suggests that digital devices prompt students to more readily conclude they are bored because all nondigital activities are unconsciously compared to entertainment on their phone, and the phone always seems more attractive.

I've reviewed data supporting each hypothesis, but there's insufficient research to convince us that either—or both—play a substantial role in the observed change in children's behavior. Still, we should probably hope these explanations are valid, because both suggest that the degradation of attention has been learned. And what is learned can potentially be unlearned.

If digital devices make students overvalue near-term rewards, perhaps children can be coaxed to reassess the importance of long-term rewards by making them more explicit or salient. For example, portfolios of student work might help students see and appreciate how much progress they have made in the quality of their work throughout a school year and reflect on the necessity of hard work to access the satisfaction that progress brings.

If digital devices prompt students to set a low threshold for concluding "this is boring," it may be that, with the consistent absence of digital devices, the unconscious mind will learn that the phone is unavailable in a particular context, and the calculation of boredom will adjust accordingly. We might hope that cellphone bans in school would induce such learning, and one would predict that students would learn it more quickly with bell-to-bell bans (rather than allowing phones between classes and at lunch and recess) because they would develop a consistent association between *school* and *no phone*. Indeed, schools and districts could help test this hypothesis by gathering relevant data as bans are implemented (and perhaps changed or rescinded over time).

We should keep in mind that children's use of digital devices may have consequences across a variety of outcomes, touching on their mental and physical health,[41] social-emotional skills,[42] and academic performance.[43] This article has reviewed data on just one cognitive outcome, namely, attention. In addition, it has focused on long-term consequences. The short-term consequences of digital device use are well known: They frequently distract users from other tasks.[44] Clearly, any recommendations for children's use of digital devices must take a broad view of likely outcomes.

That said, attention is the nexus of thought; it is essential for all of the cognitive processes we want students to develop, such as reading deeply, solving problems, and thinking creatively. If students' use of digital devices is degrading their ability to deploy attention effectively—and teachers are veritably screaming that it is—that phenomenon should be near the top of our priority list for education research and policy. ■

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/willingham.

*For a related "Ask the Cognitive Scientist" article on how to increase engagement and when to use attention grabbers, see "Why Do Students Remember Everything That's on Television and Forget Everything I Say?" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/hbu.

When Students Think Beyond the Moment

Enhancing Adolescents' Development by Engaging Their Emotions

By Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, Christina Kundrak, and Kori Street

Every educator knows the stirring silence that envelops a classroom after a curious student asks a question that opens a new way of thinking. Years ago, in a middle school science class one of us (Immordino-Yang) was teaching, a discussion about human origins led students to wrestle with what it means to "belong" in the natural world. The discussion unfolded into questions about identity, history, and how knowledge shapes our sense of self. That moment opened a monthslong conversation in which students used scientific approaches and ideas to understand observations and to make sense of themselves and the world.

We have come to call that meaning-making process *transcendent thinking*. It occurs when students connect happenings, facts, and procedures to values and ideas, integrate emotions into reasoning, and use what they are learning to imagine larger meanings.[1] Watching adolescents think beyond immediate classroom lessons has changed the way we see teaching and learning—and launched a new understanding of the adolescent brain.

Adolescence: The Brain's Time for Meaning

Adolescence is often framed as a time of risk, rebellion, and emotional turbulence. Evidence from neuroscience shows that it is indeed a period of dramatic change, but what matters most for educators is how that change enables new potential during a period of accelerated brain development:

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> Brain development after birth does not just involve the brain getting bigger or stronger or increasing its number of connections.... Instead, brain development mainly involves the generation, pruning, and reorganization of neural connections to form brain networks that reflect a person's experiences and help him or her adapt to the world in which they live.... As a person engages with situations, problems, ideas, and social relationships, these experiences influence patterns of brain structure and function that undergird a person's changing skills and inclinations over time.[2]

During puberty, the brain's major networks reorganize, and networks that support abstract reasoning, empathy, and self-reflection are shaped and strengthened. Because of this, experiences that feel deeply meaningful to teens—ones that engage their emotions and abstract thinking by inviting them to make sense of complex, compelling ideas—literally seem to help build the architecture of the brain.

In our research at the University of Southern California Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education (USC CANDLE), we have seen how adolescents' developing brains are primed for reflection, purpose, and moral imagination.[3] This is the time when they begin to ask: *Who am I? What do I believe in and stand for? What kind of world do I want to help create?* As educators well know, these kinds of questions are powerful motivators for teens, but too often our lessons and expectations seem designed to headbutt rather than support and work with these developmentally important thoughts. And, as educators also know, that doesn't go well. Students may fight the system and take their musings underground, losing interest in school and becoming defiant. Or they may push these important developmental proclivities aside and adopt an attitude of passive compliance, buying into a system that ultimately undermines their sense of agency and purpose to please adults and follow the paths others have set out for them.

But it does not have to be this way. Our neuroimaging studies suggest that when teens consider the broader implications of stories, lessons, or events—that is to say, when they think transcendently about the things they are learning—their brain networks are engaged in measurable ways that appear to strengthen them over time. In particular, the network that coordinates reflective, conceptual, and self-relevant thinking and the network for goal-directed focus come to communicate more efficiently. The brain systems that allow young people to plan, empathize, and learn are exercised when they search for meaning. What if our secondary schools were designed to incorporate and leverage, rather than thwart, this important developmental process?

The Science of Feeling and Thinking

While early neuroscientific theories assumed that emotions interfere with rational thought,[4] today we know the opposite is true. In the brain, emotions guide attention, motivation, and decision-making;[5] they are the bridge between knowledge and action and the reason you bother to think in the first place. Let's put it this way: Whatever someone is having emotion about, they are thinking about. And whatever they are thinking about, they could possibly learn about. So, the question for educators is: What are the students in my class having emotions about? If your answer has to do with the powerful ideas underlying your subject matter, then our neuroscience studies suggest you are on the right track.

In one of our earliest studies with teens, a diverse sample of high school students watched short documentary stories and individually discussed with us how they felt.[6] Just as we had previously found with adults, when the teens reflected on the bigger implications of the stories, grappling with the stories' broader ethical, personal, and systems-level importance, they were more likely to report feeling moved or inspired.[7]

For example, Isela, a participating teen, watched a video of Malala Yousafzai filmed when she was a 12-year-old in Pakistan determined to continue studying despite the Taliban having forbidden it. When asked how it made her feel, Isela responded: "Um, this story makes me feel upset—how she wants to be a doctor and continue on with her education, but it makes her sad ... knowing her journey would be very difficult."

After pausing for a few moments, Isela went on:

> And it's crazy how it's that powerful.... I mean ... it makes me think about my own journey in education and how I want to go to college and hopefully be a scientist someday. And even more, I guess what really hits me is how not everyone is able to get this chance, to go forward with their life and get an education or do what they want to do with their life. I mean, it's not right.

Again, Isela stopped to think. Her gaze wandered from the image of Malala on the computer screen in front of her to the tree outside the window. Then she continued:

> Ah, I guess when I think more, yeah, it makes me feel upset that, um, others live in certain parts of the world where they don't want people to learn and they are trying to, like, hold them back. But then, uh, her story, like, inspires me to work harder so that, uh, I can prevent those things from happening maybe. Everyone everywhere should have the chance ... I mean, all human beings should be able to live free and choose their life future.

After reacting empathically to the concrete details of Malala's situation, Isela went beyond these details to consider the personal

and ethical implications of the story. All the teens *could* think transcendently, we found, but some, like Isela, did so far more than others.

When the teens watched the stories again during fMRI brain imaging, we saw that among those who felt inspired, the brain regions that regulate bodily states (heart rate, breathing, and consciousness) were activated alongside regions associated with reasoning, self-awareness, memory, and imagination. In other words, when the teens were so taken with the information they were learning that they dared to ask big questions that challenged their assumptions and changed their perspectives, they dynamically coordinated major brain networks involved in mental and bodily functioning. This suggested something quite profound: Deep emotional reflection on complex ideas leverages the very same brain networks that are responsible for keeping us alive.

Even more striking, when we brought the participants back two years later for follow-up brain scans, those like Isela who had done more transcendent thinking in the original interview had grown their brains more over time, irrespective of their IQ or socioeconomic circumstances, and irrespective of the state of their brain development when they started the study. Our work with the teens showed us how they move through the world daily—not complacently memorizing but challenging and reckoning with the things they witness in order to learn deeply. And the more they did this, the more they were habitually exercising their minds and brains, and the more growth they later showed.

These findings are important for educators to understand because they change the way we think about the purpose of learning in school.[8] When teens develop dispositions for transcendent thinking, they build intellectual agency and strengthen the neurobiological circuits that undergird mental functioning and emotional well-being. For adolescents, whose emotions are amplified by hormonal changes and heightened social awareness, this means that learning experiences are particularly powerful when charged with genuine feeling and deep learning. Following our participants for three more years into young adulthood, we found that the more transcendent thinking they had shown in the original interview, and the more robustly their brain networks had changed over the subsequent two years, the stronger their identity development, self-liking, and relationships five years after we first met them.[9]

Now, can you imagine if teens' learning opportunities in school regularly integrated their emotions with their intellect?

Building Classrooms That Support Development

Understanding this science of how youth make meaning as they learn is only the beginning. The real challenge, and opportunity, is translating it into classrooms. That is why we created CANDLE's COLABs program, where educators and scientists work side by side to bring insights from developmental research into everyday practice. It means that relationships, relevance, and reflection are not add-ons to rigorous instruction; they are the mechanism of developmentally powerful learning itself.

The brain is shaped by how you use it, and adolescents' brains are sculpted by the kinds of thinking they do most. When we give them opportunities to make connections across subjects, to question, to empathize, to imagine alternatives, to interrogate different perspectives, the data suggest we are literally helping their brains grow and integrate. The educator's role is to provide the opportunity, resources, and structure for this exploration—to guide students through complexity without dictating conclusions.

At CANDLE, we think of this as teaching with a developmental orientation: seeing every lesson not only as academic instruction but as an opportunity for identity formation and civic growth. Whether in a COLABs workshop or a local professional learning community, teachers tell us that this perspective reenergizes their practice and changes the way they see their work. It validates what they already feel: that teaching is about far more than transmitting information. It's about shaping human beings who can think critically and care deeply, who know what it feels like to be curious, and who are learning to link the specific examples and information from their academic learning to big, powerful ideas.

Adolescents' developing brains are primed for reflection, purpose, and moral imagination. They begin to ask: *Who am I? What do I believe in and stand for? What kind of world do I want to help create?*

Thinking Beyond Academic Standards

Schools are understandably preoccupied with what students know and how this compares to standards, assessments, and outcomes. But our research suggests the mental habits and reflective capacities that students build will shape how they use what they know, and how they will develop their potential through acts of coming to know. Put another way, determining what students know and can do is not enough to assess their progress. The more important question for educators is how students' daily activities invoke patterns of thinking and feeling that shape not simply what knowledge and skills the students acquire but how they think and, ultimately, who they become.

One powerful example comes from a student in a high school designed around performance-based assessment who was working on Zeno's dichotomy paradox, the ancient puzzle about walking halfway to a door again and again.[10] Will the person ever reach the door? Preparing his graduation project, the student described how his work changed his view of both mathematics and himself:

> I have spent two months thinking about one problem called "walking to the door." It led me to thinking about limits and the idea of asymptotes. I had to study fractions to be able

to think about the problem I had. Through doing the problem, I got fascinated by the idea of finite and infinity. I was able to connect it to my life.[11]

To make sense of the problem, he had to master very concrete skills (fractions, limits, algebraic reasoning), but he also began to wrestle with big ideas about the nature of infinity and about persistence in his own life. His narrative continuously cycled between the here-and-now ("I had to study fractions") and the abstract ("I got fascinated by the idea of finite and infinity"), and he used that active toggling to connect the work to the empowering feeling of becoming a mathematician.

Moments like this reveal how deep learning often occurs when students link abstract concepts to their lived experiences. In doing so, they are not just mastering content; they are building the neural "cross-talk" that infuses their reasoning with emotion and purpose. Over time, this integrated pattern of thinking supports long-term well-being and lifelong learning. In other words, the ways students think about what they are learning—the stories they construct and the feelings they harbor about it—help grow them as people and help grow their brains.

What Transcendent Thinking Looks Like in Practice

Transcendent thinking can emerge in any subject area and in thinking about social and civic issues. It shows up whenever students move beyond describing what is happening right now and begin to think about the bigger concepts at stake. For any given thing or event, from a math problem to neighborhoods' differing levels of tree cover, transcendent thinking includes students wondering how that thing or event works, why it happens, what systems or histories shape it, how it could be different, and what it means for themselves and others.

To gather examples of transcendent thinking in a social and civic context, we asked the teens who had come to our lab to reflect on the violence and crime many had witnessed or heard about in their urban neighborhoods. Why did they think these things happened, and what did they think could be done to make the problem better? In their reflections, some students focused on describing the violent events, explaining how people "get caught up in the moment," are "really mad, and so they just kill somebody," or make a "bad decision." Those explanations are correct, but they stay grounded in the here-and-now. Other teens, talking about the very same events, described violence as "a cycle," connected to family histories, community expectations, and what people have been led to believe about themselves. One student pointed out that "everyone has a history" that shapes how they act. These more elaborate narratives weave together emotion, context, and systems considered over time; they reveal transcendent thinking.

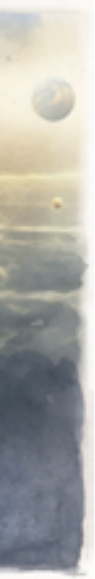
Classrooms can invite this kind of meaning-making. A history teacher might ask students not only what happened in a particular era but how patterns of injustice or courage echo in their own communities and what "cycles" they see repeating. A math teacher might use a data project to raise questions about whose experiences are represented, who is missing from the dataset, and how statistics can be used to challenge or reinforce stereotypes. A science teacher might encourage students to consider how climate change policies affect different neighborhoods or generations, prompting them to connect graphs and experiments to issues of fairness and responsibility.

In our partnerships with educators, we see that when teachers intentionally design opportunities for these kinds of narratives, students respond with remarkable insights. One teacher described how a unit on climate change turned into a conversation about justice: Students asked who gets to decide what sacrifices are made, brought in family stories, and debated the roles of government and community action. The teacher realized her students were not just learning science content; they were "practicing democracy" by building narratives about how the world works and how scientific knowledge and skills can be leveraged to understand and impact these happenings.

Neuroscience helps explain why these practices are so powerful. When adolescents engage emotionally with complex, real-world questions, the brain network that tracks bodily feelings of significance works together with the network for effortful focus and the network for reflection and imagination.* Deep, meaningful thinking dynamically engages this extensive brain circuitry, making students feel more alive, more agentic, and more invested in their work. Over time, adolescents who routinely cycle between concrete problem-solving and abstract reflection show stronger coordination among these networks and better outcomes in school and in life.[12]

For educators, the implication is clear: Transcendent thinking is not a luxury to fit in after the "real" curriculum. It *is* the real curriculum. When we invite students to build, share, and defend their own big-picture narratives—while also providing targeted support for the concrete skills they need to do so—we are helping them develop the dispositions of mind that grow their brains, sustain their learning, and prepare them to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

*These three networks are (1) the salience network, which constructs feelings of all kinds, weighing their relevance and urgency to shift thinking between the other two networks; (2) the executive control network, which is outwardly focused and enables attention to specific goals; and (3) the default mode network, which is internally focused and reflective, helping us build a sense of self.



Our longitudinal research with teens from diverse Los Angeles schools shows that those who habitually engage in transcendent thinking—who think both about and beyond the immediate context and reflect on the deeper meanings, values, ethics, and possibilities that are invoked by doing so—develop stronger connections among brain networks associated with self-regulation and perspective-taking.[13] They also report greater life satisfaction and sense of purpose as young adults.

We have found that transcendent thinking can even buffer the negative effects of stress and violence. For example, the adolescents in our lab who thought in transcendent ways about the problem of neighborhood violence showed resilience to the effects of this violence in their brain development.[14] Meaning-making appears to protect the brain, much as exercise protects the body. For educators, this underscores the importance of helping students situate their learning and experiences in larger disciplinary contexts, connecting daily work to big ideas.

Teaching as Co-Construction of Meaning

When we speak with teachers around the country, many tell us that what drew them to education was the chance to make a difference in young people's lives. Yet the daily pressures of standards and testing can make it hard to honor that deeper purpose. The science of transcendent thinking reminds us that teaching is itself an act of meaning-making.

When teachers design lessons that invite students to connect ideas and emotions, they are participating in the same developmental process they hope to nurture. Our ongoing research with teachers shows that teachers' own curiosity, empathy, and reflection activate similar brain systems to those of their students. Learning, for both, becomes a shared human endeavor and one that matters for instruction.

Our recent study with secondary teachers across Los Angeles revealed how teachers' own developmental thinking, or how they understand who their students are and what learning is for, is related to the quality of practices they enact in the classroom.[15] Teachers whose professional narratives integrate both cognitive and social-emotional dimensions of learning, reminding students that they have "amazing ideas" and encouraging students to "develop the intellectual courage" to share their ideas and consider multiple perspectives, were more likely to create classrooms that encourage dialogue, reflection, and student voice. As one teacher described, "I don't just teach biology—I teach students who are becoming biologists, citizens, and people who care about life." In their classrooms, lessons unfold as conversations in which students' perspectives and queries help shape the learning goals and deepen collective understanding.

Our neuroimaging data from teachers engaging with student work while in an fMRI scanner suggest that this kind of teaching reflects the same dynamic integration we observe in our adolescent participants: networks supporting self-reflection, empathy, and goal-directed focus working together. When teachers engage in this co-construction of meaning, they are exercising the same systems of the brain that underpin deep learning in their students. Teaching that integrates emotion, identity, and intellect becomes not just instruction but also a relational and reflective practice of growth for both teacher and learner—and youth benefit.

We see this every day in our work with educators: teachers leaving sessions with not only new strategies but also a renewed sense of purpose—a new way of seeing the classroom, of listening, and of engaging youth. They describe realizing that fostering meaning is not an add-on to good teaching; it *is* good teaching. When educators and students co-construct meaning and build a classroom culture of engaging thoughtfully with concepts and their implications, they build classrooms that cultivate the very capacities that sustain learning and democracy itself.

When students are invited to engage with rich, generative content and are given space to wonder, to wrestle with big ideas, and to connect learning to life, they don't just perform better academically—they become more fully themselves.

Looking Forward

Imagine an education system that recognizes adolescence not as a problem to manage but as a window of possibility. Imagine classrooms where academic rigor and emotional depth are inseparable, where students learn to think beyond the moment, and where teachers are partners in young people's developmental growth.

This is the vision that drives our work at USC CANDLE. We study the science of learning not as an abstract pursuit but as a way to illuminate the artistry and science of teaching. Our brain research has clear implications: When students are invited to engage with rich, generative content and are given space to wonder, to wrestle with big ideas, and to connect learning to life, they don't just perform better academically—they become more fully themselves.

We educators have the extraordinary privilege of guiding students' journeys. Every thoughtful question and moment of reflection we nurture shapes the developing brain and the emerging citizen. Together, we can create classrooms that grow minds capable of complex scholarly thinking imbued with empathy, imagination, and purpose—the capacities our youth, and our world, most need to thrive. ■

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/immordino-yang_kundrak_street.

Beyond Excerpts

Teaching with Whole Books Boosts Comprehension and Engagement

By Natalie Wexler

"The death of the novel arrived in my 9th grade English class some years ago," a former English teacher who blogs under the name Cafeteria Duty has written.[1] That day, the class was about to discuss the dramatic courtroom scenes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when it is at last revealed what happened between Tom Robinson, a Black man in the South in the 1930s, and the white woman he is accused of raping.

Before launching into that discussion, the teacher decided to first ask students to review the major plot points and characters. This, according to the teacher, is the "astonishing" debate that ensued:

> *Tom Robinson was the sheriff*, one student asserted.
>
> *No, that's Lennie*, corrected another.
>
> *Lennie's from a book we read last semester, stupid*, someone politely corrected. *Tom Robinson is the character who never leaves his house.*
>
> The class erupted. *That's Boo!* Above the din, someone shouted, *Tom is Scout's classmate, the boy with no lunch!*
>
> On it went.[2]

In shock and "not a little despair," Cafeteria Duty berated the class for not having kept up with the reading, briskly summarized the plot of the book, and "never taught that novel again." Realizing that students couldn't be counted on to do any reading for homework, the teacher turned to increasingly shorter novels before ultimately abandoning teaching whole books altogether.

Cafeteria Duty is not alone. The novels that used to be staples of English classes—*The Great Gatsby*, *1984*, *The Scarlet Letter*—seem to have faded from the curriculum, often replaced by brief texts and excerpts. Hard data are difficult to come by, but Cafeteria Duty, now an administrator, calls it an "obvious given" that "students are reading fewer books for school, and English teachers are assigning fewer books, most certainly at the high school level."[3]

Many other observers concur.[4] Three former teachers who now write guides and offer professional development on reading instruction say they've seen a dearth of whole books during their visits to hundreds of middle and high schools in recent years.[5] Psychologist and author Jean Twenge has written that at her daughter's high school, "regular English classes no longer assign books, only short stories and articles."[6] I've spoken with two broth-

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISLENIA MIL

ers—one a recent college graduate and the other a freshman in college—who attended a highly selective public high school in Washington, DC. Aside from a couple of creation myths in ninth grade—and, for one of them, the short novel *Things Fall Apart*—they hadn't been required to read an entire book during their high school careers.

The limited data available for earlier grades indicate that many children also aren't reading whole books before they get to high school. A 2023 survey of English language arts teachers in grades three through eight found that only 17 percent relied primarily on whole texts, defined to include "complete poems, novels, plays, and articles." Almost half said they use some whole texts combined with shorter pieces. Significantly, about a quarter primarily used basal readers, which generally don't incorporate whole books, and/or text selections and excerpts.[7]

Brief Passages Are Failing Our Students

Lack of student interest is one of many justifications for the shift away from whole books. Another is lack of time in a world where, as Cafeteria Duty observed, many students simply don't read outside class.[8] That's been especially true since the pandemic, when many schools lowered expectations because students were dealing with difficult or even traumatic situations. Even though the pandemic is long over, those looser standards are often still in place.

Teachers also cite shrinking attention spans. In the 2023 survey, 83 percent of teachers said their students' reading stamina had decreased since 2019, including 53 percent who said it had decreased "a lot."[9] Experts say that screens, phones, and social media have accustomed students to skimming and reading only brief snippets. Students have also gotten used to the constant stimulation provided by digital media, making it harder for them to persevere through lengthier texts.[10]

In addition, I've heard English teachers say they're under pressure to cover a range of genres—not just novels but short stories, poetry, plays, and nonfiction—as well as teaching skills like research and writing. The Common Core State Standards have been widely interpreted to require English teachers to include more nonfiction, even though the percentages of nonfiction in the standards were intended to apply across the curriculum.[11] In addition, the Common Core's emphasis on "close reading" may have led to increased reliance on short texts, since it's hard to conduct a close read of an entire novel.

Even before the Common Core became influential, the federal No Child Left Behind legislation contributed to the trend away from whole books by attaching high stakes to standardized reading tests. Those tests present students with brief passages or excerpts followed by comprehension questions. In an effort to equip students for success on the tests, many schools have adopted that approach for reading instruction as well, despite the lack of evidence that it increases test scores—or comprehension.[12]

Consider a lesson, available online at go.aft.org/mgy,[13] designed to teach third-graders the skill of identifying literal and nonliteral language in a story.[14] The vehicle for teaching the skill is a story about Amelia Bedelia, the famously literal-minded fictional housekeeper. In the story, Amelia Bedelia's employer asks her to get the spots out of a dress in the closet. Of course, she finds a polka-dotted dress—and proceeds to get the "spots" out by cutting them out with a pair of scissors.

In the lesson, students get only one paragraph from the book, followed by comprehension questions of the sort they would see on a standardized test—like "What is a different way that Mrs. Rogers could have asked Amelia Bedelia to do what she wanted?" Providing children with the entire book would not only be more engaging, it would also likely make it easier for them to grasp a complex concept like nonliteral language.

While standards and tests have contributed to this approach to reading comprehension, the fundamental impetus is a long-standing but mistaken assumption that pervades the education system. Reading comprehension has been seen as essentially a set of skills and strategies, like "making inferences" and "finding the main idea," that can be taught and measured in the abstract.[15] As a result of their training and materials,[16] many literacy teachers see their job as teaching these comprehension skills rather than any particular content—or any particular books.

If comprehension skills are in the foreground, teachers who are under pressure to cover a lot of material are likely to opt for shorter texts as a means of teaching the skills. Education journalist Holly Korbey asked her son's middle school teacher why the class was only reading excerpts or just the first half of a chapter book. His reply was that "it doesn't matter whether it's the entire book or an excerpt" because "the skills are the same."[17]

It's certainly important for students to be able to find the main idea or make inferences, but evidence from cognitive science indicates that these aren't skills that can be taught in the abstract and applied generally. Unlike riding a bike, reading comprehension skills don't "transfer." If you know how to ride a bike, it doesn't matter *which* bike you're riding. But reading doesn't work that way—which topic you're reading about matters. It's easy to make an inference about a text on a topic you know a lot about and difficult or impossible to do so with a text on a topic that's unfamiliar.[18]

A 2023 survey of English language arts teachers in grades 3–8 found that only 17 percent relied primarily on whole texts.

Prior knowledge about a topic isn't the only component in the complex process of comprehension, but it's a key factor and one that has been largely overlooked. And the more general academic or cultural knowledge and vocabulary people possess, the greater their chances of understanding anything they try to read.[19] The most effective way to build that general knowledge and enable general reading comprehension is through a curriculum that builds knowledge of lots of topics systematically, beginning in the early grades.[20]

Not only does skills-focused instruction fail to boost reading comprehension, it also turns reading into a joyless chore. When a nationally representative sample of 13-year-olds was asked in 2023 if they read for pleasure every day or almost every day, only 14 percent said yes. That's a marked decline from 2012, when 27 percent were in that category, and from 1994's 32 percent. The flip

side is that in 2023, 31 percent said they never or hardly ever read for fun—a significant increase from 2012, when the percentage was 22, and 1994, when it was just 12.[21]

Of course, societal factors like social media have contributed to this trend, but it's a reasonable assumption that the way reading comprehension is taught in schools has led many adolescents to see it as something that has nothing to do with fun. And those societal factors only make it more urgent than ever for schools to show kids that reading books can be both a way of learning about the world and a source of pleasure. One way to do that is to introduce students, in school, to whole novels.

Whole Books Boost Comprehension

Reading whole novels can boost both students' interest in reading *and* their reading comprehension scores. One study,[22] which took place in England, had students read two challenging novels, one classic and one contemporary, over the course of 12 weeks, with most of the reading done aloud by teachers (though students also read aloud, usually in small groups to make them more comfortable). The students, who were in the equivalent of seventh grade, attended 10 urban and rural schools and ranged from being 50 or more months behind in reading to performing above average.

According to the authors of the study, in England (as in the United States) struggling readers "are often regarded by teachers as unable to read whole narratives and given short, simplified texts, yet are expected to analyze every part in a slow laborious read-through." The 20 teachers participating in the study were, in contrast, advised to move through the novels at a fairly brisk pace, pausing only when needed (e.g., when students looked confused or at the end of a section) to make sure everyone was following the story.

Reading whole novels can boost students' interest in reading and their reading comprehension scores.

At the beginning and end of the 12-week period, students were given standardized reading comprehension tests. On average, students made almost nine months of progress; weak readers made *16* months of progress. And even though the researchers weren't trying to spark a love of reading, the experiment appeared to have that effect. Students who had previously been reluctant readers couldn't wait for the next chapter, frequently coming to class excited to read. This study has given rise to a project based at the University of Sussex in England, called the Faster Read, that offers free guidance for teachers (see go.aft.org/so3 for details).

Why would novels boost reading comprehension so dramatically? The researchers weren't sure, but I have a theory. We're more likely to remember things when we're affected emotionally, and novels can engage us emotionally far more than brief texts or excerpts can. In addition, as cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham noted, the human mind "seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories" as opposed to expository texts.[23] Those factors may have helped students absorb and retain

the language structures and vocabulary they heard in the novels, equipping them to better understand the unrelated passages on the standardized tests.

Still, it can be difficult to teach using novels and whole books in the current environment. Is it really worth the effort? For a number of reasons, the answer is "yes."

Students' Abilities Are Suffering

The trend toward brief passages and skills-focused instruction in the K–12 curriculum has consequences for what students are able to do once they graduate from high school. Anecdotal and some experimental evidence indicates that many college students, including some at highly selective institutions, struggle to make sense of 19th-century novels.[24] Some professors say that even contemporary works of literature are incomprehensible to their students.[25]

I've spoken to a number of professors in various disciplines who say they've had to significantly lower their expectations, reducing the length of reading assignments and still devoting class time to summarizing them. There have always been students who don't do the reading, but they say this is a sea change.

Stuart Carroll, an experienced professor of elementary education at the College of New Jersey, told me his department used to have all students read the same book over spring and winter breaks, with positive results. But it became harder to get students to do the reading, and the program was discontinued in 2017. Carroll has seen a similar phenomenon in the freshman seminar he teaches. It covers five "interesting and readable books," and he says in the past, students "came out of the class with a more positive attitude toward reading." Now, he says, only a few students bother to read the books.

"I was kind of shocked this year at what my students thought was an onerous amount of reading," said an assistant professor of European history at a flagship state university who requested anonymity. He eventually realized he couldn't assign more than 20 pages per class, "which extremely curtailed what I could do." Even then, he could tell that many students still weren't reading what he'd assigned.

Even when students do the reading, professors say, many are unable to understand or analyze it. "We are in new territory when even highly motivated honors students struggle to grasp the basic argument of a 20-page article," Adam Kotsko, who teaches at North Central College in Illinois, wrote recently.[26]

These anecdotal observations are backed up by data: ACT scores have been declining over the past decade or so, including in the area of reading comprehension. In 2024, 57 percent of students scored "Below Proficient in Understanding Complex Texts," a marked increase from 2016, when only 23 percent fell into that category.[27] Likewise, scores on the most recent national test of 12th-graders' reading comprehension ability dipped to a historic low, with the average score in 2024 ten points lower than when the test was first given in 1992.[28]

The combination of brief passages and skills-focused comprehension instruction in K–12 may also lead to a "check the box" approach to reading. Many students no longer see the value of diving into a complex text and extracting whatever meaning and nuance might be there. They often want professors to tell them what to look for—or just provide the key points. "Gone are the days when you could expect students to do the prep work," said Jackie Witkowski, an assistant professor of art history at Western Washington University.

If a professor doesn't provide a summary, students are increasingly likely to turn to generative AI (artificial intelligence) tools like ChatGPT to provide one. Various surveys have found that anywhere from a third to almost all undergraduates use AI, with more recent studies showing higher proportions.[29]

But reading a summary of a novel is a far different experience from reading the novel itself. I ran the opening paragraphs of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens through ChatGPT. Although the summary I got back was accurate, it lacked the charm and humor that made Dickens so popular in his own time and makes his prose worth reading today. Of course, the summary was easier to understand. But, crucially, that very lack of effort deprives the reader of important benefits.

As literacy researcher Maryanne Wolf has suggested, learning to parse denser prose may develop both cognitive abilities and the "cognitive patience" that enable deep reading.[30] In addition, evidence shows that in middle and high school, having students summarize a text can provide a powerful boost to their understanding.[31]

Recent studies suggest that when students subcontract that task (or others that require cognitive effort) to a bot, their ability to think critically and analytically decreases.[32] Similarly, if teachers in middle and high school provide summaries of novels rather than requiring students to read whole books, as some are apparently doing,[33] students may be ill-equipped to engage in summarizing themselves and unaware that they're missing out on its potential cognitive benefits.

Reliance on summaries and shortcuts, whether provided by humans or AI tools, can lead to what some researchers have called "metacognitive laziness."[34] Rather than using the shortcut as a way to supplement learning, students begin to depend on it as a crutch. That kind of dependence can make it difficult for students not only to read but to absorb and retain information.

Even at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, a "great books" school that draws a self-selected group of students who want to immerse themselves in challenging texts, there's been a change. Brendan Boyle, the associate dean for graduate programs, says that the "bookish" students the school draws aren't arriving with the same ability to sit with a text and mine it for meaning. "Our graduates are no worse" than they used to be, he told me. "It's just that the amount of labor involved in getting them to that point is greater."

To be sure, K–12 schooling isn't solely responsible for the changes that college instructors are seeing. But the K–12 system is likely to be our best hope for addressing them. By immersing students in whole books and treating reading as an end in itself, rather than a means of developing discrete skills, teachers at all grade levels can foster the kind of reading stamina, sustained focus, and intellectual curiosity that all students deserve to enjoy.

Brief passages and skills-focused comprehension instruction may lead to a "check the box" approach to reading.

Whole Books Are Rewarding

It's important to show students that reading can be fun, and reading novels—especially contemporary novels that are relatively easy to access—is a great way to do that. Reading for pleasure is associated with a host of positive outcomes, including cognitive development, academic achievement, and social and emotional well-being.[35]

One study found that children and adolescents who read frequently for fun, especially those who read whole books, tend to experience more of a boost to reading comprehension than those who read less or engage in other kinds of reading.[36] Another found benefits even from "light" books like science fiction or thrillers.[37] Yet another found that, in adults, reading whole books is associated with greater longevity—greater even than reading newspapers and magazines.[38] So it's worth doing whatever we can to ensure that more students read for their own enjoyment.

It's also important that all students in a classroom have the opportunity to read and discuss the *same* book, as educator and instructional coach Doug Lemov and his coauthors explain in *The Teach Like a Champion Guide to the Science of Reading*.[39] Choice in reading material has its place, but making it the center of a literacy curriculum leads to a fragmented class experience. And, left to their own devices, students are likely to choose books that relate to topics that already interest them rather than having their horizons expanded by a teacher or curriculum designer who is aware of more options. Providing children with the experience of reading a book together, especially a novel, can transport the entire class into another world.

At an elementary school in Amarillo, Texas, where 39 languages are spoken and almost all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, the practice of reading whole novels aloud together has had enormous benefits, according to faculty members. Describing teacher Lori Hughes's experience, Lemov said, "Each

Reading a book together, especially a novel, can transport the entire class into another world.

class feels like a community, and her students look forward to what book is coming next."[40] The school's principal, Genie Baca, notes that fluency scores for the classes that read whole novels together have improved dramatically, as have behavioral issues. I've heard similar observations when visiting elementary schools using curricula that center on shared novel reading.

Another argument for having students read novels—especially literary ones—is that it helps develop empathy. That certainly resonates with the experience of many readers, and studies suggest that reading fiction can enable readers to understand what others are feeling and can reduce prejudice against stigmatized groups, especially when readers are "emotionally transported" into the story.[41] Some studies have found that when people read fiction, regions of their brains become activated in ways that reflect the characters' feelings and actions.[42] It's not yet clear, though, if those effects carry over to actual behavior.

Still, as Maryanne Wolf has written, the act of reading can change our consciousness, so that "we learn to feel what it means to be despairing and hopeless or ecstatic and consumed with unspoken feelings."[43] And it's likely that the longer and deeper the story, the greater the benefits. Following a set of characters over a period of time can emotionally transport readers in a way that short fiction and excerpts can't.

Kyair Butts, a middle school English teacher, saw that happen when he taught sixth-graders the novel *Out of the Dust*. Butts was dubious that his students—Black kids in inner-city Baltimore—would be interested in a story about "a 13-year-old white girl from Depression-era Oklahoma." But, he told me when I interviewed him for a podcast, "when students care about a character, and when they realize that Billie Jo lost her mom and her baby brother, they are hooked. They want to keep reading."[44]

For all these reasons, it's important to introduce students to, and regularly immerse them in, the enjoyable, emotionally transporting experience of reading a novel. But to fully equip students to be proficient readers, whether they go to college or not, teachers also need to guide them in making sense of challenging text, including nonfiction. Given the rampant distractions and unreliable information we all confront these days, students need to develop the capacity for sustained attention and complex thinking that immersion in complex, lengthier text can foster. That isn't always fun. Like all learning, it requires effort. At the same time, it can be immensely rewarding.

Overcoming Barriers to Whole Book Instruction

But what about the obstacles that Cafeteria Duty and other teachers say are standing in the way of teaching whole books? Those barriers can be overcome—but probably not by individual teachers alone. Schools and districts need to provide support, ideally beginning in the early elementary grades.

While the dominant elementary literacy curricula rely almost entirely on short texts and excerpts,[45] more recently developed knowledge-building curricula that incorporate whole books seem to be gaining traction across the country. One such curriculum, Bookworms K–5 Reading and Writing, has students read a total of 265 books across the elementary grades.[46] Although not as well-known as some other knowledge-building curricula, the evidence for its ability to increase general reading comprehension, especially for lower-performing students, is compelling.[47] And judging from my own observations of the curriculum in action and conversations with educators who have used it, it also boosts students' interest in reading.

Given the importance of exposing children to whole books, that should be one of the criteria states and districts use when approving or selecting curriculum. Shorter texts can of course have value as well, but a steady diet of them fails to supply children with the literacy nutrition they need. Some short texts, including nonfiction, can be taught in connection with a book, especially one set in a different time or place. If students are reading a novel that takes place during World War II, for example, a nonfiction article on rationing can enhance their understanding of the text while also exposing them to a different genre. Writing instruction can also be embedded in the content of a novel.

It may be more difficult to include whole books in the curriculum at higher grade levels, but it's not impossible—and it's crucial that students continue to read books at increasing levels of complexity. Doug Lemov and his colleagues have created an ELA curriculum for grades 5–8, Reading Reconsidered, that is built around novels, along with shorter texts that enhance students' understanding of them.[48] It includes routines designed to help students retain vocabulary and information, develop fluency, and build writing skills. Lemov and his team are also piloting a high school curriculum built around novels.

The middle grades curriculum is now used in about 500 schools, and "teachers are surprised by how much they enjoy teaching and the kids enjoy reading," Lemov told me. "You have

to develop the habit of attentional skills. You have to cause reading to happen and create the conditions for stamina."

Reading Reconsidered combines teacher read-alouds, communal reading, and individual silent reading. The teacher can "read kids into" a chapter, Lemov says, modeling fluent reading and piquing their interest. "The idea is that in class, teachers will empower students to read outside class."

Realistically, students do need to read outside class for the curriculum to include whole books at higher grade levels. Teachers can hold students accountable for assigned reading through mandatory note-taking and quizzes. In addition to ensuring that students are doing the reading, such activities help students understand and remember key points in the story, avoiding the kind of class dialogue that led Cafeteria Duty to abandon whole books. But if students are in the habit of not doing homework, it may require a shift in culture engineered by a whole school, or even a whole district, to reverse that.

Especially in schools where many older students face reading challenges, however, it may still be necessary to devote a good deal of class time to reading whole books. Former English teacher Meredith Coffey has suggested that high school administrators protect or even add time for in-class reading, perhaps through double periods for ELA.[49] They can also set expectations that, for example, students will read a complete novel or play during every unit.

One significant barrier to such a change in culture is the widespread assumption that brief texts are necessary to teach comprehension skills. Lemov says that teachers who use Reading Reconsidered often worry it won't prepare their students for state tests. To allay their concerns, the curriculum includes guides showing that a lesson relating to a novel *is* teaching students how to, for example, make an inference about a character even if that's not the lesson's main objective. As Coffey points out, not only *can* students practice comprehension skills using whole novels, understanding a literary device or gleaning the author's message may be easier with a longer text.

By immersing students in whole books, teachers can foster the sustained focus and intellectual curiosity that all students deserve to enjoy.

To enable all students to read at length and understand texts at a deep level, we need to change widely held assumptions about what reading comprehension is and how it can be fostered.[50] We have to recognize that limiting students to brief texts seen as vehicles for teaching comprehension skills is an illusory and self-defeating approach. Technology and other societal pressures present new and daunting challenges to students' abilities and attention spans, but our best chance of addressing those challenges is to center whole books in the K–12 curriculum.

Schools still have the potential to turn the United States into a "nation of readers," to borrow the title of a landmark 1985 report.[51] In the face of the temptations of screens, social media, and generative AI, that goal has only become more urgent than ever. ■

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/wexler.

Helping Students Navigate Screen Reading

One potential barrier to comprehending complex text is the shift toward digital rather than printed materials in classrooms.[1] In 2021, 90 percent of district leaders reported that all of their middle and high school students had their own devices for digital learning.[2] Perhaps not coincidentally, some professors say college students rarely come to class with hard-copy books, even in classes that rely heavily on textual analysis.[3]

But evidence indicates that when people read on screens, they understand and retain less than if they read printed text.[4] Maryanne Wolf has said that the data we have suggest that "print advantages slower, deeper processes in the reading brain" and that too much screen reading diminishes the brain's ability to use those processes.[5] While Wolf hasn't focused on the effects of reading different kinds of print text, the thrust of her argument is that whole print books are essential to counteracting the effects of digital media and developing the capacity for deep reading.

Still, reading from screens is inescapable in the modern world. Wolf advocates for a "biliteracy" approach that would teach children how best to use and negotiate each medium.[6] Similarly, linguist Naomi Baron suggests explicitly teaching students how to read printed text in a slower, more focused way and then helping them transfer those skills to reading from a screen.[7]

One way to do that is to provide students with a template for taking notes. Having students turn in their notes—ideally in their own handwriting, to prevent them from using AI—can also help teachers spot comprehension problems. Teachers can tailor questions for notetaking to particular content or use generic questions, as David and Meredith Liben, experienced educators and consultants, suggest in their book *Know Better, Do Better: Comprehension*.[8] Their approach, the Structured Journal, has students track their thoughts as they read, using four questions, including "What don't I understand completely?" and "What are the most important ideas in this section?"[9]

Another possibility is to have students complete thoughtfully designed writing activities relating to their assigned reading—perhaps a sentence stem relating to a key point, which they need to complete using a word like *because*, *but*, or *although*. They might also write a summary of what they've read, with guiding question words like *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *when*, and *how*.

Many if not most students will need explicit instruction in these kinds of activities before being expected to engage in them independently, but the effort is worthwhile. In addition to boosting comprehension and retention, writing activities such as this can familiarize students with the complex sentence structures of written language, equipping them to understand more complex texts. In addition, students' writing is likely to become clearer and more coherent.[10]

–N. W.

Being Seen

Embracing Identity to Enhance Students' Engagement and Academic Achievement

By Shaylyn Marks

Over the last 20 years as an educator, I have relied on critical self-reflection to better understand my professional journey and better serve my students. Throughout the years, I taught in a handful of districts and states before making the leap into the collegiate space as a professor of teacher education. Through reflection, I realized that the obstacles and challenges that I've endured over the years largely center on being a Black female educator working in predominantly white spaces—and they mirrored many of the experiences that I had as a student.

For most of my student experience, I was often the only Black student in the classroom. At an early age, I learned that the curriculum I encountered at school was not designed for me. I rarely saw characters who looked like me in the stories we read, and my most vivid memories of seeing small inclusions of Blackness were of historical accounts often related to slavery or the civil rights movement. The Black excellence that I encountered in my home life and celebrated in personal spaces was never reflected in the curriculum or in school settings. The Black language that many of my relatives spoke was always deemed *incorrect* and *not proper*. Essentially, I did not see my lived experiences validated at school. The subtle marginalizations of Blackness throughout my schooling made me feel small, if not invisible. And what was reinforced to me more than anything else during these formative years was that I was different. The weight of being different and marginalized in school was an invisible backpack I carried with me each day. With each year that passed, that backpack became heavier and heavier.

As a novice educator, I wrongly assumed that going from student to teacher would automatically eradicate many of the adverse experiences I'd had as a student. But I quickly found that being marginalized and racialized in educational spaces was not unique to my student experience. I also assumed that the obstacles and barriers I encountered stemming from my identity as a Black educator were unique to a specific space or place. But as I moved across different educational spaces, I had similar adverse experi-

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHARLY PALMER

ences. Despite the success I had with my students, the weight of these challenges was heavy on my shoulders and at times caused embarrassment and shame. I often questioned why I had a very different experience than my colleagues, which fueled me to push myself beyond my limits to be better and to reinvent myself over and over in pursuit of acceptance. But the problem was never really my ability to do my job, so my efforts at self-improvement did not yield acceptance, but rather burnout and fatigue.

For years, both as a student and educator, I believed these experiences were my unique burden. But when I moved into the higher education space to work with preservice and novice educators, I began to see that educators who looked like me were encountering very similar challenges. This shifted my thinking in profound ways because it demonstrated that these adverse experiences were common among Black educators. Admittedly, I found a strange comfort in this epiphany, in that I was no longer alone in carrying this weight. But the revelation also sparked a fire in me to unpack what it means to be a Black educator and student in America.

Unpacking the Cycle of Harm to Black Students and Educators

Through my inquiry work as a teacher educator, I began to better understand what was so desperately needed in my own student experience: In not ever having a Black educator throughout my K–12 schooling, I had lacked a cultural match, someone who could affirm *my* ways of being and illuminate my feelings of marginalization. I came across research that strongly demonstrates that Black educators are more likely to utilize culturally responsive practices, largely influenced by their own student experiences, and that they often serve as "cultural brokers."[1] I immersed myself in research and literature that examined the ways Black educators reduce language policing and disproportionate disciplinary referrals through their shared understanding of cultural and linguistic ways of being.[2] It is because of these culturally affirming experiences that having a Black educator even for just one year in elementary school yields higher graduation and college attendance rates.[3]

While it is common in classrooms for Black English speakers to be overcorrected and have their home language deemed incorrect,* Black educators are more apt to not only understand the Black English being spoken but also value and position it as an asset in the classroom. Black educators tend to more readily employ contrastive analysis to demonstrate the differences between Black English and the "language of schooling" than to follow practices rooted in identifying supposed wrongness in language usage.[4] This turns language encounters into learning opportunities rooted in code-switching rather than a simple policing of language. It is an asset-based pedagogical practice that increases students' confidence and overall academic success.

Consider also the research on disproportionate student disciplinary referral patterns. Black students are approximately three times more likely to receive disciplinary referrals than white students—and while white students are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals that are objective in nature (e.g., for being tardy), Black students are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals that are subjective (e.g., for being loud and/or disrespectful).[5] Relatedly, research indicates that Black students are more likely to have their cultural and linguistic ways of being misinterpreted (often deemed incorrect or disrespectful) and to be disciplined, fueling the school-to-prison nexus—but the root of these discrepancies is cultural dissonance in educational spaces across the nation.[6] The shared cultural ways of being between Black educators and Black students often avoids such harmful misunderstandings.

At an early age, I learned that the curriculum I encountered at school was not designed for me.

In my inquiry work, I also identified a connection between the Black educator and Black student experiences that is less discussed and is deeply rooted in the cycle of harm that occurs among these two populations. At the core of this cycle of harm sits the marginalization and lack of inclusion of Blackness and Black excellence, which often leads to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and fatigue. While having these experiences as a student inadvertently prepared me for what I would face as an educator, they often serve as deterrents for Black children who aspire to become educators or who want to thrive in classroom spaces. These exclusions are some of the strongest currents fueling the cycle of harm that Black educators and students experience.[7] Feeling unseen or not valued perpetuates the diversity crisis in the educator workforce and the opportunity gap in Black student academic achievement. Through unpacking this cycle of harm, we can better understand the mistakes we've made and collectively work to provide better experiences for Black students and educators alike.[8]

While it is clear that all students—especially Black students and other students of color—benefit from a teaching force that more proportionately reflects their increasing diversity in classrooms,[9] recruiting Black educators and other educators of color is just one piece of this complex puzzle. Recruitment efforts cannot be rooted in superficial notions of representation; they need to come with deep understanding and culturally affirming support. Furthermore, it is critical that *all* educators understand the elements of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical practice so they can best support their respective students. We can all collectively consider how to rethink our curriculum and pedagogical practices

*To learn about African American English, see "Teaching Reading to African American Children: When Home and School Language Differ" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/gwb.

to create more welcoming and inclusive classrooms that provide our Black students and other students of color space and agency to be more deeply engaged in learning, yielding high academic success and improved outcomes.

Empowering Students with Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy and Curriculum

Since the early '80s, we have seen waves of research grounded in *culturally relevant*, *culturally responsive*, and *culturally sustaining* pedagogical practices. Each of these frameworks builds upon its predecessor to more finely attune the practice of getting to know our students in meaningful ways so that we can improve our instructional practices and effectiveness. But while many educators recognize these terms and have some idea what they encompass, our educational system has implemented them in a largely superficial way. As a first step toward deeper implementation, let's take a quick look at the research behind these practices.

Feeling unseen perpetuates the opportunity gap in Black student academic achievement.

Recognizing the absence of research grounded in the academic achievement of Black students, in the 1990s the scholar and teacher educator Gloria Ladson-Billings[10] studied what elements were necessary to yield high academic performance within a demographic group that was "underperforming"* compared to other groups. She found that academic success among diverse learners required that educators set high expectations for achievement, develop cultural competence, and cultivate students' ability to understand and critique the world around them. These three tenets became the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Building on this foundation, researcher Geneva Gay[11] introduced culturally responsive pedagogy in 2000 to emphasize deeper cultural connections with students and better meeting the needs of diverse learners. Culturally responsive pedagogy is composed of five key elements: "developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction."[12] Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that learning is contextual and that student success requires curriculum and instruction to be situated within students' cultural and linguistic frames of reference[13]—which makes the content more accessible and enhances student engagement.

But with widespread implementation of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy, areas for improvement became apparent. Ladson-Billings critiqued the implementation of her framework, famously stating, "I have grown increasingly dissatisfied with what seems to be a static conception of what it means to be culturally relevant. Many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice, seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture."[14] She chastised state departments, school districts, and educators for distorting the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy: "The idea that adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting 'diverse' images makes one 'culturally relevant' seems to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to." She strongly criticized superficial practices like taking small elements of popular culture to "hook students, only to draw them back into the same old hegemonic, hierarchical structures."[15]

Beginning in the late 1990s, scholar James Banks also critiqued what he called an additive approach to multicultural education—adding culturally relevant materials and instruction to the existing curriculum rather than fully revising the curriculum's core structure to infuse culturally relevant materials and instruction throughout.[16] The subliminal messaging when implementing an additive approach is loud and clear to students: These add-ons are extra and at the discretion of educators to employ if there is time.

If we further unpack why the additive approach is not effective, we get to the heart of the issue: how we define and understand *culture*. What do we mean when we reference culture in pedagogical practices and curriculum? There is the obvious answer of being aware and inclusive of race and ethnicity, but culture is more than that. Culture encompasses beliefs and values, customs, arts, languages, and norms. And in ways large and small, different settings and institutions have their own cultures, so students may

*The term *underperforming* is subjective, deficit-based language, but it is purposefully used here to align with language in the field regarding this topic.

experience several different cultures—such as at home, in school, and on sports teams—every day.

The term *intersectionality* speaks to the ways various facets of culture and identity can intersect—and can compound advantages or inequities.[17] At its core, intersectionality acknowledges the complex, multifaceted nature of culture and identity. Each of us is more than our respective race and ethnicity. We, our identities, and our cultures are shaped by our families, communities, beliefs, genders, sexual orientations, languages, locations, heritages, and other factors. Therefore, when educators employ culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical practices only paying attention to race and/or ethnicity, we miss critical opportunities to connect and engage with our students.

The concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy emerged from concerns raised by Banks, Ladson-Billings, and others.[18] This asset-based approach requires that our practices go beyond being relevant and responsive to truly embrace students' cultures and ensure that their ties to and knowledge of their home cultures are not weakened as they experience and learn about new (e.g., school) cultures. The example I shared above about Black educators accepting Black English while also teaching standard English is a model of culturally sustaining pedagogy. No student should feel that their home language is wrong—they should have opportunities to learn new dialects (and/or languages) while still valuing and using what they speak at home. This is a key aspect that is sometimes misunderstood: The goal is to sustain the home culture while also teaching other cultures—including competence in the dominant (white) culture—and ways of being.[19]

At the heart of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies is the notion that students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. They need to be able to activate prior knowledge and find connections between their lived experiences and the new knowledge and skills they are learning. Nearly 40 years ago, literacy professor Rudine Sims Bishop made a compelling argument for the relevance of curricular materials pertaining to the stories and books we read with students.[20] She wrote that books could serve as a *mirror* for students to see themselves and their respective identities and ways of being, a *window* to see glimpses of the lived experiences of others, and a *sliding glass door* to immerse themselves in new or familiar experiences. This idea expands far beyond text selection to include all curricular materials and instructional approaches—and it benefits all students, as materials that are windows for some students are mirrors for others.

Pushing Past Superficial Implementation

In my journey to becoming an educator, I observed the educational community at large discuss the school-to-prison nexus, the opportunity gap, disproportionate disciplinary referrals, and other harmful patterns that exist when looking specifically at Black students' performance and achievement compared to their white peers. With conversations to unpack these harmful patterns often comes discussion of reform efforts intended to empower and uplift Black youth. But what is less discussed is that reform efforts often work to align practices to the dominant (white) culture rather than to meaningfully include other cultures and ways of being. Take, for example, my first teaching experience.

The first teaching position I secured was through a large job fair that I attended in the final year of my teacher preparation program. I will never forget my excitement when a recruiter ran after me and convinced me to visit her table to discuss potential job opportunities. I agreed, followed her back to the table, and began to pull out my résumé. This was the moment I had been preparing for, and I was more than ready to discuss the qualifications that made me a desirable candidate. My elation turned to disappointment as the conversation continually circled back to my Blackness and the district's desire to diversify its teacher workforce to better match its student population.

But my desperation to secure a position outweighed my reservations, and I signed my first teaching contract.

Accepting Black English while also teaching Standard English is a model of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

I wrongly assumed that in this position I would be among other Black educators, and I hoped to find the sense of affinity and belonging that I so desperately craved as a student. But that hope vanished when I found that I was the only Black educator in the building, despite the predominantly Black student population. Navigating this space as a new professional, I began to realize that I was encountering some of the same obstacles and challenges that my students were encountering. I was expected to teach a curriculum that did not reflect the cultural values and norms that my students and I shared, and the school's rules and norms did not affirm our cultural and linguistic ways of being. I believe the assumption made in my hiring was that my presence alone would provide something that was desperately missing from these students' educational experiences. But I did not have the tools or the support to truly enact culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical practices, and I was not granted the space or agency to enact change.

Twenty years later, I find joy in working with preservice educators and preparing them to deploy culturally responsive and sustaining practices in ways that meaningfully advance the academic success of *all* students. One common challenge that we face as our student populations continue to diversify is how to be inclusive of all students' cultures. I assure my students that when implementing these pedagogical practices, they are not expected to become experts in all cultures and ways of being. This perceived challenge is rooted in the false notion that we need to provide all the tools, resources, and cultural knowledge needed to deploy culturally responsive pedagogies. But that couldn't be further from the truth. It is more important that we

While what we bring to the classroom space matters, the magic of this work is rooted in what we invite students to bring.

are doing this work alongside our students. While what we bring to the classroom space matters, the magic of this work is rooted in what we invite students to bring.*

Culturally responsive and sustaining methodology centers the illumination of identity and cultural ways of being and requires that students have, as Gay put it, "free personal and cultural expression so that their voices and experiences can be incorporated into teaching and learning processes on a regular basis."[21] In this way, it becomes critical that *all* members of the classroom community contribute. That means we need to invite students to be active participants in creating the classroom environment. We need to allow them space and agency to be experts in the things they value and cherish and to co-construct a culturally competent classroom environment. A collective partnership between all members of the learning space can transform the classroom into a dynamic environment for unlimited and engaged learning, sparking curiosity and expanding cultural competence and awareness of self and others—which can in turn boost academic achievement.[22]

A common question my students ask about culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical practices is what materials to teach. There is a strong narrative that indicates having diverse materials is sufficient, but this narrative points toward an additive approach. It is static and rooted in materials rather than dynamic and rooted in the interpersonal relationships and shared knowledge that should be cultivated with identity-centered pedagogies. Using a text with a diverse character or celebrating cultural holidays and traditions in the classroom can fall short because these are curricular inclusions, not instructional practices. The dynamic elements and effectiveness of culturally responsive and sustaining practice are rooted in conversations with students about the text (or topic), interpretations of the curriculum, and real-world connections and applications that students make between their lived experiences and the curriculum being explored. Consciously differentiating curriculum from instruction helps us refine our practices.

Lastly, to be effective in our practice, we must start with student identity to enact authentic culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, not our preconceived notions of the culture(s) represented in our classrooms. We have to create opportunities for students to bring their full selves into the classroom for *exploration* and validation. Furthermore, these approaches cannot just be the springboard used to insert students' cultural wealth into an unchanged, traditional curriculum. Being culturally responsive and sustaining in practice means ensuring that students' cultural wealth and assets are infused throughout the curriculum and classroom instruction.

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices are not fully effective when we do not create space for critical self-reflection. In conjunction with employing diverse curricular materials, throughout the learning process we should invite students to

*Educators of young children can engage in culturally relevant and sustaining practices by inviting contributions from both students and their families.

consider how new knowledge acquired in the classroom builds on their prior knowledge, how their perceptions have changed, and how newly acquired knowledge can be applied in their daily lives and/or the world around them.† This not only centers students and their identities in learning, it also helps them develop resiliency, empathy, and understanding while encouraging transferability of skills.[23]

To better illustrate this, I want to share what this looked like in my seventh-grade classroom years ago. When I introduced *Monster*, the novel by Walter Dean Myers, I started with activating prior knowledge and encouraged my students to consider a time they may have been wrongfully accused of something and how that made them feel. From there, I asked them to think about stereotypes and the preconceived notions that they consciously and unconsciously develop about others. While the prompts I used were not culturally based, the students' responses were. My students talked about being judged for the color of their skin and the ways they spoke, and they shared how these elements of their cultural wealth were perceived as deficits by those from other cultures. We began to have rich conversations revolving around their thoughts and ideas as they intersected with concepts from the text and with their own lived experiences. These conversations became a foundation not only for us to revisit and revise our thoughts and feelings regarding the recurring themes in the novel, but also for students to build empathy and understanding that they leveraged in their analysis of the text.

While we had tons of fun engaging in this learning process, the real magic was in the conversations. Because students brought their lived experiences into the classroom, they all entered this learning process with empathy and care developed from listening to the experiences of their peers. With that empathy and care, we made our classroom come alive. We questioned the text and the author's choices, we followed foreshadowing throughout the novel and made predictions, we experienced emotions along with the characters in the story, we engaged in a full mock trial as we put characters on the stand and developed arguments for the prosecution and defense, we wrote newspaper articles as if we were members of the story's community, and we moved between the storyworld and our own reality, transferring our thoughts and skills between the two spaces. These real-life applications then led to championing social justice change in our school and classroom community.

As I cultivated space for them to deepen their exploration of the text by being curious about the world around them, my students questioned why Black youth are disproportionately represented in the prison system. They wondered about the consequences of stereotypes, prejudices, and police brutality against historically marginalized people. And they delved into America's legal and justice systems. I invited their inquiry because it fostered engagement and created a rich, dynamic learning experience for all. My students took these wonderings and engaged in research, explored how they could leverage their collective voice to enact social justice change, and became engaged in civic discourse. When identifying how policies and procedures were influenced by stereotypes and prejudices in the storyworld, students became curious to see if they could identify similar trends in their own lives. They began their inquiry by analyzing our school and district policies—policies that they were already familiar with but wanted to analyze critically. While looking for neutrality, they found disproportionate policies hinging on gender and culture, and they began to wonder what the consequences of such discrepancies were. This led to deeper research and inquiry, ultimately moving them to share their thoughts, research, and advocacy for more culturally relevant and inclusive policies in the school newspaper. In this way, we moved beyond simply reading a text and practicing skills; we became a community of active change agents.

Black youth and other youth of color continually receive subliminal messages that they are not important when we exclude them from the curriculum and do not choose pedagogical practices that invite their contributions. They feel othered when we take an additive approach to curriculum, implementing superficial cultural insertions and celebrations only when time permits. And they believe they do not belong when school and classroom rules, policies, and procedures are exclusive of cultural awareness and understanding. These exclusions lead not just to feeling marginalized, isolated, and fatigued, but also to disproportionate disciplinary actions and slowed progress in academic achievement.

We can no longer simply talk the talk; we need to walk the walk. If we want to ensure high academic achievement for all students, we need to consider those students who are most harmed in school settings and work to eradicate the obstacles between them and their success. For our Black students in particular, that means integrating Black culture and excellence into the curriculum and teaching in a way that highlights how it is an asset for all students. It means acknowledging that while Black English is not the "language of schooling,"[24] it is an established, standardized dialect of English. It means realizing that our ways of styling our hair and clothing our bodies are not inappropriate or distracting, but a beautiful representation of our cultural ways of being passed down through generations in our respective families and community at large. Our students need to experience pedagogies that acknowledge and affirm them to allow them to reimagine their future, grounded in academic achievement and success. ■

We have to create opportunities for students to bring their full selves into the classroom for exploration and validation.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/marks.

†This approach supports the development of transcendent thinking as described in "When Students Think Beyond the Moment," which begins on page 17.

A Better Future for All

How Our Public Colleges and Universities Save Lives, Power the Economy, and Strengthen Democracy

BY RANDI WEINGARTEN AND TODD WOLFSON

MARCO POSTIGO STOREL / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

Our unions together represent the largest and most powerful force of faculty and staff in America's colleges, universities, and community colleges. These campuses are where students go to gain knowledge and advance their lives and where breakthroughs that benefit humankind are discovered. These campuses are also cultural and economic hubs that enliven and enrich the communities around them. By any measure, American higher education is an essential public good. But after more than a half century of disinvestment and ideological attacks, it is under even more ferocious assault from forces seeking to weaponize political power to control how these institutions operate and even what can be taught.

President Donald Trump has declared war on higher education. His administration has cut or withheld billions in federal grant funding,[1] arrested student activists,[2] targeted diversity initiatives,[3] and sought to undermine academic freedom and university independence by tying funding and preferential treatment to adherence to a coercive compact.[4]

These attacks on higher education threaten instructors' freedom to teach, students' freedom to learn, and the foundations that have made America a global leader in research, innovation, and democratic governance. We must understand what is at stake, how we arrived at this moment, and what we must do to protect the independence of institutions of higher education and the right of all students to learn. In this moment of profound crisis, we must not only defend our institutions from sustained political and economic attacks, but advance our vision of what higher education can and must be: a democratic, accessible, and transformative public good.

After more than a half century of disinvestment and ideological attacks, institutions of higher education are under assault from forces seeking to control how they operate and even what can be taught.

Our colleges and universities benefit not just individual students, but society as a whole, our democracy, local communities, and the broader economy. Colleges and universities serve multiple essential functions that no other institutions can replicate.

Research and innovation: America's colleges and universities are drivers of discovery and innovation. Federal funding for university research—totaling $60 billion in fiscal year 2023[5]—has produced breakthroughs that have transformed human life. From the development of COVID-19 vaccines[6] to advances in cancer treatment,[7] and from artificial intelligence[8] to clean energy technologies,[9] university researchers have been at the forefront of scientific progress. Universities perform 48 percent of all basic research in the United States, laying the groundwork for innovations that can then be broadly disseminated.[10]

These institutions have contributed to virtually every major medical breakthrough of the modern era. Research at Harvard Medical School alone led to the development of the smallpox vaccine, anesthesia, insulin, and pioneering work in genetics and cancer treatment.[11] Recent university research has yielded treatments for Alzheimer's disease[12] and rare cancers,[13] and stem cell therapies[14] that were once thought impossible. From 2020 to 2024, universities contributed patents underpinning 50 percent of the drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration.[15]

Complex, costly, and protracted work such as this is made possible with the substantial and sustained financial support that only the federal government can provide.

But the Trump administration is deliberately undermining America's world leadership in science, technology, and innovation. It has slashed billions from the National Institutes of Health,[16] the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,[17] and other agencies,[18] dismantling the greatest biomedical research infrastructure in the world, bar none. As these budgets are cut and staff are fired, fewer grants are being made to university researchers, and existing grants have been stopped.

The funding cuts and freezes ordered by the Trump administration set us backward, toward an era of less innovation, fewer cures, and a shrinking economy. They result in very real harm to the public—to all of us.

Economic impact: Higher education has economic benefits both for graduates and for the greater society. Students who have completed any level of college generate an estimated $73.4 billion in additional annual earnings relative to those with only a high school education.[19] These earnings ripple through local economies, supporting businesses, generating tax revenue, and reducing expenditures on public health, criminal justice, and public assistance programs.

Whether a community college or a four-year university, institutions of higher education anchor communities, often serving as the largest employer in the region.[20] Businesses are built around them. Colleges and universities expand opportunities for students and are engines of our local and national economies. States' public higher education systems also often run hospitals that are major providers of healthcare for local residents and of training for the next generation of clinicians, and our state regional uni-

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT and the author of Why Fascists Fear Teachers. *Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her commendations include being named to* Washingtonian*'s 2023 Most Influential People in Washington and* City & State New York*'s 2021 New York City Labor Power 100. Todd Wolfson is the president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and has been in leadership of Rutgers AAUP-AFT. Wolfson is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University and codirector of the Media, Inequality and Change Center; his most recent book is* The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence. *Previously, Wolfson worked as a community and labor organizer in Philadelphia.*

versities—many of which started as "normal schools"—train the educators who teach preK–12.

The State University of New York (SUNY) system is the largest system of public colleges and universities in the country. For every $1 the state of New York invests in SUNY, the SUNY system returns $8.67 to the state in terms of economic growth.[21] This pattern repeats across the country. Higher education institutions in Washington, DC, contribute more than $15 billion to the local economy and employ more than 100,000 workers.[22] Community colleges in Southwest Virginia collectively benefit regional economic growth by making education accessible and affordable while preparing students for higher-paying jobs.[23] Historically Black colleges and universities generate $16.5 billion in economic impact across local and regional economies, generating more than 136,000 jobs and preparing graduates to earn more than $1 million in additional income throughout their working lives.[24]

Democratic vitality: Higher education serves as a crucial bulwark for democracy. Research shows that the link between increased levels of higher education (particularly studying liberal arts) and decreased levels of authoritarian attitudes is particularly strong in the United States. Education promotes independent thought, respect for diversity, and rigorous assessment of evidence—competencies essential for democratic citizenship and for countering unquestioning deference to authority.[25]

As one of us (Weingarten) wrote in *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*,* and as both of us frequently argue, authoritarians fear a well-educated citizenry. They fear what educators do—the teaching of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, power, and privilege cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens. An educated public is essential to a free and fair America. Educators are under siege not for anything we do wrong, but for all the things we do right.

AFT

The Trump administration is using fear, misinformation, and intimidation to turn colleges and universities into indoctrination centers.

A History of Disinvestment Rooted in Backlash

The current crisis in higher education did not emerge overnight or as a result of the Trump administration's assaults, although those have exacerbated the crisis. It is the culmination of decades of systematic disinvestment and political attacks that began as backlash to the civil rights movement and campus activism of the 1960s.[26]

As student bodies started to become more diverse in the 1960s, and as students and faculty demanded reforms in admissions policies, faculty representation, and the development of race-conscious policies, a powerful backlash coalesced. Conservative politicians and business leaders viewed demands by civil rights activists, educators, and students for greater access to higher education as threats to the existing social and economic order.

Ronald Reagan's successful 1966 gubernatorial campaign in California explicitly targeted the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Politicians across the country followed suit, enacting punitive measures against student activists. The financial sanctions imposed on public higher education were devastating and long-lasting, with state legislatures cutting college and university budgets even as enrollments grew, beginning a pattern of austerity that persists today.

Ellen Schrecker, a professor emerita of American history at Yeshiva University and a longtime AAUP leader, documents this troubling development in her book *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s*.[27] The promise of free or nearly free access to public higher education gradually disappeared as a result of this backlash. The neoliberal restructuring of higher education that began in the 1970s transformed colleges and universities from institutions prioritizing education as a public good into entities forced to operate like businesses.

A pivotal moment came in 1971 when Lewis F. Powell Jr., shortly before his nomination to the Supreme Court, wrote a confidential memo to the US Chamber of Commerce titled "Attack on American Free Enterprise System," in which he crafted a blueprint for corporate political and economic dominance. Powell identified college campuses as "the single most dynamic source" of attacks on the American economic system

*To read an excerpt, see "Why Do Fascists Fear Teachers?" in the Fall 2025 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2025/weingarten_book.

and called for a comprehensive, coordinated counteroffensive by the business community.[28]

The Powell memo laid out a strategic plan that included developing scholars to be placed on college campuses, demanding "balance" on college faculties, influencing curriculum, and ensuring that think tanks and media outlets promoted pro-corporate perspectives. Inspired by Powell, in 1978 former Treasury Secretary William E. Simon explicitly called for using economic pressure to reshape higher education, suggesting that businesses should "cease the mindless subsidizing of colleges and universities whose departments of economics, government, politics, and history are hostile to capitalism."[29]

In the decade following its publication, the number of corporations with public affairs offices in Washington grew from 100 to more than 500, registered lobbyists increased from 175 to nearly 2,500, and corporate political action committees multiplied from under 300 to more than 1,200. Conservative think tanks proliferated, lavishly funded to produce research attacking higher education as a public good and supporting free-market ideology.[30]

Today, the Trump administration is following a modern-day successor to the Powell memo's blueprint to capture higher education for ideological purposes: the Heritage Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership*, commonly called "Project 2025."

Project 2025 is a 900-page document meant to serve as a road map for a far-right presidential administration. The Trump administration swiftly began enacting its sweeping policy proposals, which are designed to give anti-democratic politicians, judges, and oligarchs more control over Americans' lives. Among its sweeping provisions is a radical plan to transform American colleges and universities by cutting funding, stifling ideas, silencing debate, and destroying autonomy.

Project 2025 details the intent to roll back decades of progress on access to higher education, eliminate protections for LGBTQIA+ students and sexual assault survivors, privatize student loans, end loan forgiveness, attack programs like TRIO and GEAR UP that provide a real pathway to a college education for low-income students, and, as we are seeing, abolish the US Department of Education.

The document baselessly claims that institutions of higher education are "hostile to free expression, open academic inquiry, and American exceptionalism."[31] That is a central myth promoted by those attacking higher education: that colleges and universities are centers of indoctrination rather than education. This claim inverts reality.

We want ideological diversity on campuses and an open environment that challenges assumptions, beliefs, and ideas.

Education Is the Antithesis of Indoctrination

Contrary to claims by some that universities are bastions of indoctrination, the goal of education is not to get all students on the same page politically or ideologically.[32] It is to develop their ability to reason through complex problems, to separate fact from fiction and information from disinformation, to apply reasoning, and to form their own opinions. Critical thinking is the most important muscle in the exercise of democracy.

Higher education prioritizes students' freedom to learn by creating open environments for inquiry and engagement. Students learn to evaluate evidence, consider multiple perspectives, engage in civil dialogue, and form independent judgments. We want ideological diversity on campuses and an open environment that challenges assumptions, beliefs, and ideas—without it, the intellectual environment dies.

Campuses should be places of free speech, with the exception of speech not protected by the First Amendment, such as defamation, incitement, and true threats. The proper response to controversial or offensive speech is not censorship but more speech—open and vigorous contestation of ideas through reasoned argument and evidence. Universities and colleges fulfill their mission not by shielding students from challenging concepts but by equipping them to grapple with complexity, ambiguity, and disagreement.

Our campuses must be places where all are safe to learn, speak, and question. Protecting free expression and ensuring safety are not competing goals, they are inseparable: Students need to feel safe enough to speak freely. And they are especially vital given the growing divisions in the United States and the efforts to limit constitutionally protected freedoms since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks.[33]

We will continue to combat antisemitism on our campuses and in our society because all students and staff must feel and be safe and welcome on campus. We are especially concerned, however, about the Trump administration's cynical weaponization of antisemitism as a pretext for censoring scientific research as well as targeting immigrants and free speech on campuses. Instead of addressing the legitimate concerns of students, faculty, and staff about antisemitism,

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the Trump administration is exploiting the issue to attack colleges and universities and to undermine democratic norms and rights.[34]

The Corporatization of Higher Education

The shift away from viewing higher education as a public good has had devastating consequences for how colleges and universities operate. As government appropriations dwindled, institutions increasingly turned to raising revenue through tuition, private donors, and federal and corporate research grants. Between 2003 and 2020, state and federal appropriations fell from 68.5 percent to just 56.1 percent of total revenue for public universities.[35]

This financial pressure led to the erosion of shared governance—the principle that faculty, administrators, and boards should work together on institutional decisions. As colleges and universities adopted top-down managerial practices borrowed from business, they sidelined faculty input in favor of institutional efficiency. The traditional role of faculty in determining curriculum, hiring, and institutional priorities gave way to a corporate model focused on cost-cutting and revenue generation—often without regard to the impact on students' opportunities to learn.[36]

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

Average tuition at public four-year universities has increased by 213 percent since the late 1980s.[37] Meanwhile, average student loan debt (for all students, not just those at public colleges) rose from $27,260 in 2007 to $37,850 in 2024 (with both figures in 2024 dollars).[38] For many students, particularly those from low-income families and communities of color, this debt burden is a crushing obstacle to economic mobility and wealth-building.[39]

Simultaneously, the academic workforce has been radically changed. Forty years ago, 70 percent of academic employees were tenured or tenure-track. Today, that figure has flipped: 68 percent of faculty are contingent workers who are not eligible for tenure and 48 percent hold part-time positions.[40] Academics increasingly are joining the ranks of gig workers and temps, working part time for low pay, often without benefits or job security. This lack of job security makes colleagues in contingent positions especially vulnerable in this current environment of censorship and attacks on freedom to teach.

More than one-quarter of adjunct faculty respondents in an AFT survey reported earning less than $26,500 annually, and only 22.5 percent reported having contracts providing continuous employment.[41] Many adjuncts teach at multiple institutions simultaneously, rushing between campuses with little time for the engagement with students that effective teaching requires.

One of us (Wolfson), as president of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT local in 2023, helped lead the first strike of academic workers at Rutgers in the institution's then-257-year history. Our strike brought together 9,000 workers across three unions representing faculty, graduate workers, postdocs, librarians, healthcare workers, and counselors. We won more control over our work, contractual rights around academic freedom, and raises of 14 to 44 percent over four years, as well as a $600,000 fund to support housing for workers living near the university.[42] Key to our demands were the needs of the more vulnerable parts of our unit—the adjunct faculty and graduate workers. In an important victory, we won job security for full-time nontenure-track faculty, adjunct faculty, postdocs, and grad workers.

How did we do this? By rallying the support of the community and reminding the administration that a university is more than a business.

The Trump Administration's Authoritarian Assault

From Project 2025 to the broadsides on higher education from both Trump and Vice President JD Vance, the administration's hostility toward higher education has not been whispered but blared.

Trump has declared that "our colleges [have] become dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics" and vowed to "get this anti-American insanity out of our institutions once and for all."[43] We cannot help but wonder how the "radical Left" that Trump

rails about manages to indoctrinate students in their physics labs, accounting courses, and Chaucer lectures. Even in courses about the 20th-century rise of fascism, students are expected to think for themselves and to debate each other (only a fascist would tell them what to think).

With the ascension of Vance to the vice presidency, far-right forces have succeeded in elevating an extremist who vows to "aggressively attack universities in this country"[44] to within striking distance of their goal: the annihilation of American higher education as we know it.

Vance's labeling of professors as "the enemy" and his praise of Hungarian dictator Viktor Orbán's seizure of state universities as "the closest conservatives have ever gotten to successfully dealing with left-wing domination of universities" are unambiguous.[45] This administration aims to take control of higher education and bend it to their will.

The Trump administration set out almost immediately to freeze or threaten billions in federal funding to coerce universities into compliance with ideological demands that violate institutional autonomy or the First Amendment. By April 2025, the administration had frozen or paused federal funding to numerous universities, including more than $400 million to Columbia University, $2.3 billion to Harvard, $1 billion to Cornell, and $790 million to Northwestern.[46] The administration justified these actions by claiming universities had not adequately addressed antisemitism, but federal judges have found that the government was actually engaged in ideologically motivated retaliation against institutions that refused to surrender their independence.[47]

We must refuse to choose between academic freedom and safety, between excellence and equity, between free inquiry and community.

Trump's so-called Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education is essentially a loyalty oath.[48] The compact would force colleges and universities to adopt Trump's priorities in exchange for favorable treatment, including access to federal funding. Trump's corrupt bribery attempt would usher in a new draconian era of thought policing in American higher education, damage our capacity for technological innovation, and assault our very democracy. No amount of federal inducement is worth surrendering the freedom to question, explore, and dissent.

Trump's compact is not just wrong, it's unconstitutional. It violates the First Amendment by forcing universities to surrender their right of free speech and academic freedom in exchange for federal funds. It risks America's world leadership in science, technology, innovation, and healthcare, creating opportunities for our competitors and our enemies to take the lead. It sets us backward toward an era of less innovation, fewer cures for diseases, and a shrinking economy.

The AAUP and AFT, as well as others, have sued to halt the administration's abuses of power and illegal actions targeting higher education. We have prevailed in several important cases.

The Trump administration has systematically targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across higher education. On the first full day of his second administration, Trump issued an executive order requiring all federal agencies to end what it describes as "illegal discrimination" and directing agencies to identify potential investigations of institutions with endowments over $1 billion.[49] The US Department of Education responded by sending "Dear Colleague" memos to colleges and universities ordering them to end all "race-based decision-making" or face penalties, including loss of federal funding.[50]

In August 2025, federal Judge Stephanie Gallagher agreed with a lawsuit filed by the AFT that the government was enforcing "unclear and highly subjective" restrictions that forced educators to "choose between chilling their constitutionally protected speech and association or risk losing federal funds and being subject to prosecution."[51] And that victory was affirmed on appeal and became final in January 2026 when the Trump administration withdrew its appeal.

In September 2025, a federal district court issued a scathing decision blocking the Trump administration from withholding federal funds from Harvard. Judge Allison D. Burroughs found that the administration "impermissibly imposed unconstitutional conditions on Harvard's receipt of federal funds"[52] and engaged in First Amendment retaliation after Harvard refused to comply with demands that would violate its constitutional rights.

AP PHOTO / NOAH BERGER

And in the *AAUP v. Rubio* case, the AAUP took on the Trump administration's attempt to deny international students and scholars First Amendment rights and to use participation in constitutionally protected speech as a pretext to purge these academics from the country. In late September, Judge William G. Young found that the Trump administration had violated these individuals' constitutional rights, writing that, "This case—perhaps the most important ever to fall within the jurisdiction of this district court—squarely presents the issue whether non-citizens lawfully present here in [the] United States actually have the same free speech rights as the rest of us. The Court answers this Constitutional question unequivocally 'yes, they do.' 'No law' means

'no law.' The First Amendment does not draw President Trump's invidious distinction and it is not to be found in our history or jurisprudence."[53]

And in November, the AAUP and AFT were granted a preliminary injunction that will stop the Trump-Vance administration's attempt to unlawfully stifle free speech and academic freedom across the University of California system's 10 campuses and medical centers. The judge wrote that our wall-to-wall labor union lawsuit submitted "overwhelming evidence" that the administration has engaged in a concerted campaign to purge certain viewpoints in violation of the First Amendment.[54]

But our most successful response to the Trump compact has been the organizing work undertaken by our members and the students at Brown, Dartmouth, the University of Virginia, Vanderbilt, the University of Texas at Austin, MIT, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Southern California, and the University of Arizona. Their successful organizing and protesting—coupled with our unions' national petition—created the momentum for seven of the nine administrations to reject the compact.[55] None of the original nine have signed on, and even after Trump opened the compact up to all colleges and universities, we are seeing very little appetite from institutions of higher education to sign on.

We have a responsibility to advance a bold, collective vision of higher education as a democratic, accessible, and transformative public good.

We must continue to forge and strengthen alliances with students at our universities and colleges because the fight to save higher education is a fight for their futures. They should have a right to higher education that is debt-free and that provides them with education and skills they need not only to thrive but also to meaningfully engage in their communities. That is why we joined with student groups on November 7 for a day of action, with our members participating in rallies, teach-ins, and protests in over 100 locations nationwide, including a large, multi-union rally outside the Apollo Global Management headquarters in New York City to protest CEO Marc Rowan's involvement in the drafting of the Trump compact for higher education and protests outside Senator Dave McCormick's offices across Pennsylvania to call for more federal funding for higher education.[56] And that is why we continue to work in coalition with student groups to push back on Trump's agenda for higher education and to push for higher education that truly serves our students and our communities.

The Assaults on Academic Freedom and Free Speech

Historian Ellen Schrecker observes that the crackdown today within higher education is "worse than McCarthyism—much worse." Then, individual academics were scrutinized and fired for Communist ties. But today, she notes, the country is experiencing a "frontal attack on everything that has to do with universities and colleges."[57]

The Trump administration is demanding institutional neutrality all the way down in clear violation of constitutional rights. It follows authoritarian regimes across the world,* restricting speech, abducting our students in broad daylight for writing editorials they don't like, and outlawing protests on our campuses,[58] which we believe is a prelude to trying to crush dissent in society writ large.

Even before the burst of terminations related to commentary on the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk[59]—political violence that we as a union have unequivocally condemned—faculty members reported being increasingly afraid to express political views or engage with controversial topics, knowing that a single social media post, even on their personal accounts, could cost them their jobs and livelihoods. Surveys show that more than half of faculty report self-censoring in response to perceived threats to their academic freedom.[60]

COURTESY OF THE AAUP

The University of Chicago's "Chicago Principles" on free expression make clear that "it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive."[61] Indeed, a core purpose of higher education is to provide a forum to wrestle with difficult ideas and engage with people across differences.

The September 2025 assassination of Kirk led to an unprecedented wave of faculty and staff terminations that has further intensified the climate of fear in higher education. In the month following that terrible event, at least 40 faculty were fired or threatened with termination for comments related to the killing—half the number of faculty who were fired during the entire McCarthy era.[62]

The Trump administration is putting the vise on wholesale institutions—demanding changes to how departments operate and ordering universities to eliminate departments that it says create violence against conservative ideology.

*For more on how the Trump administration is following the lead of other authoritarian rulers, see "The Trump Administration Is Trying to Wreck Our Democracy" in the Fall 2025 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2025/ben-ghiat.

In Orwellian doublespeak, they are using fear, misinformation, and intimidation to turn colleges and universities into what the far right has for years falsely accused them of being: indoctrination centers.

The Struggle for Higher Education's Soul and Survival

The convergence of decades of disinvestment, corporatization, attacks on shared governance, the affordability crisis, and now an openly authoritarian assault from the federal government poses grave threats to higher education in America.

In this moment of profound crisis, we have a responsibility—not only to defend our institutions from sustained political and economic attacks, but to advance a bold, collective vision of higher education as a democratic, accessible, and transformative public good.

That is the purpose of the joint higher education campaign launched in September 2025 by the AAUP and AFT: *Saving Lives, Building Futures, Powering the Economy*. We want workers on our campuses to have dignity and security. We want to expand opportunity, make college more affordable for anyone who wants to pursue postsecondary education, and end crushing student debt. We want to ensure that all those who work in our colleges and universities have jobs that provide them with dignity and economic security. And we want to uphold academic freedom and students' freedom to learn.

It is a simple proposition: Any person who wants to avail themselves of postsecondary education should be able to do so—in a manner that is affordable and accessible.

That is part of the American dream—and America can achieve its role in the world as that engine of opportunity and innovation and hope and freedom when its universities are muscular, dynamic campuses full of vibrancy and aspiration.

To bring this to fruition, higher education faculty and staff, students, parents, unions, businesses, policymakers, and others with an interest in not just preserving but strengthening and improving higher education must unite. We must forge a political force that can respond to the threats, offer a counter vision, and fight for a policy agenda that enacts that vision.

We must become a social and political force with footholds on every campus, in every state, and at the national level to resist authoritarian control and to advocate for reinvestment in our colleges and universities so that they are truly a public good.

We must tell the truth about higher education—acknowledging genuine problems that need addressing while rejecting false narratives designed to justify ideological control. And we must refuse to choose between academic freedom and safety, between excellence and equity, between free inquiry and community. These are false choices designed to divide us. The path forward requires embracing all of these values, recognizing that they are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

We write this not only as a warning but as a vision of what can be. The fight for higher education in America is a fight for the common good, for democracy, and for the American dream. ■

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2026/weingarten_wolfson.

AFT

Harnessing the Best of AI

Three Educators Share Tips for Saving Time and Boosting Creativity with Artificial Intelligence

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETE RYAN

Whether you find artificial intelligence (AI) exciting or frightening, its widespread use—including among students—means we all need to learn how to interact with it responsibly. How can we harness AI as a tool to enrich learning? Reduce teachers' workloads? Facilitate communication with families? Answering these questions is probably best done by jumping in, trying out AI to see what it can do for you. To find out where to start, we talked with three educators who have been experimenting with AI. Here, they share how it saves them time and adds new dimensions to their lessons—and they also share their concerns.

Elisa Leonard, whose mother was an educator, knew her calling from an early age and has been teaching for 23 years. She's a member of the Broward Teachers Union and teaches kindergarten at Ramblewood Elementary in Coral Springs, Florida. Cal Siebenmark knew he wanted to help people and almost became a nurse; now, he is a fourth- and fifth-grade special education teacher with six years of experience at Stanley Elementary in Wichita, Kansas, and serves as the secretary of the United Teachers of Wichita. Louis Venagro, a career and technical education teacher in the Educational Pathways program at Cranston High School East in Rhode Island, devoted 30 years to teaching math (following in his father's footsteps) and is a Cranston Teachers' Alliance building delegate.

–EDITORS

EDITORS: How are you using AI, and what do you find most helpful?

LOUIS VENAGRO: Along with my district's instructional coach coordinator, I started experimenting with AI almost three years ago. We tried to make chatbots for elementary math, but they didn't work well. Things have improved dramatically in the last year. Now, I regularly use ChatGPT to create curriculum and lessons, as well as to differentiate lessons. It streamlines my process. I also use Google's tools, such as Gems and NotebookLM. This year, I've created many Gems for my students—they are chatbots that only draw from the information I give them. That's much safer and more reliable than ChatGPT, which draws from the entire internet. For high school students, Gems are great homework helpers because I develop the instructions for them; I can limit each Gem to engaging in problem-solving with the students, suggesting a next step without giving them the answer. With NotebookLM, I often make notebooks for myself and for the students. Like Gems, I provide the source material for NotebookLM; it does a good job of summarizing everything I give it and finding connections—and it saves a lot of time developing rubrics and assessments.

CAL SIEBENMARK: I use AI for lots of small tasks—and it adds up to a lot of time saved. Teaching fourth- and fifth-grade special education students, I find AI especially helpful for differentiation in math. I have to do centers every day, and AI helps me plan out each week. I also use it to build rubrics based on my state standards, make lesson plans more engaging, refine the wording I use on individualized education programs (IEPs), and conduct goal checks. AI has been really helpful when I've been out sick and needed to make substitute plans quickly.

ELISA LEONARD: I hadn't thought about using AI for substitute plans—that's a great idea. I started using ChatGPT over the summer to create games and scavenger hunts for my kids. I started using AI in my classroom this past fall. I was hesitant at first—it was a little intimidating—but my union offered a class showing us how to use Microsoft Copilot, which Broward County adopted as its AI platform. I quickly found that AI is a great way to come up with new activities. As a veteran teacher, it's easy to teach the same thing over and over again; AI is helping me get outside of my comfort zone and do some different things with the kids.

CAL: I have a colleague who is not very good with technology, but he has bloomed with ChatGPT. He became interested in having it

generate passages for his students to read and then started adding topics that they like, such as dinosaurs and Power Rangers. Now these AI passages are a reward in his classroom—when kids complete their work, they can ask for a personalized passage. One child asked for a story about playing soccer with the Argentine star Lionel Messi. I think this is great—the kids are doing extra reading as a reward.

LOUIS: That reminds me of one way AI is changing how I support my students: I'm using it to provide more feedback. Last spring, I asked students in the Educational Pathways program to write a complete unit as their end-of-semester project. I knew they would have multiple drafts, but I couldn't provide feedback on all of them. I made a Gem based on my rubric, allowing students to upload their projects and see how they scored on the rubric. The Gem pointed out what was missing but didn't do the work for them. The Gem wasn't perfect.

One concern I'm beginning to think more about is that students may start to optimize their writing to please AI instead of writing for a human reader. To mitigate that, I'm trying to instruct the Gems to give objective, rubric-based feedback without altering the students' voice, tone, or style. I want AI to support their thinking and not reshape their writing.

EDITORS: Tell us more about how you interact with these platforms.

ELISA: My unit on sound offers a good example. I tried working with ChatGPT, but with the free version you're somewhat limited in how many questions you can ask. With Copilot, I can engage more deeply. I asked Copilot to use the Florida State Standards for sound and English language arts in kindergarten to create several experiments and add writing components. When I wanted to create a worksheet, it created the PDF (or any other format I wanted).

I approached this from scratch, seeing what Copilot would produce, and I also gave it my lesson plans from previous years to see how they could be enhanced. I ended up using a mix of both. I retained some of my tried-and-true books, videos, and experiments, and I added some experiments that Copilot gave me. One thing I've benefited from is prompting it to make experiments a little easier or more advanced. And like Cal, I use it to offer a range of centers for students who need more time on core concepts or who are ready for enrichment. I used to spend a lot of time searching online for activities, but with Copilot I can describe what I have in mind and very quickly bring it to life. I don't take the first thing Copilot creates, but with my feedback, revisions happen in mere seconds.

CAL: My approach is similar. For lesson planning, I start with my district's standards, which are unique because we use standards-referenced grading. I mainly use ChatGPT, sharing my ideas for teaching a specific standard, then asking it to offer more ideas and to create the lesson plan. I don't use its first draft, either. I'll type in suggestions and edits. I feel like it's mostly bringing my ideas into a finished, student-ready product more quickly—it's not really thinking for me. But sometimes it suggests something I would not have thought of.

ChatGPT also saves me time putting together content and materials for my students' IEP goal checks. Sometimes I have it write reading passages; other times I have it create websites with games based on the goals I need to assess.

Overall, AI helps me cut down on the mundane things that take a lot of my time, and it allows me to focus on the things that I'm passionate about, like building solid lesson plans, making sure that I have good classroom management strategies in place, and making sure that I am staying on top of my classroom organization.

LOUIS: My process is also pretty similar for writing lesson plans; I'll just add one practice that's a little different. I find writing the instructions for a Gem difficult—they are very intricate, almost code-like. So, I use ChatGPT to write the instructions. I tell it what I want, including the restrictions (like not giving students the answers), and it writes Gem instructions that I can copy and paste. Some of my colleagues think I have a strong handle on AI, but really I'm just learning alongside everyone else and relying on the tools to help me with the complex parts.

Here's another example. I don't know how to code, but I used AI to make a bathroom pass app. I explained to ChatGPT that I wanted a pass system in which a student scanned a code and received an email pass, and that I needed a spreadsheet at the end of the day that told me when and where students had gone. I asked ChatGPT to write it for Google's Apps Script, so I was able to create the app without any conceptual knowledge of what I was doing.

This does raise some issues concerning accuracy and especially long-term maintenance. I am trying to be more intentional about what AI generates. I appreciate that AI lets me build things I couldn't have otherwise; I just want to be thoughtful about how I use it.

EDITORS: Is AI helping you communicate with families?

ELISA: I've used it to help write conference forms and notes on students. This is really helpful with communicating about children who are struggling. Copilot helps me write in a parent-friendly way instead of in educator verbiage. It also helps a great deal when I'm tired and frustrated—it helps me send notes to families about behavior challenges that are clear and kind.

LOUIS: I also use ChatGPT to write emails. It saves me time when I'm writing to colleagues, and it's especially useful for the batch emails I use in mass communications with families. Again, I used ChatGPT to write in Apps Script, and instantly I had an app for sending the batch emails.

CAL: I've used AI to make class newsletters and translate them into multiple languages. It has also helped by transcribing meetings with parents, which I then use for parent documentation. And, I've had it generate word lists and math problems that parents can work on with their children at home, all related to their IEP goals.

ELISA: I've had AI generate activities for families too. I have a few students who need to develop their fine motor skills, and a lot of parents don't know how to strengthen those skills with-

out professional help. With Copilot, I created a list of different activities, like using scissors, modeling clay, and hole punching. Hole punching was one that Copilot suggested—I didn't think of it, but I realized that it is beneficial because it uses so many hand muscles.

EDITORS: What concerns do you have about AI?

ELISA: My main concern about AI is our children using it. My daughter, who is in middle school, wants to use ChatGPT for everything; I worry that she is not spending enough time thinking—developing knowledge and critical-thinking abilities. I have empathy for middle and high school teachers figuring out how to navigate AI with their students. But I don't have those concerns as a kindergarten teacher. Some of my colleagues fear AI taking our jobs, but I think that's a misunderstanding of what AI is. AI helps me be a little more creative, but it can't love and hug my five-year-olds or meet their social and emotional needs.

LOUIS: I agree. I don't have any concerns about AI replacing teachers, but I do have concerns about irresponsible use by teachers and students. For teachers, we have to build connections with our students and get to know them and their needs. AI can write lesson plans instantaneously, but we have to carefully read everything it gives us and spend time making revisions. Those revisions can happen with AI, but we can't simply accept that first draft.

For students, using AI can be worse than plagiarism. To plagiarize, students at least have to read and find something relevant to copy. With AI, you can paste the assignment into ChatGPT and turn it in without reading it. Even when I restrict my Gems to rubric-based feedback, AI can still oversimplify or unintentionally push students toward formulaic patterns. I'm trying to make sure feedback supports their thinking without flattening their style and creativity. Students miss out not only on building knowledge but also on developing curiosity and their voice. There are apps teachers can use to try to catch students, but it's a struggle. In my classes, I have students do handwritten assignments about twice a month to be sure I have an authentic picture of their learning.

CAL: On a personal note, my fears are related to the environmental impact of AI and replacing the joys of human life, like art. I absolutely despise AI art. Educationally, my biggest concerns are security, how rapidly AI is changing, and the extent to which students depend on it. A lot of teachers' fears about students not building knowledge and skills are valid. But the more I use it, the more I realize that if educators don't know how to use it, then we can't help our students learn to use it responsibly.

The AFT's AI academy reassures me that we'll have a voice in how AI is developed and deployed. I did a presentation on AI at the AFT's TEACH conference in 2025 and spoke with representatives from ChatGPT. That reassured me that we're all committed to using AI wisely and that educators will be able to share our concerns and advocate for what works.

Still, there are problems emerging in high school and college. As professionals, we use AI to save time and enhance our work—but we're still doing the thinking and using a mix of resources. Too many students are using AI to think and do their work for them. Even if they don't seek out an AI platform, a simple Google search now places the Gemini results at the top of the page. Instead of examining that critically, too many kids accept what it says.

ELISA: I agree with Cal and Louis. As educators, we have a foundation in education, in technology, in what's right and wrong. Young people won't develop that foundational knowledge to guide them if they rely on AI. As a college student, I loved being in the library researching, and I fear that many college students are missing out on that now. It's a little unnerving, honestly.

EDITORS: Do you have any advice for educators who are starting to use AI?

CAL: When I started using ChatGPT, I used it just like I do Google. I asked it questions and found it to be much more interactive and responsive than Google. A couple of years ago, AI came up in a conversation with my school's technology representative, and we've been sharing resources ever since. Having a thought partner like that helps a lot. We're both special education teachers, and we're trying to better align our goals throughout the school in part to have smoother transitions as students change grade levels. With AI, he created a website that we can all use to assess our students' reading skills, and more recently we've added online games and math problems—all in service of our goal checks.

This school year I've been presenting on AI in my building, and I'm working with my local union to offer professional development sessions on AI. I start by talking about people's fears and helping them feel more comfortable. Then we create accounts and ask ChatGPT questions or give it problems to solve. Getting past that very first try goes a long way.

LOUIS: I think your process is spot on. Having at least one colleague who is excited about AI makes a big difference. Working together and sharing ideas builds camaraderie and momentum.

I wouldn't be as far along as I am in using AI if I hadn't been collaborating with my district's instructional coach coordinator, Pete Guyon, who has done a lot of work with the AFT AI academy. The goal is to make our work easier, not to hand our judgment or creativity over to the tool.

I've shared many of the Gems I've made with my colleagues, but some are not interested—and I understand why. Teachers are overworked, and this can feel like one more thing we don't have time to add to our plates. I also recognize that there are so many AI platforms and tools coming out at once that it can feel overwhelming. My advice is to pick a tool and get comfortable with it. Once you understand how one platform works, it becomes easier to evaluate others. But once you learn how to use it, it saves time. More importantly, once you start using it, you see that it is not a fad. I can recall times when teachers were against using calculators and the internet. Well, no one uses square root charts or paper encyclopedias anymore. As Cal said, we need to learn how to use AI so that we can teach our students to use it responsibly.

ELISA: I believe I was the only person using AI in my building at the beginning of the school year. I'm the kindergarten chair, so I've been sharing how I use Copilot with my team. But for the most part, they feel tired and overworked, like Louis said, and they don't see (yet) how much time it can save. More recently, our exceptional student education teachers started using it, as did our support facilitators, to help them with IEPs and legal documents.

I would encourage teachers to take courses on AI. I'm fortunate that my district and my local union are offering courses, but teachers who don't have that option can check out the free webinars offered by the AFT's AI academy.*

CAL: One more thing I'd share with teachers is the importance of protecting students' privacy. When I use ChatGPT to help me differentiate lessons or complete special education documentation, I'm careful to leave out students' names and all identifying information. That's just following the usual privacy rules, but we have to be aware that they apply to AI also.

LOUIS: That's a good point. I've shared a lot about myself as a teacher with ChatGPT, but I only provide very general information about the types of students in my courses.

My last thought for my fellow educators is that getting started with AI is a lot like having a conversation with a new colleague. You introduce yourself and your goals, and it provides suggestions—sometimes good, sometimes bad. But unlike a colleague, it has no feelings, so I can say plainly that I like one section of a lesson plan but not another. Plus, it works instantly; I can provide a critique and get a revision immediately. The key for me has been treating AI as a partner in the creative and planning process, not a replacement for my judgment. The more intentional we are about how we use it, the more meaningful and sustainable its benefits become. I really believe that once teachers start using AI, they won't want to go back. ■

*To see what courses are available, go to go.aft.org/17v.

Get the AI Help You Need

Safe, fair, effective, and ethical: That's what AI should be, and that's the mission of the new AFT National Academy for AI Instruction. With free online courses for AFT members, the academy prioritizes the human connection between educators and students while providing a platform for educators to share with each other how to use AI professionally and responsibly to reduce workloads and support student learning. It also recognizes that student use of AI requires separate guardrails and instructional decisions. Learn more at aiinstruction.org.

As you explore, be sure to check out the FAQs in the About section for answers to pressing questions. Many educators are rightly concerned about partnering with technology companies and are wondering about the AFT's leadership on AI. The FAQs tackle this openly and pragmatically: AI is here, so the best path forward is for educators to engage critically and intentionally to protect students' privacy and opportunities to learn.

Whether you are new to AI or an expert user, take time to read the AFT's "Commonsense Guardrails for Using Advanced Technology in Schools" at go.aft.org/ap8. Developed with educators, these guardrails will help you maintain high standards for privacy, equity, transparency, and human-centered learning. They also address critical issues like advancing democracy, teaching digital citizenship, and ensuring environmental sustainability.*

More ideas and guidance for safely using AI are available through the AFT's Share My Lesson platform. By joining the AI Educator Brain community (go to sharemylesson.com/ai), you can engage with more than 1,000 educators who are discussing the pros and cons of educator use of AI. Together, they are figuring out what aspects of AI can save teachers time and support students' learning—and when it's best to avoid AI (or even screens) entirely. There are also more than 20 webinars on key issues, including

- prioritizing your well-being by learning about time-saving AI tools (go.aft.org/7wp);
- using AI to differentiate instruction and communicate with families (go.aft.org/glx);
- supporting English learners with AI translation tools (go.aft.org/ob4);
- assessing students' work with AI (go.aft.org/ld8) and reducing bias in grading (go.aft.org/xss); and
- writing effective prompts for AI (go.aft.org/69j).

–EDITORS

*The AFT also offers guidance for AI in higher education; see "Key Principles for Using Artificial Intelligence" at go.aft.org/jb9.

AFT

Elevating Critical Issues—and Trustworthy Information—Through Vital Lessons

COURTESY OF VIN GUPTA

I've tried to bring experts under the banners of Republicans and Democrats to discuss issues that matter to all of us.

In 2025, the AFT launched a series of town halls focused on providing timely, science-based health insights for AFT members and their communities. The series, "Vital Lessons: Health Chats with Dr. Vin Gupta," covers a wide range of topics—including measles, perimenopause and menopause, autism, immunizations and back-to-school safety, and mental health—and is available at sharemylesson.com/vital-lessons.

For this special edition of Share My Lesson, we talked with Dr. Vin Gupta about what inspired the Vital Lessons series as well as his unique career path in medicine. A pulmonologist and a leading public health expert at the intersection of healthcare, technology, and communication, Gupta is the managing director of healthcare innovation at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, a major in the US Air Force Reserve serving in the Medical Corps, and a regular medical analyst for NBC News and MS NOW (formerly MSNBC).

–EDITORS

EDITORS: Will you share your path to becoming a doctor and why this career is important to you?

DR. VIN GUPTA: I've been heavily influenced by my mom, who was a neonatal intensive care doctor. I saw the impact she had on her patients, who were tiny, critically ill babies, as she exuded love, warmth, and empathy. It showed me from a very early age that there are few things in life as meaningful as being trusted to care for somebody else's loved one.

I was also heavily shaped by September 11. My first day of college was literally September 11, 2001. I was at Princeton, about 40 minutes south of Lower Manhattan, so that day brought an emotional window into the possibilities and impact of medicine and a desire to one day join the armed forces in some capacity.

After my first two years of medical school, I was fortunate to have two seminal experiences in global health. I spent time in Uganda working to understand malaria burden. Then I spent a year working closely with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention to understand the high cancer burden in Shanghai. While learning what might be useful in the American context, my colleagues and I were also building bridges across countries that didn't always see eye to eye. This was around the time that President Obama came into office, and the focus on soft power and diplomacy also became top of mind for me. By the time I graduated medical school, I knew I wanted to help improve global health as a clinician and communicate that focusing on shared health challenges makes for a safer world.

In 2011, I went to Seattle to begin a residency in internal medicine, and in March 2012, I joined the Air Force Reserves to serve in the Medical Corps, then completed officer training school and was formally commissioned in 2015. My military experience has been deeply impactful. I've seen the intersection of healthcare in our military and how helping other nations build better health systems furthers our national security. There's a soft power element to global health that meets common goals, like pandemic preparedness and rooting out disease.

After my residency in internal medicine, I pursued a career in pulmonary critical care medicine and got a master's in public administration focused on healthcare policy and communication skills. That decision turned out to be fateful in a really good way, as we've now seen for the last six years that lung health is public health. At the same time, I was in the throes of military service as an ICU reservist. I was part of a critical care air transport team tasked with safely evacuating and transporting critically ill soldiers from downrange back to the United States. I rose in the ranks, ultimately becoming a major, and led that team on the West Coast and in the Pacific Northwest.

This is how I have led my life: doing things that I found meaningful; following curiosities in global health, military medicine, and bedside communication; and trying to be the best doctor I could through all these trainings. Along the way, I was often asked to speak publicly on matters related to lung health, like climate change or vaping. Then COVID hit, and I kept being asked to speak. I wasn't looking to be a TV doctor, but communicating what I hope is trusted health information to a large audience has now become an important part of my life.

EDITORS: Is that dedication to sharing information why you are giving so much of your time to Vital Lessons?

VIN: I think it's more critical now than ever to engage in conversations with a diverse audience to understand people's questions and try to distill down complexity in an accessible, non-judgmental, and non-condescending way. Also, it's been revealed in recent years that the ways healthcare leaders have communicated with the public on health issues are not working. For example, posting something on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website and then thinking it's going to diffuse down to the masses and people will trust it—that doesn't work.

There's a tension between the public wanting institutional credibility in some cases but rejecting it in others. The institutions providing the vaccine recommendations that are ignored by a lot of people are the same institutions that credential me to provide intensive

care to a family's loved one; they are the same institutions that credential a trauma surgeon to provide emergency surgery on somebody who was in a car accident. Yet while there's a segment of society that says, "Whatever the CDC puts on the website, we're going to revolt against it," many of those same people want a credentialed, respected clinician to provide lifesaving care to them or their loved ones if they need it. Some people—even some with medical degrees behind their names—are taking advantage of this tension for their personal aggrandizement.

I want to move the needle forward, which does not happen unless you're out there meeting and talking with people. Through Vital Lessons, I see an opportunity to move the needle forward with AFT members, who are a microcosm of America. Every day, the AFT's 1.8 million members are doing vital frontline work in hospitals, schools, and other places across the country. So, partnering with the AFT to talk about issues that matter with real people who are doing the real work is a privilege.

EDITORS: How are you choosing the experts featured in the series?

VIN: I am not the nation's top expert on any topic. It is important to me that this series be a platform to bring together the best healthcare leaders and thinkers because we don't have the best, by a long shot, in the federal government right now. In fact, some of the leaders we have in healthcare at the federal level are among the worst; they are distorting it and harming public health and families.

In response, I've tried in my platforms—and now especially through Vital Lessons—to bring healthcare experts at the highest levels of leadership under the banners of both Republicans and Democrats to discuss apolitical issues that I think matter to all of us.

Over the past year, we've heard from a wide range of experts, including President Trump's first surgeon general, Dr. Jerome Adams (one of the nation's foremost authorities on youth mental health); Dr. Mandy Cohen, President Biden's former CDC director; Dr. Peter Hotez, an internationally recognized expert in vaccine development; and Dr. Irwin Redlener, a nationally recognized expert on disaster preparedness. And I'm looking forward to upcoming discussions on wellness for children, families, and communities.

What we're trying to do with this series is bring union and healthcare leaders together to talk about public health and get people the science-based, trustworthy information they need. We haven't been perfect, but we remain dedicated to the power of coming together in collaboration in this new world, and that is the spirit of Vital Lessons. ■

Recommended Resources

The AFT's award-winning "Vital Lessons: Health Chats with Dr. Vin Gupta" series brings expert guidance to help communities make sense of complex, pressing health issues in real time. These town hall–style webinars are paired with blogs and other resources to help families, educators, and community members navigate health concerns and make informed decisions. All sessions are available live and then on demand for free.

A Town Hall on the Measles Outbreak and What You Need to Know
go.aft.org/38f

A Town Hall on Mental Health, ADHD and What You Need to Know
go.aft.org/0cy

A Town Hall on Perimenopause, Menopause and What You Need to Know
go.aft.org/y8k

A Town Hall on Wellness, Public Health and Taking Care of Ourselves
go.aft.org/a3q

A Town Hall on Autism, Education and Public Trust
go.aft.org/o3j

A Town Hall on Immunizations and a Healthy School Year
go.aft.org/qx7

Cutting Through the Noise: Vaccines, Childhood Health and Navigating the School Year
go.aft.org/3py

Caring for Veterans, Families and Communities
go.aft.org/0p6

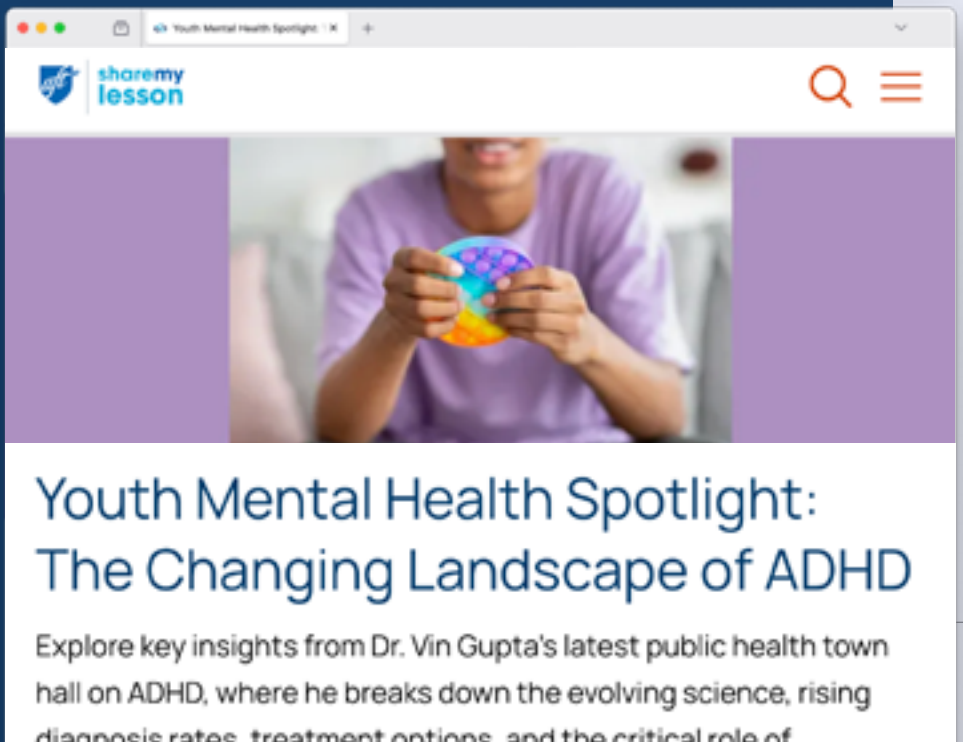
Supporting the LGBTQIA+ Community: A Vital Lessons Chat with the Trevor Project
go.aft.org/7d5

Supporting Mental Wellness Through Inclusive, Connected Workplaces
go.aft.org/uy0

Children's Health in a Changing World
go.aft.org/cf1

AI, Chatbots and Mental Health: What Families and Communities Need to Know
go.aft.org/02f

Dr. Vin Gupta on Public Health and Wellness: Vital Lessons for Educators and School Communities
go.aft.org/txg



Check Out SML's 2026 Virtual Conference!

For more great webinars and resources on a range of education and wellness issues for children and families, register for the 2026 Share My Lesson Virtual Conference, March 23–26: go.aft.org/s2k.

BRINGING THE SCIENCE—AND JOY—OF READING TO LIFE

For more than 25 years, the AFT has been a leader in bringing the science of reading to life: By helping teachers identify trustworthy research, master essential practices, and expand their classroom libraries. By giving books to kids and offering families practical tips for boosting their children's skills. By guiding policymakers toward what works.

American Educator has supported that effort, from our special issue on the unique power of reading in 1998 (go.aft.org/jvt), to our focus on family engagement in literacy in 2023 (go.aft.org/k4g), to Natalie Wexler's article in this issue (see page 22). To catch up on a few dozen of our favorite articles on literacy, see the "reading" section of our subject index: go.aft.org/ff4.

In this new column, every spring and fall we'll highlight resources—from the AFT, educators, researchers, and anyone else well versed in evidence-based reading instruction—to ensure the highest quality information reaches the widest possible audience. As we debut this column, we're sharing the great materials our union offers.

Behind the scenes, the AFT has been and remains a crucial partner for two major websites devoted to highly effective reading instruction:

- Reading Universe (readinguniverse.org) is a comprehensive site for learning to bring the science of reading and writing to life in your classroom. It has videos showing real instruction—such as "Teaching the Digraph 'th'" (go.aft.org/p7j) featuring AFT member Katina Johnson—as well as ready-to-use teaching strategies, interviews with educators and researchers, and more. Reading Universe also shows how all the different literacy skills are related. Using its taxonomy, educators engage in a structured, cumulative approach to reading and writing instruction.
- Colorín Colorado (colorincolorado.org) is the most widely used website for educators and families of students learning English as a second language. It has tips for families in several languages—including Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese—booklists that celebrate students' languages and cultures, and an extensive set of ready-to-use guides for teachers, including classroom videos. For example, in one video (go.aft.org/zs9), AFT member Anne Formato previews vocabulary with her high school English learners to prepare them to read a letter by Captain John Smith.

For in-depth professional development on evidence-based reading instruction, the AFT offers both online and in-person courses. With 11 courses to choose from—including "Reading Interventions 101," "Supporting Students with Dyslexia," and "Content-Area Writing Instruction in the 6–12 Classroom"—you'll be sure to find what you need to reach all of your students. And because families reading together is vital for fostering a lifelong love of reading, the AFT also offers a series of parent and caregiver workshops on topics from read-alouds in early childhood to connecting with teens. As one parent said, "It opened my eyes to engage with my kids more and use devices less." To learn more about these courses and how to access them, visit go.aft.org/91m for the AFT's professional development catalog.

One of the AFT's most exciting initiatives is Reading Opens the World: We're making sure all kids have their very own books! Since 2011, the AFT and First Book have given out nearly 11 million books to children at events across the country that celebrate the love of reading. Learn more by visiting aft.org/read. If you'd like to host a Reading Opens the World event, ask your local union leader to fill out this form: go.aft.org/8bv.

If you're ready to move into literacy policy, advocacy, or legislation, check out the Albert Shanker Institute's resources for bringing the science of reading to scale: go.aft.org/t9c. Since 2022, the institute has tracked and analyzed states' efforts to strengthen reading instruction through legislation and reviewed pending bills for AFT state federation leaders in California, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Drawing on this work, the institute has developed evidence-aligned policy recommendations and a publicly available database of model legislative language. The institute recently launched a series of papers exploring advances in reading science and their implications for educators. The first paper, by leading researcher Maryanne Wolf, examines how brain science informs reading instruction. The institute also regularly publishes blog posts on the more than 500 literacy bills it has examined over the past four years and other pressing issues in literacy.

If you have resources related to the science of reading or would like to share your experiences implementing evidence-based reading instruction, contact the *American Educator* team at ae@aft.org.

Trauma Counseling Program

A free benefit for all active working AFT members to provide help and healing after facing personal or workplace trauma.

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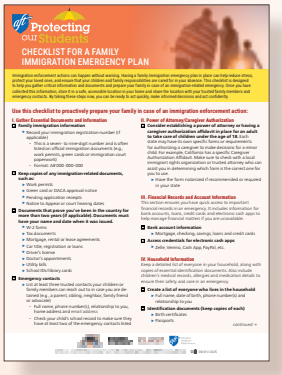
Protecting Our Students & Communities

Practical Tools for Uncertain Times

Immigration enforcement actions can happen without warning. Families, educators and community members deserve clear information and practical steps—not panic. The AFT has developed straightforward resources to help people prepare, stay safe and support one another.

Checklist for a Family Immigration Emergency Plan



Preparation reduces fear. Planning protects families. This step-by-step checklist helps families gather critical documents, organize emergency contacts and make clear plans in case of an immigration-related emergency.

It includes guidance on:

- Immigration documents and registration details
- Trusted emergency contacts
- Power of attorney or caregiver authorization for minors
- Financial records and account access
- Medical information and identification documents
- School, employer and union contacts
- Attorney and consular contacts
- Personal, community and character records

The checklist provides step-by-step guidance on what to gather, where to store it and how often to review and update the plan so families can act quickly, stay organized and make informed decisions during an immigration-related emergency.

Download the "Checklist for a Family Immigration Emergency Plan" at go.aft.org/raid-plan.

Protecting Our Students Emergency Kit: Whistle + Know Your Rights Card

Schools, hospitals, colleges, houses of worship and community spaces must remain places of care—not fear.

The "Protecting Our Students Emergency Kit" includes:

- A safety whistle
- Know Your Rights cards (in English and Spanish)
- Clear guidance on when and how to use the whistle

The whistle serves as a nonverbal alert to raise awareness when immigration enforcement agents are visibly present. It is designed to promote safety and information-sharing—not confrontation.

The kit explains:

- The difference between three short whistles (agents in the area) and three long whistles (detention in progress)
- What impacted community members should do
- How allies can safely bear witness and document events
- The importance of de-escalation, accuracy and community care

These tools are about awareness, preparation and protecting one another—while respecting the law.

Access the "Protecting Our Students Emergency Kit" at go.aft.org/whistle.

Stand Together. Be Prepared. Protect Each Other.

The AFT is committed to supporting educators, healthcare workers, public employees, students and families with practical resources that promote safety, dignity and community care.

aft Protecting our Students

For more immigration resources and toolkits:
aft.org/immigration