

Together, we are America

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Giving out books is a passion project for my union. I spent several delightful hours on Super Bowl Sunday handing out free books at P.S. 48 in the Bronx. The selections reflected kids' wide-ranging interests and our country's vibrant diversity. Children eagerly snapped up books about Star Wars, athletes, puppies and princesses. Parents and grandparents chose books written in their native tongue—including Mandarin, Spanish and English—that they could share with their families. Stacks of the anti-intolerance story *Sharing Shalom* were perched next to *Mariam's Dream*, the story of a Palestinian refugee who supports other displaced women. But hands down, the hottest items were the books about Bad Bunny, the singer and global superstar.

We went from the Super Bowl of books to the actual Super Bowl later that day, when Bad Bunny (born Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio) performed in the halftime show. It was a love letter to his native Puerto Rico and a display of diversity and pride. While laying bare the territory's history of hardship—from centuries of exploitation, signified by sugarcane, to the nearly yearlong energy blackouts after Hurricane Maria—it emphasized unity. The AFT represents the educators in Puerto Rico, and we recognize the difficulties they have endured, as well as their strength and compassion. Bad Bunny's performance resonated with millions, as did the words emblazoned on the stadium billboard: "The only thing more powerful than hate is love," the message he delivered a week earlier at the Grammy Awards.

President Donald Trump blasted the performance, writing that it "is an affront to the Greatness of America," on his Truth Social platform. "Nobody understands a word this guy is saying," Trump posted from his home at Mar-a-Lago, which is Spanish for "sea to lake." But nobody could misunderstand the performance's message that the United States is rich in diversity, and that part of America's "Greatness" is that throughout our struggles and successes, we have always been a montage of the cultures, classes and peoples who call America home.

Good for the NFL not to cave to criticism after Bad Bunny was chosen to perform; such convictions are a model for other corporations. Trump and others may want our society to reflect a mythological, monocultural past. But America's rich diversity is evident in our public schools, and educators work to make them safe and welcoming for everyone and to ensure that

all students succeed. Teachers strive to address the harmful effects of unequal opportunity, and they help young people value diversity and bridge differences.

Extending opportunity for all is the law of the land, despite the Trump administration's efforts to eviscerate it. Last February, the U.S. Department of Education issued a "Dear Colleague" letter warning schools from preschool through college that they risked losing federal funding if they promoted inclusive environments or undefined "pervasive and repugnant" racial considerations not in line with the Trump administration's agenda. The department's administrative fiat attempted to require school districts to censor lessons, abandon student support programs, and take a hatchet to 60 years of civil rights laws that help create educational opportunity for all students—so we sued. A U.S. District Court ruled in favor of our coalition that challenged the administration's actions, and an appeals court affirmed that ruling. Last month, the government withdrew its appeal of that judgment, marking an important victory over the Trump administration's unlawful crusade against civil rights, equity and inclusion.

But Trump's pattern of dehumanizing targeting of women, minorities, immigrants and others continues. Just look at the vile way he depicted Barack and Michelle Obama as apes, perpetuating a racist trope in the first days of Black History Month.

Instead of making degrading remarks, trying to restrict civil rights and raging against a joyful

halftime show, Trump should be focused on what the country needs him to do—both those who voted for him and those who didn't: make life better and more affordable for all Americans.

Administration officials boast about the soaring stock market, but recent data show that most Americans don't earn enough to afford essentials like food, child care and housing. And they don't see things getting better. Today, about three-quarters of adults in the U.S. believe their children will be worse off.

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Americans want us to treat each other with dignity, not inhumanity. Dystopian scenes seem inescapable these days, from a 5-year-old boy interned in a detention camp to a nurse shot dead in Minneapolis while protecting a woman. But I have hope. Ordinary people are supporting their neighbors and calling for decency and the rule of law. Kids still buzz with happiness when they can pick out a bagful of books. And that halftime show was a balm for me and countless others—a celebration of love and life, of inclusion not exclusion. Far from offensive, it felt overdue. To quote Bad Bunny, "Together, we are America."



Photo: Asher Huey

Weingarten, center, with students Kaylyn R. and Saniya M., at P.S. 48 in the Bronx on Feb. 8.

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