

The essentials for a better life for all

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It is impossible to capture all we have been through the past two years: A pandemic, and a plot to overturn a presidential election. Mask wars, culture wars and a war on truth. Floods in Puerto Rico, and fires in New Mexico. Shattering gun violence in Uvalde, Buffalo, Highland Park and so many other communities. Racism and the fear and trauma it inflicts. A right-wing majority on the Supreme Court that undermined the Constitution's separation of church and state; overturned *Roe v. Wade*; and hobbled *Miranda v. Arizona*, the Environmental Protection Agency, and states' ability to keep their citizens safe—all in a single month. Oil companies and other corporations are reaping record profits yet squeezing us dry at the pump and the grocery store.

More than 3,000 AFT members gathered last week in Boston for our first in-person [convention](#) since the COVID-19 pandemic. As I told them, this moment can be viewed through the lens of fear or hope; despair or aspiration; self-interest or the greater good. As I have traveled the country visiting members—teachers and school staff, nurses and healthcare professionals, public employees, and college faculty and staff—I have seen that they definitively, defiantly and undeniably choose hope, aspiration and the greater good.

They've done it by focusing on the essential foundations for a better life for all. Essentials like safety, whether commonsense gun safety or protections for our LGBTQIA+ students. And essentials like the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in today's world—reading, math, science, and practical life skills and critical thinking.

To recommit to those essentials, the AFT has launched our new [What Kids and Communities Need](#) campaign. While some politicians are trying to drive a wedge between parents and teachers by banning books, censoring curriculum and politicizing public education, we're focused on investing in public schools and the essential knowledge and skills students need. We're focused on accelerating learning, not just catching up. We are fighting for the conditions students need to thrive, like schools with good ventilation, smaller class sizes and mental health resources. If politicians truly want to help kids thrive, they need to invest in this too.

Reading is another essential. It not only affects all other academic achievement, it's essential for well-being and to unlock life's possibilities. Through the AFT's [Reading Opens the World](#)

campaign, we are giving more than 1 million books to children and school staff across America, along with tips to promote literacy and a love of reading.

We are working to expand access to another essential—community schools, which help children and families get healthcare, food assistance and other necessities in one place. The AFT and our affiliates currently support more than 700 community schools nationwide. We have an ambitious goal: to expand our reach to 2,500 community schools over the next five years.

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Of course, the people who do all this are essential. But a recent Gallup poll found that K-12 professionals are the most burned-out workers in America. Teachers and school staff have been struggling for years with a lack of respect, inadequate resources, subpar compensation and endless paperwork. And then came COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers left the profession each year—two-thirds before retirement age.

The AFT is not just decrying this problem, we are finding solutions. AFT convention delegates

approved a resolution from our Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force, identifying key areas that need to change: climate, culture, conditions and, of course, compensation.

Another essential is making the economy work for all, especially as working people struggle with higher prices for almost everything. Higher prices hurt even more because the federal minimum wage has been just \$7.25 since 2009. They hurt because Republicans in Congress keep blocking efforts to lower the cost of prescription drugs. They hurt because private equity firms are scooping up real estate—causing the price of rent and homes to skyrocket. And higher prices hurt because employers keep beating back unionization drives.

As Americans, we have an essential obligation to defend our democracy. The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection has presented shocking evidence of how Donald Trump and his allies tried to prevent the peaceful transition of power. And anti-democracy forces who worked overtime in advance of the 2020 elections to limit voting rights now are laying the groundwork to interfere with vote counting and even manipulate the outcome in future elections.

This is a moment to stand up and be counted, to live our convictions, to engage not withdraw. We must fight for our children and our country, for our democracy and our freedoms. We must act to fulfill our aspirations—by voting, by fighting for an economy that works for all, and by ensuring every child has access to safe, welcoming, well-resourced public schools. That is how to achieve a better life for all.



Weingarten addresses delegates to the American Federation of Teachers convention on July 14 in Boston.

Photo: Michael Campbell

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