



Protecting Our Country's Proud Immigrant Tradition

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

THE CURRENT DEBATES over immigration are personal for me. Like many Americans, I am the granddaughter of immigrants. My mother's parents fled pogroms in Russia and Ukraine; my father's family had faced anti-Semitism in Austria. They worked hard as merchants in the Bronx and in Nyack, New York, and were proud of their children's military service and careers as engineers, teachers, nurses, and lawyers. My family's immigrant story connects me to other immigrants, whether they're from El Salvador, Syria, or Sudan. America would not be the country we know and love without our long and enriching immigrant tradition.

I have always been grateful to live in a country that welcomes the world's "tired and huddled masses." But our tradition of welcoming immigrants is threatened by lawmakers and xenophobes and nationalists who are spewing fear and hate. One of the most callous demonstrations of this was President Donald Trump's decision this fall to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that protects more than 800,000 young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, many of whom know no other home.

The young people covered by DACA, appropriately known as Dreamers, are woven into our communities. Thousands are first responders, nurses, firefighters, lawyers, and community and union activists throughout the country. And 20,000 DACA recipients are filling critical teacher shortages as bilingual educators. Trump promised that he would treat Dreamers with "great heart." But terminating DACA is absolutely heartless and cruel.

We in the AFT feel this urgently. Our members who work in public schools educate children who carry with them constant, crippling terror and uncertainty because of their immigration status. Children should be free to learn and live

without fear, but that is not possible when they have to wonder who immigration agents will pick up next. And the AFT has members in each of our divisions who are covered by DACA but now live in fear of having their lives destroyed.

Jessica Esparza's parents brought her to the United States from Mexico when she was 11 years old. She did not have

reversal has thrust her back into the uncertainty she lived with for years as she pursued her American dream to become a teacher, despite her fears that her immigration status would make that impossible. DACA allowed her to realize that dream; it also made it possible for her to return to Mexico for the first time in 16 years to visit her grandmothers, one

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proper documentation, but she did have a passion to pursue her own American dream, to become a registered nurse. Jessica excelled in school, and in 2012, through DACA, she was granted a work permit and a Social Security number that allowed her to earn her nursing license and work as an RN. She is now a member of the Washington State Nurses Association and treats cancer patients and patients with chronic conditions. Jessica often translates for Spanish-speaking patients, who are clearly relieved to have such critical conversations in their primary language.

Lee-Ann Graham is a DACAmented paraprofessional in the New York City public schools and a proud United Federation of Teachers member. She's also a leader in UndocuBlack, a network founded by black undocumented immigrant youth that works to highlight and address the diversity of our undocumented population. Lee-Ann strives to transform learning environments to respond to the needs of undocumented students.

Areli Zarate is a high school teacher and department chair in Austin, Texas, and is on her way to becoming certified through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Trump's DACA

of whom died months after her visit. Areli is awaiting a decision on her renewal and praying that she can continue teaching.

Without congressional action by March 2018, Dreamers will be deported or have to live in the shadows. We need to end the political gridlock and enact comprehensive solutions to our broken immigration system. That starts by providing pathways to citizenship for millions of students, families, and neighbors working and living alongside us who are at risk of being deported. Congress must pass the Dream Act—a clean version, not one that only protects Dreamers in exchange for funding for a border wall, increased immigration raids, detention centers, and policies that separate families and cause constant fear and uncertainty.

The AFT will continue to fight to protect undocumented students, refugees, individuals with temporary protective status, and their families from the threat of deportation. The United States' cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity is an asset, not a liability. It is the wonderful realization of the "pluribus" in "e pluribus unum." A nation built by immigrants should welcome those in pursuit of the American dream, not pull up the ladder behind us.