A Union of Professionals

RETURN, RECOVER AND REIMAGINE:
Toward a Renaissance in America's Public Schools

Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers

May 13, 2021

During this time when so many schools had to close for in-person teaching and learning, there has been a new appreciation for public schools. There is no doubt: Schools must be open. In person. Five days a week. With the space and facilities to do so.

We know that's how kids learn best and that prolonged isolation is harmful. School is where children learn. It's where they work together and play together. It's where they form relationships and learn resilience. It's where many children, who otherwise might go hungry, eat breakfast and lunch. Parents rely on schools, not only to educate their kids, but so they can work—like the 3 million mothers who dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic.

This pandemic has also underscored how important educators are.

Teachers scrambled to redesign lessons and projects, and to create virtual field trips and labs to keep kids engaged and learning from afar. School food workers kept meals coming, often feeding anyone in the community who needed it. Many school bus drivers delivered those meals, along with schoolwork and internet hotspots so students could learn from home. All the while, educators have yearned to be back in school, with their students. They only asked for two things—a safe workplace during this pandemic and the resources they and their students need to succeed.

They are exhausted. They're working longer hours, troubleshooting IT problems, and trying to connect with students despite the barriers—whether that's a computer screen or a Plexiglas shield. If there's an educator in your life, you know this.

Yet critics have scapegoated teachers and vilified their unions because of school closures during the pandemic, ignoring the extreme disparities among schools and blaming teachers for problems outside their control.

Creating safe conditions in schools during a public health crisis is not an obstacle to reopening classrooms; it is the pathway to going back, staying back and creating trust throughout the school community.

That commitment to both safety and education is why the AFT moved quickly to put out our first plan to reopen schools safely in April 2020, just weeks after COVID-19 overtook our country. We developed our plan with health and education experts, and with input from our members. Many AFT affiliates have used it to negotiate school reopening agreements.

But we faced stiff headwinds. Donald Trump tweeted at schools to reopen but did nothing to help them do so safely. The Trump administration politicized safety and undermined science. And as a result, from last April right up to Jan. 19, 2021, we were working to reopen schools in a climate of chaos, fear and misinformation as the pandemic surged in wave after wave.

Thankfully, the Biden administration changed course. It is fighting the pandemic with science, truth, transparency and, yes, money. There have been bumps, of course—this is a once-in-a-century pandemic. But as a result of the Biden administration's leadership and all of our efforts, today 97 percent of schools across the country are open for in-person learning, either full or part time.

Conditions have changed. We can and we must reopen schools in the fall for in-person teaching, learning and support. And keep them open. Fully and safely, five days a week.

But we must do more than physically return to schools, as important as that is to create the normalcy we crave. We must also put in place the supports to help students recover—socially, emotionally and academically. And we must reimagine teaching and learning to focus on what sparks students' passion, builds confidence, nurtures critical thinking and brings learning to life—so all children have access to the opportunities that give them the freedom to thrive.

We must—this may be the most important thing I say today—we must do this for all children. The United States must do what we have never done in our wonderfully diverse society: fully enable all children to reach their heights, to prepare them for college, career, civic participation and life.

We can seed a renaissance in America's public schools that will change young people's lives and change the course of our country. We can make every public school a place where parents want to send their children, educators and support staff want to work and students thrive.

RETURN

Given current circumstances, nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open.

It's not risk free. Public health experts caution that, unless many more people get vaccinated, we will not reach herd immunity against COVID-19. But we can manage the threat by encouraging people to get vaccinations and following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prevent the spread of disease—which currently includes the layered mitigation strategies of masking, distancing, ventilation, sanitizing, handwashing, COVID-19 testing and contact tracing that help prevent outbreaks and minimize quarantines.

Since I've been fully vaccinated, I have visited schools in Connecticut, Texas, New Mexico, Washington, D.C., and New York. All of them have successfully reopened with these safeguards in place. But as Education Secretary Miguel Cardona observed when we visited schools in White Plains, N.Y., the glue that holds their reopening efforts together is resources and relationships—the resources from the American Rescue Plan, and the collaboration among educators, including administrators, union reps and parents who have worked together to solve reopening questions in

the face of tremendous uncertainty. The feeling I've been left with in all of these school visits is the joy expressed by students and staff at being back.

The game-changer has been vaccines. I hear it in educators' voices and see it in our polling results. The fear that they will bring the virus home decreases the moment they get their shot. Our members have stepped up—according to our data, 89 percent of our members are fully vaccinated or want to be. And it's really good news that just this week the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration have authorized use of the Pfizer vaccine for 12- to 15-year-olds.

But the fear isn't gone. You see it in who is back in school and who is not. Some school staff need accommodations to protect their health or that of someone in their household. And some families still are considering keeping their children at home.

The AFT, with the NAACP, the League of United Latin American Citizens and others, recently polled parents of public school students. Only 73 percent of parents said they are comfortable with full in-person learning for their child this fall—and only 59 percent of Black parents. But if the safety measures in the AFT's reopening plan—layered mitigation, testing and vaccines—are in place, the comfort level jumps to 94 percent of parents, including 87 percent of Black parents. Parents whose children's schools are open feel more comfortable with in-person learning. The same is true of educators; the more they are in school with appropriate safeguards, the more they trust it.

Mitigation measures create trust. So does collaboration. So here's an idea: Every school should have a committee of school staff, parents and, where appropriate, students to plan for and respond to safety issues. These committees can conduct health and safety school walk-throughs this summer, as we just did in Washington D.C., at McKinley Tech High School and McKinley Middle School, with the school chancellor, members of the school parents associations, the union and others.

Here's another idea: Let's integrate the best practices for both health and learning.

One way is to link class size to the CDC's revised guidance that, with universal masking, students should remain 3 feet apart in classrooms. For the most part, this will mean fewer students in each class—effectively aligning health and pedagogical best practices. Smaller class size has been shown to have a positive impact on academic achievement, safety and suspension rates, and teacher retention. So why don't school systems work through the summer to find adequate space and to keep those classes intact all school year? The constant changing and reconfiguring is part of what has created such uncertainty.

This will also help end the untenable practice of simultaneous teaching. This juggling act requires teachers to essentially teach two classes, in two different modalities—one with kids in a classroom, and one with kids online—at the same time. Unless there's a compelling reason, it's not just untenable and unsustainable, it's educationally disastrous.

National Campaign—Back to School for Everyone

The United States will not be fully back, until we are fully back in school. And my union is all in.

The AFT does a back-to-school campaign every year to engage with members. This year, our campaign is "Back to School for Everyone." We are dedicating $5 million for this unprecedented effort.

We'll still connect with teachers and school staff, but we'll also reach out to families and communities about the value of children returning to school in-person.

From San Francisco to Kanawha, W.V.; from Jefferson Parish, La., to Minneapolis; from pre-K to higher education—we are developing programs and deploying activists to this campaign like we would for get-out-the-vote campaigns.

Some of our locals, like the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, will go door to door, visiting students' homes to talk about the health and safety and education programs in place, and to encourage families to send their children back for in-person learning.

In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers is advocating for schools to hold open houses for parents, to show them health safeguards, and other resources, to answer questions and build trust.

The United Teachers Los Angeles and the Chicago Teachers Union are participating in COVID-19 vaccination events for students, families and communities. The CTU is calling on the mayor and the school district to work with them over the summer to engage the vast majority of families that have opted to stay with remote learning and to overcome the obstacles to sending their children back to school.

The AFT will operate "office hours" and clinics—designated times when affiliates and others can call in to discuss ideas and get technical support. We hope to have parents and superintendents with us in this effort. And Share My Lesson, the AFT's free online platform for education resources, will be a clearinghouse for best practices.

When I say we're all in, we're all in.

RECOVER

But returning is not enough—we have to focus on recovery. Students will enter our schools this fall with an array of social, emotional and academic needs. And schools must meet those needs. The good news is that the American Rescue Plan provides the funding.

So here's another idea: The U.S. Department of Education requires school systems to consult with stakeholders, including "teachers, … other educators, school staff, and their unions," in the planning for the use of these funds. Together with families and community partners, we could use collective bargaining, school board meetings and legislative hearings to collectively press for what kids need. Imagine working with parents to advocate for upgraded school libraries with high-speed Wi-Fi and multilingual literature, or upgraded ventilation systems, or mental health services for students and staff.

Social-Emotional

There was an epidemic of anxiety and depression among young people even before the stress and isolation caused by COVID-19. It may not be readily apparent to school staff which of their students' time away from school was especially traumatic—whether a parent lost their job, a loved one was sick or died, or a student was cyberbullied or experienced violence. Returning to in-person school may cause students to feel even more anxious—they may fear getting sick, or may

have grown disconnected from peers during lockdowns, or may be self-conscious about physical changes they have experienced.

Racial injustice in particular has been a "pandemic within the pandemic." COVID-19 has intensified the existing inequities in the United States. People of color suffer higher rates of infection, serious illness and death from COVID-19. They are more likely to work in risky frontline roles or to have lost their job during the pandemic. Black and brown Americans too often are unsafe from the very people who are supposed to keep them safe. While ugly vestiges of anti-Asian racism were stoked anew by the last administration, now anti-Asian hate incidents have surged. All of this is traumatizing.

Social-emotional learning is not an add-on. We know that students' mental and physical health, their sense of physical and emotional safety, their connection to caring adults, their access to challenging, culturally relevant content, and their engagement by teachers and paraprofessionals who value the knowledge they bring from home ALL matter to their academic learning and overall development.

That's why social-emotional learning is for everyone and is directly related to achievement. Now, as we emerge from the pandemic, we have to build that understanding into how we organize and staff schools, and we must strengthen the skills and knowledge of all the adults so that more kids have access to specialized supports, to learn and thrive.

Academic

There is a lot of concern about "learning loss," and there are even warnings about a "lost generation." There *have* been widespread disruptions to learning, and equity gaps *have* grown even wider. Remote instruction *is not* on par with in-person teaching and learning. And this is especially true for students with special needs. But this deficit mindset ignores what students have learned this year and assumes there won't be any efforts to help students recover.

So speaking of recovery, let's offer programs this summer that help students get back into routines and that provide academic support, programs that are fun and help kids get their mojo back.

This summer, for instance, Cincinnati's public schools will offer voluntary academic classes in the mornings, followed by enrichment in the afternoon. Jaumall Davis, a kindergarten teacher at Oyler Elementary School, is on Oyler's summer planning committee. Jaumall says they're planning a "summer experience like no other" with nature expeditions, journaling, broadcasting and a nearby aquarium that will bring sea life to the school.

In Miami-Dade, the district is using $50 million in federal relief funds to offer in-person and virtual summer programs to 10 times more children this year than previously. In addition to academic classes and credit and course recovery, kids in Miami will have fun with dance, art, band, sports, cooking, STEM and creative writing. School counselors will be at all open school sites, and mental health services will be available to any student in need throughout the summer, either in person or virtually.

Like many other places, schools in Dearborn, Mich., will use federal dollars for summer programs with academics in the morning and enrichment in the afternoon. Teachers are being asked, if they have a special skill or talent, to teach or share that in the afternoon. The full-day program is from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and runs a full eight weeks.

We want kids to return to school this fall with less stress and more resilience. We'll meet students where they are and provide the necessary interventions and supports.

In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers laid out a 5-point plan to do just that. Intervention teams—composed of a guidance counselor, a psychologist, a social worker and a teacher—will conduct quick diagnostics to assess each students' academic, psychological and social needs. This will allow school staff to provide personalized interventions to address students' needs and, if necessary, to refer students for clinical interventions with outside partners.

The UFT is also advocating for smaller class sizes in 100 of the city's highest-need schools. School staff in New York City will conduct high school transcript analysis to get students, especially those who fell off during remote schooling, back on track to graduate. And, to help all educators identify trauma in children, and in other adults, the union has created real professional development available to all members.

When students need help with concepts or skills, high-quality tutoring can have a high impact. Consistent, frequent sessions with a teacher, paraprofessional or other trained tutor, aligned with their curriculum and classes, can increase student learning and build confidence and interest in school. That's why in Gary, Ind., the school day will be extended by 90 minutes this fall to offer tutoring. And teachers in Anderson, Ind., will offer after-school tutoring two days a week. Teachers, of course, will be compensated for their time.

In classrooms across the country, teachers will do what they always do. They'll use what practitioners call formative assessments—an ongoing process to check for understanding and identify students' strengths and weaknesses. Teachers use this to adjust instruction to ensure that students understand concepts and have the knowledge and skills that are scaffolds for the next level.

Practices like this tell us much more—in real time—than any end-of-year standardized assessment.

These are just some ways educators are planning to meet students' academic, social and emotional needs, and there are more in "Learning beyond COVID-19," a guide produced by the National Education Association and the AFT.

REIMAGINE

As much as we want to feel "normal" again, we can do better than the old "normal." We don't have to accept vast inequality, chronic underfunding and narrow test-based accountability systems. We have a rare opportunity to reimagine public schooling in America and to pursue bold initiatives that will help all our kids thrive.

I love President Joe Biden's proposed American Families Plan, which would provide four more years of free public education, two years of early childhood and two years of higher education, and the American Jobs Plan, which will ensure that every American has essentials like safe drinking water and reliable broadband access. But today, I'm focused on what we should do right now: We should provide every student a positive school climate. We should take care of their physical and emotional health, and offer them a rich, well-rounded education. We do all of this very well for some kids yet very poorly for others. Let's do it well for everyone.

Reimagine School Climate and Safety

Schools should, first and foremost, be safe and welcoming places. Safe from violence. Safe from poor ventilation, mold and contaminants like lead and asbestos. Safe from the spread of the coronavirus. Safe from discrimination and bigotry. And safe for every child to feel that they are welcome for who they are. The same should be true for their families and for school staff.

Being stigmatized because your mom needs an interpreter when she enrolls you in a new school, isn't safe and welcoming. Having your enthusiasm for learning misinterpreted as disrupting the class because you're a Black boy, isn't safe and welcoming. Refusing to use students' preferred pronouns is not safe and welcoming. While these practices are not the norm, they exist. We must have honest conversations about what school safety and school climate look like, and what policies and practices can and must change.

Safety comes, too, from the experience of learning itself.

Let's be honest: Bias is built into our education system—from history textbooks that glide over oppression; to the systemic underfunding of inner city, tribal and rural schools; to the over-representation of Black and brown children in special education, and their under-representation in gifted and college-track programs. The result? Inequitable outcomes for students of color and students who are vulnerable. Educator or student, you cannot change practices that have a racist impact if you are not well-grounded in what they are, what types of changes are needed, and how to make those changes. You can call that anti-racist, because it is, or you can call it being racially literate, because that is what we as educators need to be. But please, we're talking about our children, don't turn this into another culture war.

A few decades ago, education research focused on the importance of positive identity development and cross-cultural awareness. These help all students appreciate the richness our differences bring to our society. But it's not enough. Culturally responsive education helps debunk long-standing misconceptions about the academic potential of students of color. It values the knowledge and skills students bring from their homes and communities, and develops students' agency as powerful learners and problem solvers.

Our country is culturally and linguistically diverse. That's an asset, not a liability. In many schools, there are not just two or three languages spoken, but hundreds of languages. It's really important to ensure that we help prepare our English language learners to succeed. We have to make sure that all kids feel safe, secure and valued.

That's what we mean when we say that we must support the cultural competence of all. Increasing the diversity of the workforce will help hugely; it's a key ingredient to helping all kids learn and grow.

Community Schools

Community schools can help organize much of what I have talked about today. These schools are hubs of well-being and support for children, families and communities—partnering with nonprofits, local government and businesses to help meet a host of needs. They solve a problem educators have long encountered—that a student who is hungry, is in distress or cannot see the board will struggle to learn. By integrating academics, enrichment, nutrition, and medical and mental health services, community schools truly meet the needs of the whole child. And by anchoring the school

in the daily life of the community and connecting families with services, community schools build trust and remove obstacles to getting kids and families the support they need.

Today it's more important than ever. And once again, the American Rescue Plan can help fund it.

In Baltimore, staff at the Wolfe Street Academy helped undocumented parents who lost their jobs apply for food benefits and increased the school's food program for families. In Houston, AFT members are partnering with Brighter Bites to distribute fresh produce to families at Dogan Elementary, a school I visited last week.

Binghamton University Community Schools, which covers 10 rural school districts in New York's Southern Tier, provided Chrome books and Wi-Fi for students and families so they could connect to online classes. They held virtual cafes for the many grandparents who are guardians for students, to help them with remote learning.

When most school programs went online during the pandemic, the Cincinnati Community Learning Centers were able to keep school health services open so students and families could continue to receive care. Their mental health partners will integrate these supports into the summer session, working side by side with the teachers on social-emotional learning, while also continuing to provide dental, vision and college access services throughout the summer.

We've heard over and over these last 14 months how schools can help meet kids' needs. Let's meet those needs with bold action by accelerating progress toward our goal of creating 25,000 community schools.

Reimagine Teaching and Learning

Students have surprised themselves by yearning to be back in school this year. Let's make sure schooling meets their, and our country's, aspirations.

Learning should be engaging and relevant, so students see it as worthwhile. Young people need a rich foundation in math and language arts, of course. But we are in a period when subjects with renewed currency and importance have been squeezed out by subjects that "count" for accountability purposes. Art and music, as well as science and civics, can cultivate students' passions, with catalytic educational effects.

Science

Not every child will grow up to be a scientist, but every child should grow up with a strong foundation in science. Science literacy enables people to make informed decisions, solve problems and protect the health of our world. Science has heightened urgency and relevance because of the climate crisis and the pandemic. Science can get us out of this pandemic—if only more people will let it.

Fascinating breakthroughs and vexing challenges are all around us—nanotechnology, gene editing, sustainable cities, even advances in 3-D printed organs. What seemed like the future is here—so it must be in our schools.

Here's an idea: Let's make room in the school day and in the curriculum for rich, deep science programs. And work with industry and nonprofits to create pathways to science careers.

Elementary students can plant a garden and study how to improve their vegetables' growing conditions. Middle school students can experiment with desalinization to provide safe and plentiful drinking water. And older students can explore the social, cultural, economic and political implications of the human impact on the environment.

Students, particularly those in our most chronically under-resourced communities, need opportunities to engage in scientific practices beyond the lab in their school (if a lab is even available). Partnerships with engineering and architectural firms, departments of energy, chambers of commerce, conservation organizations and local hospitals will allow students to see themselves as scientists or engineers and to seek careers in STEM fields.

Civics

I am a social studies teacher and a lawyer, so it's no surprise I have been calling for civics curricula for decades. In the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection, I have rededicated myself to this cause. The need for civic education and participation could not be clearer.

Not dry, didactic lessons on topics such as how a bill becomes a law. Young people learn how to be citizens in a democracy by actually engaging in the work of citizenship—examining an issue that is important in their own lives, studying what different parts of government and civil society can do to address it, and advocating for policies to make change.

That's what Sheyla Street, a high school senior in Philadelphia, did recently. She organized a march to "demand better for kids"—more mental health supports, safer buildings, a more culturally responsive curriculum, and equal access to magnet schools and high-level courses for all students. More than 100 supporters marched with Sheyla from City Hall to the school district headquarters. This young woman knows her civic strength, and she is flexing it.

I taught Advanced Placement political science at Clara Barton High School in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and it was thrilling to see my students, who were mostly Black and brown immigrants, from poor and working-class families, flex their civic muscles. My students won high honors in several state and national "We the People" civics competitions. They could match any student from any affluent background. Here's my point: Students shouldn't have to wait for an AP government class to debate the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. That should begin in elementary school and grow deeper in middle school and high school. These are topics that really engage kids and build that muscle of civic participation.

But civic participation has declined over the last half-century, and that decline has not been evenly distributed. Research points to civics "deserts," where the decline is much steeper and people have many fewer opportunities for civic participation. Not surprisingly, these civic deserts are in the same communities—largely poor and working class, immigrants and people of color—that experience food deserts and lack services and opportunities. Civic education can help change this.

This isn't about politics; this is about patriotism.

Reimagine Project-Based Learning, CTE and Assessment

And you know what's a great way to teach science, civics, music and art? Project-based learning. Students "show what they know" as they progress through a unit, rather than simply taking a test

at its conclusion. They own the learning process either individually or in teams. This approach to teaching and learning tells us far more about what students know and can do than selecting A, B, C or D on a standardized test.

One of my favorite experiences as a teacher was the moot court trials my students conducted in the high school law class I taught. They could have simply taken tests. Instead, they were the judge, the attorneys, the witnesses and the jurors. They learned so much as they prepared for "trial," and in presenting what they learned, they were teaching their classmates as well.

Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh is a great example of project-based learning. With support from a grant from the AFT Innovation Fund and support from the city, Westinghouse offers students a full academic program, including CTE pathways for public safety careers in firefighting, emergency medical services and law enforcement. It uses project-based instruction to help students apply the technical knowledge and skills they will need to enter these fields and earn industry certifications.

And in Peoria, Ill., the Greater Peoria Works CTE program has provided internships and job-placement opportunities for more than 400 students in fields ranging from health services; to manufacturing, arts and entertainment; to city government.

The AFT and many school districts have invested in CTE project-based learning. We are big believers in CTE, and so are kids. Nearly 95 percent of students concentrating in CTE programs graduate from high school, about 10 percentage points higher than the national average. And survey data show that students are more satisfied with their educational experience than students not involved in CTE.

But the unrelenting focus on standardized testing has hampered the use of project-based learning. Our current system of accountability relies heavily—almost exclusively—on standardized exams, particularly in math and English language arts. It has created disincentives for providing a rich, varied education. This system takes an especially heavy toll on schools and students with the greatest needs, so those who need academic enrichment the most are least likely to get it.

If you need proof of the limitations of standardized tests, consider that, of the 750 students admitted to New York City's acclaimed Stuyvesant High School for this coming fall, only eight are Black and 20 are Latino—with similar trends at other selective public high schools requiring admission exams. The most elite colleges and universities use a number of measures—not a single standardized exam—for admissions. Why can't selective high schools do the same? New York City's UFT has advocated for the elimination of a single high-stakes test for entrance to these schools. And, given all the criticism about standardized assessments this spring, clearly tests aren't the be-all and end-all.

We have an opportunity to rethink accountability and assessment. Let's change accountability systems to organize schools around teaching and learning, around what we want children to know and be able to do, and around the science of learning and development—instead of around testing. At the classroom level, let's offer students at least one project they can delve into deeply on their own or with other students. They can show what they have learned through meaningful projects—it could be a research paper, a science experiment, an oral history project or a mini graphic novel.

But this requires changing accountability on the federal level. So here's another idea: We are calling on Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to form a task force to rethink how we assess student learning and how to measure what really counts.

Reimagine Our Education Workforce

Finally, the United States must also reimagine how we staff our schools—and how we support the people who work in them. How many years have we lamented the teacher shortage? Is there really a shortage of people who would consider teaching? Or is there a shortage of respect, support, autonomy and funding so students and teachers can be successful, and of salaries befitting our profession? I think we know the answer.

In focus groups prior to the pandemic, educators told us they were frustrated, demoralized and stressed. They lamented the lack of classroom autonomy, the deprofessionalization of teaching and the lack of respect.

Teachers need the freedom to teach. More than ever, educators need time to plan and time to work collaboratively with colleagues. They need the time and tools for in-class formative assessments and the flexibility to change curricula to build on students' strengths and meet their needs. And they need support to teach kids who have experienced trauma.

In addition to teachers, we need school counselors, psychologists and nurses—but we are facing extreme shortages. The federal government estimates that, by 2025, the shortage of school counselors will reach 78,000. For every one school psychologist, there are an estimated 1,182 students. And more than one-quarter of schools do not employ a nurse.

Our affiliates have been fighting for and winning long-term commitments to get more of the nurses, counselors, psychologists, speech and language professionals, and other professionals we know our students need. We've seen this in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, St. Paul and many other places. And now, thanks to President Biden, more resources are available for these essential roles.

So, with all these staffing needs, it's painful to hear people say, "We'd better not use Rescue Plan funding for staff, because what will we do when it goes away?"

Stop. Let's use this money as a down payment to give our kids what they need. And we've got some great models showing the way.

The Teacher Academy, a new project with the Newark, N.J., public schools and the Newark Teachers Union, will offer high school students a "pipeline" to careers as teachers, with an eye toward increasing teacher diversity in the state. Graduates of the academy will have earned enough credits to work as teaching assistants while completing their degrees. The AFT partnered with Montclair State University to design the program's curriculum, and the university will provide adjunct professors to mentor students.

AFT New Mexico, in 2017, led the charge to reimagine teacher preparation and professional support for teacher assistants to pursue a teaching degree and license. The union successfully lobbied for the Grow Your Own Teachers Act, which provides a continuum of support for teacher assistants and other aspiring teachers, including yearlong clinical residency programs.

Teacher residency programs provide aspiring teachers the opportunity to earn a salary while working with an expert educator. Locally tailored programs can prepare teachers in specific shortage areas, such as math, science or special education, and can attract more racially diverse candidates to the profession. And teachers who complete residencies are more likely to stay in their jobs. For example, 80 percent of the San Francisco Teacher Residency program participants are still teaching in the district after four years, compared with only 38 percent of other new hires over that same

period. The same can happen for school nurses, psychologists, social workers and guidance counselors.

That's why we are so glad that President Biden recently announced plans to address teacher shortages, improve teacher preparation and strengthen pipelines for teachers of color. He is calling on Congress to double scholarships for future teachers, and to make major investments in "grow-your-own" programs, teacher preparation at historically Black colleges and universities, and other minority-serving institutions.

And while we are a big proponent of canceling up to $50,000 of student debt, another tool at the federal government's disposal to help attract and retain educators is the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. When administered properly—and we have every faith that the Biden administration can get PSLF on track—tens of thousands of teachers and other public service workers can, after 10 years of qualifying payments, have student loans forgiven. PSLF has the promise to be a game-changer in helping dedicated educators, especially educators of color (who have disproportionately high loans) commit to and stay in teaching while saving for homes or their own children's college education.

Conclusion

Returning, recovering, reimagining. We are all yearning to move forward after this difficult year. For our young people, that means being back in school, with their peers and caring adults, with all the supports they need.

Despite all the divisions in our country, there is a consensus around the importance of strong public schools. That is especially vital now, when we need our schools to provide access to a great, well-rounded education and to help students recover socially and emotionally. No one has come through these trying times unscathed.

I truly believe we have a rare chance to seed a renaissance in American public education—a time of a flowering in culture and learning as in the Harlem Renaissance and the European Renaissance. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to reopen and recover, but to reimagine our schools in a way that makes every public school a place where parents want to send their children, educators and support staff want to work and students thrive. This is our moment.