



*A Union of Professionals*

## **Remarks by AFT President Randi Weingarten**

**AFT TEACH 2019**

**Washington, D.C.**

**July 11, 2019**

### **Democracy in Education, Education for Democracy**

America's public school educators are change agents. You guide young people not only to build skills and knowledge, but to build relationships. You instill appreciation for diversity and respect for differences. You help our country realize its promise and help people have a better life; you are the essence of public education.

Horace Mann, John Dewey and Margaret Haley, a founding mother of the AFT, saw public schooling as central to the well-being of society and the strength of our democracy. So did Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin and Al Shanker. Al frequently invoked the AFT's founding motto: Democracy in education, and education for democracy.

Because that is what public education is at its best—a ladder of opportunity, a path out of poverty, a place to develop the muscle of civic participation, where we both embrace America's diversity and forge a common identity; indeed, the foundation of democracy.

But our country is dangerously divided. Will hope or fear prevail? Aspiration or despair? Humanity or cruelty? This is a moment of reckoning for our collective national character.

Our democracy is under assault. Donald Trump has waged a war on truth and on the press. He has trampled rights and responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution. He has scoffed at the rule of law and stoked America's divisions in order to exploit them, spurring neighbors to turn on each other; driving wedges between people who actually want the same things, like parents and educators; and inciting people to fear others for absolutely no good reason. He embraces despots while distancing our allies. He has put commerce and greed over human rights.

And his economic agenda has widened the gap between the rich and the rest of us. Today, the 400 richest Americans, less than one-fourth of 1 percent, have more wealth than the bottom 60 percent of people in our country. Claiming it's the "best economy ever" doesn't make it true. Just ask

---

The **American Federation of Teachers** 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.

Randi Weingarten  
PRESIDENT

Loretta Johnson  
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Mary Cathryn Ricker  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO • 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. • Washington, DC 20001 • 202-879-4400 • [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)



people in McDowell County, W.Va., or Lordstown, Ohio, communities that have been abandoned by industry and now further betrayed by the president who promised he would help them.

Many of you see the impact of this in your classrooms every day. The bullying and hatred that permeate society are on the rise in our schools. Economic stress has you stocking more snacks for your students and taking more money out of your own pocket for school supplies. At this moment when we need more civic participation, not less, subjects like American government and civics are squeezed out because standardized testing still compels schools to fixate on math and language arts.

This is not the first time our democracy has been at risk, but today its survival falls on us. Why? Because we are part of two institutions that are essential to the American dream—public education and the labor movement. Public schools and labor unions are direct pathways to broad-based prosperity and pluralism. They are how people can achieve a better life. And you—AFT members—are at the nexus of both.

That is why, together, we must play a vital role in moving the country toward our better angels. We must ensure that better days are ahead of us, not behind us. And I know we can.

Think about what we've already done. Remember the false narrative about public schools a decade ago—about so-called bad teachers, failing students and a system supposedly so broken that privatization and austerity were the only answers? We've busted up those myths, one by one.

For much of the last decade, it felt like we were in a knife fight, outnumbered by a bunch of billionaires and ideologues intent on reducing teachers and students to a test score, dividing parents and teachers, pauperizing our schools, and scapegoating and slandering public school teachers.

Slowly but surely, we have changed the narrative: By telling our story—about what works in our schools, and what doesn't; about the devastating toll disinvestment has taken on kids, educators and schools; about teachers' deep dedication to our students and our craft. By confronting the privatizers and the pauperizers. And by unmasking the true intentions of people like Michelle Rhee and Betsy DeVos.

Americans are committed to their public schools, which 90 percent of American children attend. Polls show that parents and the public want greater support for public schools—particularly neighborhood public schools. They want public schools strengthened when they struggle, not shuttered or supplanted by private alternatives. And the teacher strikes have been an amazing inflection point, making clear to America that teachers want what students need. We've changed the narrative; now we have to change the politics.

And that takes power—not power for its own sake, but power so we can transform our aspirations into action. So we can make every public school a place where parents want to send their kids, where teachers want to teach and where students feel safe and engaged.

Sure, teachers have always had power: The power to ignite a spark that engages a disaffected student. The power that comes from students wanting to earn your respect. The power that comes from fierce devotion to your students and your craft.

But in our disproportionately female, caring profession, we have not always been comfortable owning our power, much less building it. For example, how many of you have been in conversations questioning why the union is involved in elections?

You know who owns their power? Wall Street. The Koch brothers. Mitch McConnell.

My friends, we need to own our power. And we need to build our power so we can move our agenda—for our students and our families; for safe, welcoming and well-funded public schools; for affordable higher education; for healthcare that is a right, not a privilege; for a living wage; for a decent retirement; for a healthy climate; and a strong democracy. To get those babies and children out of detention centers and back with their families.

History is our guide. When the Dred Scott case upheld slavery, abolitionists did not capitulate: They built their power and ended slavery. When suffragists were arrested for voting and for picketing the White House, they did not meekly submit: They built their power and won the vote. And when child labor laws, a minimum wage and the eight-hour work day were struck down by the Supreme Court, the labor movement did not abjectly surrender: It built its power, and won back those rights and more.

We must build power for democracy in education, and education for democracy.

Our opponents—right-wing groups and billionaire extremists like Betsy DeVos and Sheldon Adelson—often understand our power better than we do. That’s why they fight to suppress the vote, defund our schools and destabilize our unions. They’re hell-bent on depriving us of power. That’s what the anti-union *Janus* case was all about.

But a funny thing happened on their way to writing our obituary after that ruling. *Janus* was a blow—no doubt. The AFT lost 85,000 fee payers instantly. But *Janus* also inspired us to do more of what we do best as a union—to engage with members, to demonstrate the value of unionism. And it reminded us of an essential truth about unions: Together, we can achieve what would be impossible on our own.

Let’s be clear, the attacks on unions didn’t end with *Janus*. Right-wing, anti-union groups have filed 80 lawsuits against us in the year since that decision. But our members are sticking with the union. Despite everything that has been thrown at us, the AFT continues to grow—1.7 million strong.

To our enemies’ vexation, we are thriving. Our allies not only took back the House of Representatives in 2018, we won support for school funding measures, from south Florida to upstate New York, and we elected pro-public-education, pro-worker governors in Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico and Wisconsin.

But we cannot rest. Not simply because our opponents aren’t going away, but because we are the change agents; the movement builders; the dreamers; the fighters for a better life, a better world and the soul of America.

And that’s why this year the AFT has used our collective voice and harnessed our power:

- For safe and welcoming environments in our schools and our communities;
- To demand the investments we need in public schools and services;
- For the freedom to teach, so we can meet our students’ needs; and
- For the freedom to live without having to work two or three jobs and without worrying about healthcare costs or crushing student debt.

Let's start with investment: The root cause of every single teacher walkout in the last two years was deep and prolonged inadequate investment in public schools, higher education and public services. Those moments of activism—of “red for ed” —must grow into a movement for sustainable funding. For public education to be the great equalizer, adequate funding must be available for all children to reach their potential. That's why the AFT has launched a nationwide campaign called Fund Our Future to combat the austerity and privatization that have created deplorable teaching and learning conditions in all too many schools. Starting this spring, thousands of members have stepped up, demonstrating and lobbying in more than 120 collective actions—and in countless individual actions. AFT local unions across the country are not just joining in; grass-roots leaders are part of the planning every step of the way.

And while we have made progress, there is much left to do. Twenty-one states still spend less on public education than they did a decade ago. Class sizes of 40 and 50 kids; schools that are freezing in the winter and sweltering in warmer months; water fountains that can't be used because they are contaminated with lead. I can go on and on.

In 38 states, teacher salaries are lower than they were before the Great Recession. How dare so-called leaders devalue and disrespect the profession that shapes the next generation of Americans? With Fund Our Future, the AFT is taking all of this on.

While the educator strikes from Los Angeles to Chicago to West Virginia have gotten much-warranted attention, change is happening across the nation. The Boston Teachers Union recently won contract language guaranteeing a nurse in every school and more mental health professionals. In Louisiana and Texas, school employees have gotten their first raises in years. And Washington, D.C., has a big role in this too. Betsy DeVos attempted to cut \$9 billion from education funding this year. But the new Democratic majority in the House of Representatives said no thanks and, instead, passed a funding bill that *increases* investment for public schools by \$4.5 billion, for programs like Title I and IDEA. Mitch McConnell has stymied the bill in the Senate, so it's wonderful that so many of you lobbied for it yesterday.

The AFT is working on a number of fronts to make our schools, workplaces and communities safe, healthy and welcoming. No one should fear for their safety at school or work. But I know many of us in this room do, and so do our students. In the aftermath of the massacre in Parkland, Fla., a

majority of American teens said they are worried about the possibility of a shooting at their school—and most parents share that concern.

While rarely discussed, anxiety and depression afflict so many families in America, as does the opioid crisis. Between 2009 and 2017, depression among adolescents increased by more than 60 percent. Tragically, teen suicides also soared. No family or community is immune to mental health issues, and our schools must be equipped to meet these needs.

We are also seeing a disturbing rise in hatred and bigotry in our schools. Just consider the Southern Poverty Law Center's recent survey: Two-thirds of the educators who responded witnessed hate or bias incidents in their schools in the fall of 2018.

This is why we advocate with such urgency for community schools and wraparound services. It's why we fight for a fixation on kids' well-being and against the toxic fixation on testing. It's why we fight every day for laws, policies and services that benefit kids' physical and emotional health, that create supportive environments, that keep students and educators safe and give them peace of mind.

### **Freedom to Teach**

The teacher uprisings of the last two years have laid bare the frustration over insufficient resources, deplorable teaching and learning conditions, and inadequate pay and benefits.

But you know the other cause of this frustration: deprofessionalization that strips us of the freedom to teach; the denial of teachers' expertise, experience, judgment and voice. We enter the profession excited, optimistic and determined to make a difference in our students' lives. But, too often, that optimism wanes under the stress and disrespect we soon experience.

It's being told to teach lockstep to a pacing calendar, even if students need more time on a particular topic. It's getting in trouble for allowing students to continue a debate over two days instead of one. It's drowning in a sea of paperwork—or feeling more like a test-prep manager than a teacher. And, too often, it's not being heard, or even asked, about decisions that affect our classrooms. This is not only demoralizing. It denies us the freedom to teach—not the freedom to

do whatever we want, but to do what we know is right based on our knowledge, preparation and experience. This defies common sense, it undermines our profession, and it hurts our students.

The freedom to teach stands on three foundations: a culture of collaboration in schools and districts (and time to deliver on it); the recognition that teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions; and ensuring that teachers have voice and agency befitting our profession.

AFT affiliates are using the tools of advocacy, legislation and negotiation to make the freedom to teach real: like negotiating anti-retaliation language, which the United Federation of Teachers just did in its last contract to ensure teachers are not afraid of broaching hard subjects or taking other risks to meet our students' needs. It's professional development days designed and delivered by our members in places like Meriden, Conn., and Pinellas County, Fla., and in Cincinnati, where the district relies on the union to deliver high-quality orientation for new teachers. It's in places like Cleveland, where the new teacher evaluation system is more about teacher and student development and less about test scores, and where the union and district are collaborating to reduce unnecessary and unhelpful testing. In the ABC school district in California, they've not only improved teacher retention and student learning through their highly regarded labor-management collaboration, they've developed an institute that this year has helped 20 other California school systems do the same.

This can happen at the state level as well. Like in New Mexico, with the Grow Your Own Teachers Act that provides school paraprofessionals a \$6,000 scholarship per semester while keeping their jobs as they study to become teachers. The result will be a more diverse teaching force with deep community connections.

I know, some of you are saying: But really, how can I do it? The truth is, you already do. For starters, you differentiate instruction to meet your students' needs. But you shouldn't have to hope no one catches you doing what you know is best for your students. The freedom to teach should be part of the culture of teaching.

And the AFT is here to support you. Share My Lesson, the AFT's free online platform, has resources you can download and communities you can join. And the AFT Collective Bargaining Center is producing a guide this fall with the best-in-class contract language from AFT affiliates. We're putting the force of collective bargaining behind the "freedom to teach."

I have talked today about things worth fighting for and things that keep me up at night, like Katie's experience with Navient. I know that many of you feel the anxiety of student debt firsthand, every day and with every loan payment.

The AFT's student debt work falls under three categories. The first is navigating a broken system. The AFT started our student debt clinics several years ago, which have helped thousands of members manage their student loan debt, often greatly reducing their monthly payments. And just as some locals, like the UFT, have built on our original concept, we are adding a new AFT benefit—access to a new app to help our members handle their student loan debt and enroll in income-driven repayment and public service loan forgiveness. It's called Summer, and it will be free for AFT members.

But we have to do more than help you navigate a broken system. Americans hold \$1.6 trillion in student debt, affecting 45 million people. The average student loan for a master's degree in education jumped 87 percent between 2002 and 2016. The bipartisan Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which Congress passed in 2007, was intended to help. But, as Katie's experience shows, it's not working. So we are supporting plans that both simplify and provide much more loan forgiveness, like those advanced by Sens. Warren, Sanders, Kaine and Gillibrand.

And third, we have to demand accountability for loan servicers like Navient, which have misled and exploited tens of thousands of borrowers. And we have to hold the DeVos Education Department to account for making it virtually impossible for people to secure public service loan forgiveness. That is why last fall we filed a suit against Navient for its deceptive practices. And today we are filing suit against Betsy DeVos for her role in sabotaging the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. The suit is simply called *Weingarten v. DeVos*, and eight AFT members, the AFT and I are the plaintiffs. I am glad that I have the standing to demand justice for every one of our members who has been hurt by Betsy DeVos' malfeasance.

This is all union work—caring, fighting, showing up.

The freedom to teach gives us voice in our work. Feeling safe in school and being free of crushing student debt give us freedom from anxiety. But there is no freedom more important than having a democracy, and a voice in it.



## **Civics and Democracy**

Teachers have always had a huge responsibility for the next generation: To teach and nurture students so they have the opportunity to live fulfilling lives. To help them develop judgment and discernment to be engaged citizens. To fight for social justice and make our classrooms and schools safe havens for students.

Today our role is even bigger. America's teachers are called to be defenders of decency and guardians of democracy, because the very foundations of America are being undermined every day.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the 19th-century French observer of American democracy, wrote: "America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

While our democracy has never been perfect, today its very existence is threatened.

Our national government has become a platform for the promotion of hatred and prejudice, a pulpit for authoritarianism, and a megaphone for shouting down the democratic ideals that have motivated what is best in America. And our classrooms and schools are not immune from the toxic political and social climate enabled by the president and his accomplices.

Our freedoms are under attack by a president who threatens to imprison his political opponents, who openly wishes he could "get rid" of journalists, who props up white nationalism and who cozies up to dictators while shunning our allies.

Our elections are undermined by widespread voter suppression, by extreme partisan gerrymandering that was just upheld by the Supreme Court, and by open invitations to foreign interference—with President Trump even joking about it with Vladimir Putin last month.

Our very moral character as a nation is tested when government leaders see immigrants and asylum-seekers not as "tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free," but as invaders so threatening and worthless that the government's inhumane treatment of them—denying even children adequate food, sleep and hygiene—is somehow deserved.

In a civil society, there is no “both sides” on matters of human dignity, equal rights, tolerance of diversity, civility and truth, or the rule of law. These are not options against which other beliefs can be regarded as equally worthy. But today these values need defending, and that is why we must be guardians of our democratic principles.

I am asking you to be clear-eyed about the perilous time we are in, to think deeply and seriously about what you can do to take a stand, and about the implications of doing nothing. We may have chuckled when President Trump revealed that he thinks Frederick Douglass is still alive and that American patriots stormed airports during the Revolutionary War. But we can’t lose sight of Trump’s unconscionable cruelty or forget that his erratic behavior is intended to create chaos and confusion. And we can’t assume that things won’t get worse.

Most of us didn’t become educators because we wanted to be political activists. But as educators with a conscience, we can do nothing else. To paraphrase the Jewish scholar Hillel, “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

So while I would never ask you to take on all these issues or to go it alone, the fight to safeguard American democracy begins in our classrooms and our schools. And TEACH is chock-full of how-to sessions.

In some ways, our journey to exercise the freedom to teach is a model for what our students need to be engaged and empowered citizens—voice, latitude and the ability to think for oneself.

Think about it: When classrooms are freed from the tyranny of testing and test prep, we have time for project-based learning—so students can analyze problems in their communities, figure out potential solutions and advocate for change. When lock-step pacing calendars no longer rule, we can have extended classroom discussions and debates. We can model democratic deliberation where disagreements are over ideas, not people, and dissenting views are respectfully heard, not shouted down; where opinions need to be supported with logical arguments and evidence, and not simply asserted; where discourse is to persuade, not to name-call or bully.

When our students experience the power of democratic citizenship in their education, they will not surrender it but will exercise it and demand the fullest of democracy for all Americans. Democracy in education has always been the foundation for providing education for democracy.

When students understand that our democracy rests upon free and fair elections, then they see that their first and most important right and duty as a citizen is to vote and to defend the right of all Americans to vote. That's why it's so important that students who are eligible to vote have every opportunity to register and cast their ballots. When the rule of law, a free press, and checks and balances become more than words on a page, students start feeling their own power to petition their government and to be heard. Help them develop the confidence to make their voices heard, the courage to challenge injustice, the knowledge of their rights—and the rights of others.

And it's not just our students. Too many Americans sat on the sidelines in the last presidential election. Too many people sit out *every* election. Michelle Obama's When We All Vote initiative aims to increase participation in elections and to close the race and age voting gap, and the AFT is an active partner.

Finally, we need to be all-in in 2020, which is why, first and foremost, the AFT's presidential endorsement process is about engagement—the most member engagement ever. We must practice what we preach about empowerment and civic participation.

The goal of our endorsement process is to determine the candidate (or candidates) who shares our values and can get elected—and for our members to feel ownership of it. Because the stakes are higher than ever, and no one can sit on the sidelines in 2020. Already, seven presidential candidates have participated in town halls with our members. You can check out the videos on [AFTvotes.org](https://www.aftvotes.org). More are in the works.

We used to be grateful if there was even one question about education in presidential debates. Now, your colleagues are asking tough questions of the candidates directly. And they're getting thoughtful responses.

You know how I said we've helped change the narrative about public schools? There's no better proof of that than the robust plans so many presidential candidates are putting forth on public education.

Bernie Sanders would enact universal pre-K and make tuition free at public colleges. Tim Ryan has laid out a detailed agenda around social and emotional learning. Kamala Harris has plans to raise teacher salaries and put college within reach. Amy Klobuchar calls for increased investments in

school infrastructure and help for working families with after-school programs. Elizabeth Warren pledges to select a teacher as her Secretary of Education and take on student debt and child care. Joe Biden calls for tripling Title I funding, investing in community schools, and doubling the number of school psychologists, counselors and nurses. Beto O'Rourke would forgive 100 percent of student loan debt for public school teachers. And those are just the candidates we've had town halls with so far.

Ten years ago, *Time* magazine emblazoned its cover with the image of a school superintendent sweeping out so-called "bad teachers." Today, presidential candidates are one-upping each other with their support of teachers and public schools. We have changed the narrative about public education and, in so doing, have helped preserve it. Now we have to safeguard democracy.

But it will take all of us taking a stand and doing our part. Get involved through your local union. Get active in local and national politics. Vote—and vote people into office who share our priorities and can make the changes we seek.

I look at the state of our country and I end with the question I started with: Can we change it? Whatever your priorities—climate change, healthcare, living wages, retirement security, support for public schools and our students, immigration, higher education, the fight for justice and for our democracy—let's find a candidate who shares our values and who can win, and then let's do everything in our power to make that happen.

It won't be easy. Remember what Frederick Douglass said: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

My friends, we cannot be silent. Our moment to save democracy is here and now.

When this moment in history is written, let it be said that America's teachers rose to the challenge. That hope won against fear, aspiration over frustration, and humanity over cruelty. That we defeated demagoguery and preserved our democracy.