



A Union of Professionals

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# AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

A photograph of a woman with long braids, wearing a black and white plaid shirt, sitting on a yellow chair in a library. She is smiling and reading a colorful children's book titled 'NEW DAY ADVENTURES' to a young child whose hand is visible on the left. The background shows bookshelves filled with books.

# RECLAIMING OUR FUTURE

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

**SUPPORTING TEACHERS** page 4 | **REIMAGINING COUNSELING** page 10

**TEACHING HONEST HISTORY** page 16 | **WELCOMING STUDENTS** page 20



For AFT members & students

# A free media literacy tool



## NEWSGUARD'S NINE CRITERIA:

### CREDIBILITY

- Does not repeatedly publish false content
- Gathers and presents information responsibly
- Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
- Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly
- Avoids deceptive headlines

### TRANSPARENCY

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- Clearly labels advertising
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NewsGuard is a tool to help you and your students assess the reliability of online news and information. A team of trained journalists rates thousands of news and information sites using basic, apolitical journalistic standards and writes Nutrition Label reviews explaining how each website is rated. Nutrition Labels also describe each site's owners, funding, editorial practices, and history.



## Accessing the reviews

Use the NewsGuard browser extension, available for Chrome, Safari, Firefox, and Edge, which is free for all AFT members, their students, and their families, and never collects personal information about its users.

## Using the extension

NewsGuard icons appear in the top-right corner of websites rated by NewsGuard. Icons also appear in search results and social media feeds, next to links. Hover over the icon to see how the site is rated, then click to read the full Nutrition Label.

## What do our icons mean?

- A news site that generally maintains basic standards of reliability
- A news site that generally fails to maintain basic standards of reliability
- A platform that publishes unvetted content from users
- A satire website
- A website yet to be rated



## Championing a Better Life for All

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

I'VE BEEN IN over 100 schools and worksites since April 2021—by last count about 125—because I wanted to be with you as much as humanly possible. This school year has been really tough. Students came back to school with enormous needs—academic, emotional, and social. And while the Biden administration got us many more resources, we still had to deal with all the same paperwork and testing fixation, as if this pandemic and its effects didn't happen. This was a lot, and your amazing work is the not-so-secret sauce that has helped children and families recover and thrive.

So, how did educators go from being heroes in 2020 at the start of the pandemic to being vilified in 2022? Because extremists are exploiting anxiety and uncertainty to try to undermine public education—and our democracy. This is an election year; rather than help everyone recover from this unprecedented pandemic, they would rather divide and conquer. It's as simple and scary as that.

Censoring teachers from talking about “divisive” topics, book bans, “don't say gay” statutes, and McCarthyistic tip lines encouraging parents to “report” you for teaching honest history—these are all intended to drive a wedge between educators and families. Our children are being targeted too, by attempts to marginalize LGBTQIA+ students and to gut programs that help our students socially and emotionally. (And these attacks are amplified—for profit—on social media.) But what's really happening in classrooms is educators are rebuilding relationships with students, even as they struggle to keep up with the same old pacing guides and succeed on the same old tests.

Extremists want universal school choice, so they have embarked on a campaign to undermine public schools. In the words of Christopher Rufo, one of the right's orchestrators, “To get universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.”

Our schools aren't perfect—but they have been a lifeline throughout the pandemic. We can stand up for public education *and* fight to make it better.

Public education is an equalizer. Just like democracy, it provides voice, agency, and empowerment to all. Together, 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. But we'll have to fight back and fight forward.

Public education and labor have always worked hand in hand to build a more just, inclusive world—from bringing children out of factories and into classrooms in the early 20th century, to the AFT's role in the civil rights movement, to our support for Ukrainian teachers, some of whom I met in April during a recent trip to Poland.

The other side knows that we're a bulwark for broad-based opportunity, so the attacks won't stop. But we are not alone.

Parents overwhelmingly support their public schools and how schools have handled the pandemic. In an April 2022 NPR/Ipsos poll, parents expressed strong satisfaction with their children's schools and what is being taught in them, regardless of their political affiliation. (That's why in recent school board elections in New Hampshire and Montana, pro-public education candidates won across major districts.) The public is with labor, too: a Gallup poll found that 68 percent of Americans approve of unions, the highest level since 1965.

Parents and the public are with us because we work with them. We care about kids' recovery and their future. That's why we created our Reading Opens the World

campaign and are giving out one million books to children and educators in marginalized communities. And we care about college being affordable and accessible to all. That's why we partnered with Summer to help AFT members minimize their student loan payments, sued Navient to stop its misleading loan practices, and even sued the US Department of Education to fix the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. This is our work. We do it regardless of the demagogues' attacks, and we are getting results.

Every moment in history can be viewed through a lens of hope or fear, aspiration or anger. But aspiration beats hate every time. That's who we are: change agents and hope creators. Together, we can help move America forward and win a better life for all. □

## We can stand up for public education *and* fight to make it better.





## RECLAIMING OUR FUTURE

By investing in students' and educators' well-being, creating welcoming environments, and building relationships in our communities, we are fulfilling the promise and potential of our public schools.



### 4 Revitalizing the Teaching Profession

*Three Educators Share Their Experiences and Aspirations*



### 10 The Promise of School Counselors

*Why They Are Essential for Students' and Educators' Well-Being*

By Mandy Savitz-Romer, Tara P. Nicola, and Laura Hecht Colletta



### 16 I Teach the Truth

By Marcia Chatelain

### 20 Back to School for All

*Helping Students Recover by Creating Safe and Welcoming Environments*

By Todd E. Vachon, Kayla Crawley, and James Boyle



### 32 Experiences from Three Campaign Sites

### 38 Union Highlights

## OUR MISSION

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.

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EMILY JASCHKE

Pictured:  
AFT MEMBER MONIQUE BOONE

# Educating for Democratic Citizenship

Civic education is essential to a democracy that works for everyone—and it is particularly important for young people, who are preparing to make the decisions that will shape our nation for decades to come. Communities thrive when young people actively participate in civic life. Not only can youth improve their social and emotional well-being by learning to solve problems and build consensus, but communities can increase their collective efficacy and amplify the voices of those who have been historically excluded from the political process.

With this in mind, the Albert Shanker Institute—partnering with the AFT, Share My Lesson, and the AFT Innovation Fund—launched the Educating for Democratic Citizenship project. The project provides educators with action civics lessons and resources that can be used to enhance learning in American history and government. Dozens of resources are available to help students learn about their rights and responsibilities and what they can do to ensure that local, state, and federal governments are more inclusive and representative of those they serve.

## Civic Action

Understanding how government systems work and how to become changemakers can motivate students for lifelong activism. In the four-lesson unit plan “Is There Equity of Community Services?,” students in grades 3–5 use photos to compare and contrast community problems, identify problems in their communities, and then work together to implement solutions. In “Representative Webquest,” students in grades 9–12 learn about political representation in Congress, use Vote Smart to evaluate their representative’s legislative record, and write to their representative to advocate for specific issues in their communities.

## Voting Rights

Learning the rights and responsibilities of voting is fundamental to civic education—especially in light of recent voter suppression efforts across the nation. In “Right to Vote,” students in grades 6–8 consider voter suppression from a historical lens to learn why all voices must be heard, then use their voices through a community action project to improve their schools. Through “A Closer Look into Immigration and Voter Turnout,”



students in grades 9–12 compare US political campaigning and voting processes with those of other countries and consider how to make the voting experience more accessible for immigrants.

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Students may know the phrase “liberty and justice for all,” but do they understand how it relates to unity and equity in our diverse democracy? In “Affirming Identities in Our School Community,” students in grades 6–8 learn how celebrating each other’s stories and identities can dismantle biases, increase equity, and help build an inclusive school environment. And “What Do You See? Lesson on Accessibility” helps middle and high school students learn how public policy impacts the extent to which people with disabilities are able to participate in society.

## Amendments

Finally, a working knowledge of the Constitution can help students take action against prejudice and injustice. In “The 6th Amendment: *Gideon v. Wainwright*,” students in grades 9–12 consider both legal precedent and inequities in US public defense systems and propose solutions to ensure all people accused of a crime receive effective legal representation.

For a broader overview of the action civics approach, watch the Educating for Democratic Citizenship Conference at

[go.aft.org/uep](http://go.aft.org/uep). Sessions are available on demand for professional credit. And many more lessons are available in the Educating for Democratic Citizenship community on Share My Lesson: [go.aft.org/rth](http://go.aft.org/rth).

Please reach out to us with any additional ideas or requests at [content@sharemylesson.com](mailto:content@sharemylesson.com).

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

## Recommended Resources

Is There Equity of Community Services?

Representative Webquest

Right to Vote

A Closer Look into Immigration and Voter Turnout

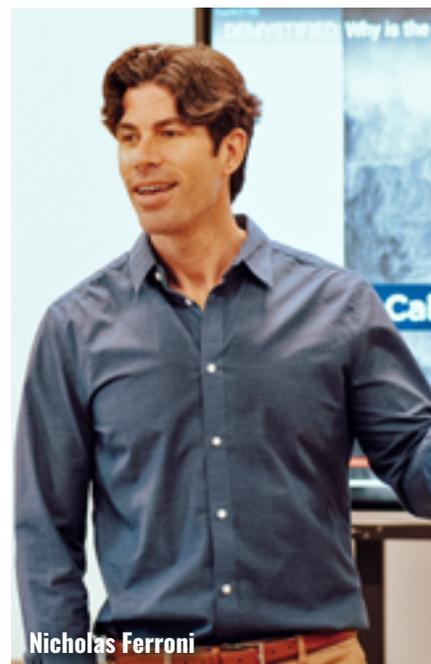
Affirming Identities in Our School Community

What Do You See? Lesson on Accessibility

The 6th Amendment: *Gideon v. Wainwright*

# Revitalizing the Teaching Profession

## Three Educators Share Their Experiences and Aspirations



Teaching, a truly noble profession, is on life support. After decades of inadequate investment, our public schools were short-staffed and under-resourced when the pandemic began. Now, educators' working conditions, which are also students' learning conditions, are abominable—and for many, simply unbearable. Here, three long-serving educators—Monique Boone, Kelly Erinakes, and Nicholas Ferroni—share their experiences striving to meet students' needs and offer straightforward solutions for restoring the teaching profession's vitality.

Monique Boone is the preK–12 English language arts and reading coordinator in the Channelview Independent School District in Channelview, Texas, and a member of Northeast Houston AFT (Local 6568). Previously, she taught middle school English and journalism and was an instructional technology specialist. A certified master reading teacher and reading specialist, Monique also teaches GED classes for the Harris County Department of Education. In addition, she is a consultant in literacy, technology, best teaching practices, and identity-affirming schools.

Kelly Erinakes is a dedicated educator and union activist. Since 2001, she has taught history and government at Coventry High School

in Coventry, Rhode Island, and has been the president of the Coventry Teachers' Alliance (AFT Local 1075). Previously, she spent six years as a middle school teacher.

Nicholas Ferroni is a history and cultural studies teacher at Union High School in Union, New Jersey, a member of the Union Township Education Association, and an associate member of the AFT. An advocate for gender equality and for LGBTQIA+ youth and an educator dedicated to inclusive history, he has been recognized as a Champion of Change by the United Nations Women and an Upstander of the Year by the Human Rights Campaign.

If you work in a school, please take from this Q&A the knowledge that you are not alone. Your fellow education professionals and your union are fighting for the changes that you—and our nation's children—need. If you are a parent, community member, and/or elected official, please hear these educators. They are caring for your children, and they need you to care for them by fully funding public schools, including providing the staff, services, and supports that enable students to be physically and mentally healthy and ready to learn.

—EDITORS

PHOTOS OF MONIQUE BOONE BY EMILY JASCHKE; PHOTOS OF KELLY ERINAKES BY BROOKE MACCOMBER; PHOTOS OF NICHOLAS FERRONI BY HASSAN MAHMOOD

**EDITORS:** Recent surveys have indicated that one-half to two-thirds of teachers are considering leaving the profession. What is driving so many to consider different careers?

**KELLY ERINAKES:** This school year has been atrocious. The workload for teachers has increased exponentially, and teachers' morale is at an all-time low. In 20 years as union president, I've never seen it so low. In addition, many staff members have gotten COVID, and many are immunocompromised, so anxiety is very high.

This year, our schools are open five days a week, but day to day, many students are at home with COVID or quarantined. Every day, teachers are simultaneously teaching to the students in class and also providing remote instruction for those at home. The lessons they are planning for class don't often work well for remote, so there's an enormous amount of double planning.

In addition, we have very few substitutes. With teachers getting sick, the teachers who are able to come in are covering other classes on a regular basis, which means they have no prep time during the day. They're also covering by pulling other students into their classes, dramatically increasing class sizes and too often causing more stress and behavioral issues for the students. Meanwhile, the parents supporting their children at home tend to become frustrated if teachers don't answer questions or help resolve technology problems right away—but they can't respond quickly because they are currently teaching in person.

**NICHOLAS FERRONI:** This has been the most overwhelming, mentally draining, exhausting year. It's the first year I have questioned whether I can continue teaching or not; I even updated my résumé because I wasn't sure if I could maintain the best version of myself for my students. I never thought I'd be in a position where I'd consider leaving my dream job. We're breaking professionally, mentally, emotionally. The students are the reason we became teachers, but we need more support to stay in this profession.

This year, I have 153 students. Connecting with each of them is tough. Just to reach each family once every few weeks, I spend three or four hours of my personal time each week calling parents to let them know all the amazing things their children are doing and find out what's going on at home. When I learned that one of my students lost a family member, I focused on making sure they were stable because if a student is depressed, education is really irrelevant.

I'm in my 19th year as a teacher, but it feels like I'm in my first year because we're all doing something that we weren't trained to do. The miracle is that somehow we're making it work.

**MONIQUE BOONE:** It does feel like we're first-year teachers. The pandemic created a big learning curve for students, educators, and principals. It was challenging for teachers to climb that curve while experiencing sickness and death all around us. On top of the rush to create online lessons with little training, educators struggled because many of our schools did not have enough devices, and many students did not have internet access. So everyone was scrambling to give students the learning tools they needed. Meanwhile, many students' and educators' family members lost their jobs. It was an incredibly tough situation for families, students, and educators.

I have young children, so I saw the situation as both an educator and a parent. I quickly realized that I could be either a really

**“We have a severe teacher shortage because teachers don't feel safe or supported, and they're overwhelmed.”**

**—Monique**

good worker or a really good stay-at-home mom, but doing both is exhausting. I was up all day and all night. I had calls and Zoom meetings up to 4 a.m. with administrators and teachers. So many teachers were in tears because they wanted to do right by students, and they didn't know how. Many teachers developed depression and other mental health issues as they struggled to balance family—their children at home all day and their family members dealing with sickness—and their work of caring for and educating their students.

When we returned to in-person learning, educators' anxiety was extremely high because there were many unanswered questions. Elected officials throughout my home state of Texas seemed to have self-serving agendas, leaving superintendents and principals to do the best they could to make decisions. Now we have a severe teacher shortage because teachers don't feel safe or supported, and they're overwhelmed.

As an instructional coach, I try to be there and give words of encouragement. I try to thank teachers every day for showing up. But then I go home and question: I'm telling someone, “Thank you for doing this work,” but at what expense to their livelihood, sanity, and families?





ment because they have never had to do it. Teachers have to be on their feet and exuberant with students. It's exhausting even when you are healthy. Administrators will say that teachers are working hard and are appreciated, but more actions to support these feelings would be appreciated by my members.

**EDITORS:** If large numbers of experienced teachers do change careers, what will that mean for students?

**MONIQUE:** We depend on our seasoned teachers, department heads, and teacher mentors to train the people coming up. I didn't just become a master teacher; I had



**NICHOLAS:** I can't imagine what it is like for teachers who are parents. I'm single, and here's my normal day: I wake up at 5:30. I get to school by 7 to get everything set up. My class starts at 7:35. I have one prep period, but throughout the omicron surge I had to cover another class because teachers have been out sick, and we don't have enough substitutes. School ends at 2:35. I stay after for an hour to try to catch up. And then I exercise with a group of students who play sports, which is part of

a mentor and others along the way to help me. But in Texas, we already have lost many seasoned teachers. At year three or year five, people are becoming mentor teachers. In three years, you haven't mastered anything!

It reminds me of a video one of my students made in 2017 as Hurricane Harvey turned us upside down. My student's home was flooded, and her family had walked for miles in waist-deep water. Taking shelter under a bridge, she made a video in which she said, "No one is coming for us." Today, that's how we feel: no one is coming for us. It is a tough situation to be in as an instructional leader. I work close to the community where I live and grew up, so this work is near and dear to my heart. It's not just the work I do to feed my kids; it's legacy work for my family and me. I want to see teachers thrive, and I want to see student success increase.

my self-care as I train and get to know them. I get home around 5:30 and work until 8:30 or 9, editing notes and presentations, grading papers, calling parents—doing everything that I should have been able to do while I was at school. I have dinner, go to bed, and repeat.

I fear that our students are going to suffer. If we can't retain teachers, principals, and superintendents, we can't guarantee quality instruction. If we rest everything on minimal state testing, what does that look like for our future? What does the future look like for a Black student living on the wrong side of the train tracks who is not getting what they need now? What happens if marginalized students don't have experienced teachers with the collective efficacy to say that these students can succeed and who will stay to see it through? It seems like the divide between the haves and the have-nots continues to get bigger and bigger.

On average, I work about three hours a day outside of school—and I know some teachers who do far more, especially if they coach or run clubs. Even worse, many teachers must have second jobs because they can't support their families on a teacher's salary. One of my best friends goes from school to driving Uber at night. That's not sustainable.

I cannot see myself doing anything else. I would rather stay and advocate for change because my heart is filled by working in education—showing up for teachers, administrators, and students every day. And I just hope that we can come to a place in education where everyone can feel fulfilled in this work.

**KELLY:** My members and I are facing similar challenges. Even with teachers double planning for their in-person and remote students and covering for colleagues who are out sick—resulting in a 60- or 70-hour workweek—there's been no increase in benefits or salaries.

**NICHOLAS:** I agree. I have one foot out the door, but I'm going to stick it out and be a part of the change. I've committed too much time and energy to stop trying to make things better for the next generation of teachers. I'm going to keep shouting and screaming as loud as I can so that, hopefully, the right people hear it.

Inside schools, it's a really tough environment. The students are stressed, but teachers never have a free moment to connect with them because they are rushing to cover classes. Administrators are always talking about students' social and emotional well-being. Of course that is important, but I'm constantly urging administrators to also be concerned about the social and emotional health of adults.

**EDITORS:** In addition to experienced teachers, what else do students need?

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed the COVID guidelines on staying home from 10 days to 5 days, some administrators accused teachers who were not able to come in after 5 days of milking their illness and being lazy. Some administrators can't appreciate how difficult it is teaching in this COVID environ-

**KELLY:** Students also need social workers, school psychologists, wraparound services, and healthy teachers.

There are not enough social workers and school psychologists for the amount of trauma students are facing. In my district, one

social worker and one school psychologist serve two or three elementary schools. At my high school, we have 1,500 students and just two social workers; our guidance counselors have about 400 students each. With those caseloads, there's no time to learn about families' needs and connect them with services. And unless you work with both students and their families, little will improve for students.

Because teachers feel they're the ones who have to hold it together, they don't reach out enough. We're used to being the helpers; we're used to being the nurturers. We're not used to asking for help. That's the biggest struggle right now: teachers who really need help do not acknowledge it. My union colleagues and I are on alert to figure out who needs help and then making sure they get it. I've done home well checks for a couple of teachers when I was concerned about suicide. We have several teachers who have been hospitalized for depression and suicidal tendencies. Other teachers have needed counseling. It would be much easier to ensure educators get the mental health care they need if administrators would support our efforts. It shouldn't just be union leaders assisting teachers with social-emotional issues and/or placements when needed. District human resources departments should take a more active role in the social-emotional well-being of their employees.

**EDITORS: On top of the pandemic, teachers are facing enormous pressure to limit what they teach about race, gender, sexuality, and other topics. How are these attacks on teaching honest history, book bans, and other attempts to censor instruction affecting you?**

**NICHOLAS:** I will say with absolute certainty that I teach nothing but the truth. I provide the entire story and let students come to their own conclusions.

I remember taking my first college course in African American studies at Rutgers and learning about the Tulsa race massacre. I asked my professor, who is African American, "We learned about the Boston Massacre and only five people were killed by British soldiers. Why is it that something happened where 300 people were killed by a mob, but it's not in the history books?" He said, "Because they were 300 Black people." That stuck with me because it highlights that for far too long, only certain stories were told.

For the longest time, the majority of Black students, female students, and LGBTQ students learned almost exclusively about straight white male history. That was the norm. Now that we want to include other people, all of a sudden it's oppression.

As a child of German descent, I learned about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, but I never felt guilty about it because it's not reflective of me. So the logic that we're traumatizing children or that we're somehow indoctrinating children is one of the biggest farces I've ever heard. Making sure every child feels included is not indoctrination. Making sure every child understands the truth about the histories of other people is not indoctrination. It is teaching empathy and open mindedness.

I love my country enough to want to dedicate my life to teaching US history, but I also want to teach it in an honest and truthful way—so we don't make the same mistakes again, and so we understand where we are and where we're going. Learning about systemic racism, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement doesn't make me hate this country. It makes me realize we've come a long

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**“I love my country enough to want to dedicate my life to teaching US history, but I also want to teach it in an honest way.”**

**—Nicholas**

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way, but we still have far to go. It makes me appreciate the people who fought for their rights.

**KELLY:** My experience is similar to Nicholas's. We're fortunate to be in the Northeast, where the push to limit what teachers can teach is not strong. I have a master's in history, and I know US history well. I teach the truth. Teachers are not teaching critical race theory, but the people who are worried about it have greatly expanded what that term means—they are worried about teaching core topics like slavery and its aftermath. They claim that learning about slavery makes white students feel bad about their ancestors and themselves and that it denigrates the white population as a whole.

That's not the case in my courses—and it ignores the fact that students learn a great deal on social media. They are more mature intellectually than high school students were earlier in my career, and they ask more sophisticated questions. As an educator, my job is to bring out that inquisitiveness in students. When they have questions, that's when they are engaged and truly learn. And I answer their questions honestly.

In my AP US Government and Politics course, I have to teach affirmative action and gay and lesbian rights. It's part of the AP curriculum. I make the students debate; they present multiple perspectives and reach their own conclusions. I do the same in my history courses. I present the texts in a neutral way, answer students' questions honestly, and facilitate as the students engage each other in difficult discussions. I create the environment for respectful debates and intellectual discussions from the very beginning of the school year. We set ground rules focused on mutual respect.

Students are often surprised as they learn US history. For example, when we learn about Emmett Till, many students say they can't believe that happened. This can lead to an awakening—but it does not lead to guilt or shame. What I see throughout my history courses is students developing empathy. Whether we're learning about the gay and lesbian youth movement, the Mexican American movement, McCarthyism and the Red Scare,



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## “In addition to higher salaries, teachers need to be more empowered at the district, state, and federal levels.”

—Kelly

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the treatment of Irish or Italian immigrants, or women’s rights, students develop empathy. I hope they are also learning lessons that they will carry through their lives so our country does not repeat its mistakes.

**MONIQUE:** At the beginning of the school year, the social studies leader and I met with teachers to explain the new bill (which has since become law\*) indicating that they could not teach critical race theory. I kid you not: the room fell silent, and someone said, “What is that?” We don’t teach critical race theory; we teach history as it is written in the textbook and other resources provided by the state and in accord with the state standards.

So far [as of March 2022, when this interview was conducted], we have not yet banned books, but we were given a list of almost 800 books that were flagged as not suitable for students.† I don’t know who identified these books, but I see many on the list that students love. Many are picture books and middle-grades books that I don’t see any problems with at all. For example, one book on the list is *A Good Kind of Trouble* by Lisa Moore Ramée. It’s about a little girl in the seventh grade who learns that there are times when the right thing to do is to stand up for change. I would have my 10-year-old read it.

Our district encourages a 360-degree view for looking at political, historical, and scientific things, meaning we’re providing multiple perspectives so that students develop their thinking. But our teachers are scared. They want to provide quality instruction, but they don’t want to lose their jobs. So every other day, I get calls and emails from teachers asking, “Hey, I want to teach about the Holocaust. Is that OK?” or “Hey, for Black History Month, can we celebrate Black achievers?” They don’t know. And I don’t want them to be scared, but sometimes it’s hard to give answers.

Unions are more important now than ever, especially the AFT. So my colleagues and I encourage our teachers to stay connected to the union for information

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\*To learn more about Texas’s law limiting instruction, see “Republican Bill That Limits How Race, Slavery and History Are Taught in Texas Schools Becomes Law” at [go.aft.org/e6z](http://go.aft.org/e6z). And for additional context, see “Legislators Fight to Control the Content of Civic Education” at [go.aft.org/jkx](http://go.aft.org/jkx).

† For information on the books being questioned, see “Texas House Committee to Investigate School Districts’ Books on Race and Sexuality” at [go.aft.org/mom](http://go.aft.org/mom).

because it knows the laws and what teachers can do. That has been pivotal in guiding our work.

**EDITORS:** Given the overwhelming challenges you’ve described, what changes are needed to make teaching a desirable, long-term career?

**MONIQUE:** There is no one solution, but a significant salary increase would help. A stipend doesn’t sustain your family, but a considerable salary increase would be meaningful.

Many teachers I know, even myself, have part-time jobs or side hustles to be able to provide for our families. I do contract work for education agencies, and I offer professional development for teachers. I also have my own company working with districts and schools to improve the cultural relevancy of their curriculum and instruction. But honestly, I don’t think I could afford to be a teacher without a side hustle. I’m fortunate to do extra work that brings my heart joy, but many of the teachers I work with have to take second shifts in retail or drive for Uber just to make ends meet. That’s unacceptable in 2022.

**KELLY:** We need to bring back respect for the profession. In addition to higher salaries, teachers need to be more empowered at the district, state, and federal levels. The only people who can fix education are those who are educating. Funding is also a huge issue: our school buildings are crumbling, and we have too many students per classroom.

Teachers are not just teachers; they are also counselors, caregivers, and service coordinators—they strive to meet all of their students’ needs. It’s not unusual to be greeting the students at the door and have one student come in crying—she doesn’t have her homework and didn’t get any sleep because her mother was on a drunken rampage. Another student will be cranky because he didn’t have breakfast. Three or four more will arrive with similar concerns. So before you can even begin teaching, you have five or six students who need personal attention before they are ready to learn. And the larger our classes become, the more needs walk in the door.

On top of that, you have a range of prior experiences and knowledge in each classroom; some students need enrichment



activities, others are struggling to master the content, and still others are in the middle. The smaller the class size, the more one-on-one time you have with students to give them what they need intellectually.

**MONIQUE:** Reducing class sizes is critical. Currently, we are filling classes to the brim because we don't have enough teachers. The teachers I work with have 28 to 38 students in a class.

**NICHOLAS:** Along with increasing salaries and reducing class sizes, we have to reduce caseloads for school nurses, psychologists, and counselors. In my school, counselors have 500 students—how are they supposed to address mental health and social and emotional needs?

In my ideal world, teachers would be given more time to prep, to interact with each other, to plan, and to mentor new teachers. Some paperwork and some instructional time would have to be taken off each teacher's plate. I would teach five classes instead of six or seven, and I would have one period in which I mentor a new

teacher who is not teaching a full-day schedule. Unfortunately, the reality is that we are so understaffed that new teachers are largely on their own.

As a student, I didn't realize the simple things. I didn't realize that teachers paid for the supplies in my classroom. I didn't realize that so many teachers had second jobs because you can't support a family on an educator's salary. I always appreciated and valued my teachers; I didn't realize that society demeaned them and degraded them.

Education is the one investment that everyone benefits from. Every single day, teachers invest their hearts, their souls, and their money into their students. We want society to invest in us and in our schools as much as we invest in our students. □



## Tackling the Root Causes of Staffing Shortages

Every year, thousands of teachers and other school staff walk out the door, many of them taking their talents and expertise to other districts and other professions. Determined to ensure all educational workers have the supports, voice, and compensation they deserve, AFT President Randi Weingarten convened the Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force in December 2021.

"Teachers, bus drivers, food service workers, nurses, and so many other educators have been heroes during the pandemic, going above and beyond to help their kids, checking in on them day and night while paying for supplies out of their own pockets," explains Weingarten. "The best way to respect and support them is to address the root causes of their stress, including low wages, poor working conditions, and divisive political fights."

The task force is bringing together union leaders representing teachers, paraprofessionals, and school-related personnel, as well as the nation's top education researchers. Together, they are reviewing the education profession to make recommendations on enhancing well-being, improving working conditions, strengthening recruitment and retention, and advancing the careers of those who choose this essential field.

To ensure that the task force tackles AFT members' top priorities, a representative survey of our K-12 members—including teachers, paraprofessionals, and school-related personnel—was conducted in

March. Seventy-eight percent declared shortages of qualified teachers and staff to be a very or fairly serious problem, and 74 percent had taken on extra work because of shortages. Key issues that emerged are removing duties that are not directly related to meeting students' needs, securing raises for all school staff, offering mental health supports for staff and students (including additional counselors), and making class sizes smaller.

A great deal of educational research shows that teacher and school staff well-being and agency are the essential precursors to student well-being and increased academic growth. As Weingarten often notes, "Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions." Discussing the current crisis, she added: "Even before COVID, nurses, guidance counselors, teachers, support staff, and bus drivers were facing daunting workloads and a lack of respect. And layoffs at the start of the pandemic, the virus's malaise, political brawling over the teaching of honest history, and the challenge of this school year have made the current situation even worse."

As of April 2022, jobs in local government education, the Bureau of Labor Statistics category that contains almost all K-12 public schooling, remain down by 331,000 since the onset of the pandemic in February 2020. For example, the Virginia Department of Education reported that the number of unfilled teaching positions across the commonwealth had increased

by nearly 62 percent as of December 2021, with school districts reporting nearly 5,000 vacancies. But even before the pandemic, education staffing was a challenge. In California, for example, around 80 percent of school districts were short on qualified teachers as of the 2017-18 school year.

The task force will tackle the widespread educator and support staff shortages imperiling the future of public education, developing recommendations along with implementation strategies.

The task force has been drilling into critical issues such as working conditions, including reducing time on assessments, lowering class sizes, and creating a teacher evaluation system designed to improve (not penalize). It is also digging into compensation, including ensuring all school workers have living wages and access to affordable healthcare, and into recruitment and retention, with an emphasis on Grow Your Own programs to increase educator diversity, create opportunities for people already in the school community, and make education a truly inclusive profession.

The AFT is holding listening sessions with rank-and-file members across the country in addition to conducting virtual and in-person meetings with task force members. The task force will conclude with a report released at the AFT's biennial convention, to be held July 14-17, 2022. After convention, the report will be available at [aft.org/education](http://aft.org/education).

—AFT Educational Issues Department

# The Promise of School Counselors

Why They Are Essential for Students' and Educators' Well-Being



By Mandy Savitz-Romer, Tara P. Nicola, and Laura Hecht Colletta

Mr. Jerry Pham has taught sixth-grade English at Morningside Junior High for nine years but was never as concerned about his students' well-being as he was at the start of the 2021–22 school year. Between the continued stress and social isolation brought on by the pandemic, abrupt shifts to remote learning as COVID-19 cases were reported in his school, and a

national reckoning with state-sanctioned racialized violence, he was not entirely surprised that many of his students were either acting out or putting their heads down instead of engaging in class. By the end of September, although Mr. Pham was still getting to know this year's students, he had been teaching long enough to realize that he needed to be better prepared to support them. Mr. Pham signed up for several professional development workshops on trauma-sensitive schooling and purchased books on social and emotional development, but still he felt unqualified to address what he could see was getting in the way of student learning.

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Mr. Pham considered reaching out to Ms. Andrade. She and one other school counselor had recently been hired, and Ms. Andrade was supposed to cover grades five and six. However, Mr. Pham's experience with the previous school counselor gave him little hope that Ms. Andrade would help. The previous counselor had been so overwhelmed by the 900 students on her caseload, on top of what seemed like endless administrative responsibilities, that she rarely interacted with him. In fact, in his nine years at the school, he had only spoken with her when she joined his class to discuss electives. On a few occasions, Mr. Pham considered seeking her advice regarding a student who seemed to be struggling emotion-

ally, but he didn't know if school counselors were prepared to support students' mental health. From his own schooling experience, he recalled only talking to his school counselor about college planning. Still, the school had intentionally hired two counselors to make caseloads more reasonable, so perhaps things would be different with Ms. Andrade?

After overhearing two students talk about a social scenario game they had played with Ms. Andrade at lunch, Mr. Pham sent her an email asking for help. Although he tempered his expectations—she was new not only to the school but also to the counseling field—Mr. Pham recalled that she had made a point to introduce herself to all of the teachers. To his surprise, Ms. Andrade replied right away suggesting they meet during lunch so she could learn more about the situation. That conversation enabled Mr. Pham to articulate what he was seeing and separate his feelings of failure from what the students might be experiencing. Most importantly, Ms. Andrade helped him understand that some of his students' behaviors, such as putting their heads down, may actually be symptoms of depression, grief, and anxiety and are a normal response to high-stress environments and ongoing trauma. Together, they came up with a plan in which Ms. Andrade would observe three of his classes and then send him suggestions for developmental lessons she could deliver to his students. She also supplied some sentence starters for writing assignments to open a conversation between the students and Mr. Pham.

Within a few weeks, Mr. Pham noticed a difference in his ability to relate to his students. He felt more confident engaging them and began to see their behaviors in a new light. His students also were benefitting; after Ms. Andrade led sessions on self-regulation and mindfulness, Mr. Pham saw changes in their levels of focus and affect. However, he truly realized the value of these collaborations when a student told Mr. Pham that they have been feeling less anxious about coming to school because they now have space to process everything that is going on.

By the winter break, Mr. Pham and Ms. Andrade had developed a strong working relationship. He valued her unique skills and knowledge about mental health, and he readily welcomed the strategies she provided for promoting students' social and emotional development. One of the things Mr. Pham appreciated most was that Ms. Andrade recognized how deeply he cares about his students. Her conception of the school counseling role, as he eventually learned from her, was to support the success of both students and educators, which included consulting with teachers.<sup>1</sup>



## Research repeatedly finds that when school counselors deliver comprehensive programming, student outcomes improve.

**T**eachers everywhere have witnessed the deleterious impacts of the pandemic on students. Soaring rates of youth anxiety and depression,<sup>2</sup> declines in college enrollment,<sup>3</sup> and worrisome results on achievement tests<sup>4</sup> are among the consequences of prolonged disruption to students' home and learning environments. Although schools are doing their best to ameliorate these issues, limited staffing and resources remain barriers to supporting student success. How can teachers do more when they are already stretched so thin?

School counselors are often under-utilized, but they can be a huge asset as schools embark on the long road to recovery from COVID-19. Research repeatedly finds that when school counselors deliver comprehensive programming, student outcomes improve.<sup>5</sup> In schools that allocate counselors' time wisely, counselors may spend their days providing individual and group counseling sessions, leading developmental lessons in a classroom, consulting with parents or caregivers on an intervention, analyzing attendance data to develop outreach plans, or offering

### EdResearch for Recovery

To support educators who are giving their all to engage students throughout the pandemic, EdResearch for Recovery is a new initiative aimed at delivering essential resources. Working with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and Results for America joined forces to develop research briefs that answer educators' most pressing questions. More than 20 briefs have been published so far, covering topics such as academic interventions, trauma-responsive practices, and engaging families—and all are online for free. This article is based on the brief "Building High-Quality School Counseling Programs to Ensure Student Success" by Mandy Savitz-Romer and Tara P. Nicola, which EdResearch for Recovery published in January 2022. To learn more, visit [annenberg.brown.edu/recovery](https://annenberg.brown.edu/recovery).

early college and career awareness programming. However, poor working conditions—including enormous caseloads and extensive noncounseling tasks—often compromise counselors’ abilities to deliver on what students need most.

### School Counselors and Student Success

While school counselors are typically associated with their college counseling work at the high school level, they are actually trained to support K–12 student development across three domains: academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary planning.<sup>6</sup> School counselors foster students’ academic success through hosting study skills workshops, working with teachers to identify

Research consistently finds that school counselors have a positive influence on students’ academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary development. For example, studies have linked access to counselors with improved attendance and lower disciplinary and suspension rates,<sup>7</sup> as well as higher levels of student well-being.<sup>8</sup> Other studies have found that students who engage with a counselor are more likely not only to have college aspirations but also to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, apply to a four-year institution, and ultimately enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>9</sup> The impact of counselors is pronounced for minoritized and marginalized students, who tend to especially benefit from the resources and supports that counselors provide.<sup>10</sup>

## Studies have linked access to counselors with improved attendance and lower disciplinary and suspension rates.



students who may benefit from academic support, and reducing barriers to accessing rigorous coursework. Counselors promote students’ social and emotional development by providing individual and group counseling and offering classroom lessons and schoolwide programming on a wide range of topics, including substance abuse, healthy relationships and consent, mental health, and racial and ethnic identity development. In their role as college and career counselors, they promote career exploration, cultivate college-going cultures, assist with all facets of the college application and financial aid processes, and broker connections with local employers. Although the scope of counselors’ work is quite broad, they tend to prioritize certain areas of their role based on the grade levels they serve and their school community’s needs. For example, while one counselor may emphasize supporting students who are struggling with their sexual identities, another may not be called on to engage in that work at all.

Despite consistent evidence of counselors’ positive influence, several obstacles constrict students’ access to school counseling professionals and high-quality comprehensive counseling programs. One of the most significant is that not all schools offer school counseling. Limited policy at the state level is partly to blame, as school counseling is not as tightly regulated as other professions like teaching. Currently, only 29 states mandate that schools offer school counseling programs to all students in grades K–12; even fewer require that licensed professional counselors administer these programs. Furthermore, even in schools that employ counselors, high student-to-counselor ratios make it difficult for students to receive the wide array of services that counselors are trained to offer. Despite evidence linking lower caseloads with improved student outcomes,<sup>11</sup> the average counselor caseload nationally is 415 students, with the typical caseload exceeding 700 students in some states.<sup>12</sup> Caseload sizes are especially high in districts serving marginalized students—only one in six districts with predominantly students from low-income families and students of color have ratios below the 250-to-1 threshold recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).<sup>13</sup> Limited regulation of counselor caseload sizes at the state level, combined with budget and resource constraints, makes it difficult for school and district leaders to prioritize bolstering counselor staffing levels.

Misaligned expectations between counselors and school leaders about the counselor role is another constraint that hampers counselor efficacy. Research has found that principals are more likely than counselors to identify student registration and scheduling, test coordination, and record-keeping as significant counseling tasks—duties that the ASCA identifies as inappropriate for counselors.<sup>14</sup> Counselors at urban schools, as well as those serving students from low-income families and students of color, are more likely to spend time on these inappropriate duties. When counselors are asked to carry out extensive non-counseling tasks, it compromises their ability to provide critical direct services, such as implementing social skills lessons, meeting with a student struggling with the loss of a family member, or reviewing attendance data and identifying appropriate inter-

ventions. Not surprisingly, studies indicate that counselors who spend less time on direct counseling work tend to have lower levels of job satisfaction and struggle to deliver comprehensive counseling programs.<sup>15</sup>

Another factor that impacts counselors' ability to provide high-quality, comprehensive programming is low support among district and school leaders for in-service professional learning.<sup>16</sup> Professional development is important because many counselors have reported that their pre-service training did not adequately prepare them for their roles.<sup>17</sup> For example, counselors have voiced a need for more training in recognizing manifestations of student trauma in school settings,\* implementing college and career readiness counseling, and using data to inform their practices.<sup>18</sup> When school leaders provide access to meaningful professional development, counselors are better prepared for the unique demands of their jobs.

### The Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 exacerbated many of the challenges that school counselors face in fulfilling their professional roles. Notably, because of pandemic-induced staffing shortages, counselors have reported taking on additional noncounseling work in their schools. One survey of 7,000 counselors found that many have been required to serve as substitute teachers, perform new administrative tasks, or assume health-related duties such as temperature checks.<sup>19</sup> These responsibilities have further limited their availability to meet with students at a time when students' needs are escalating.

School closures and shifts to remote and hybrid schooling have also stymied counselors' ability to effectively support students. In our research, which involved documenting the experiences of hundreds of counselors during the pandemic, a recurring theme was counselors' struggle to connect with students.<sup>20</sup> Many counselors reported that just meeting with students was a challenge, as disparities in access to computers and the internet meant that not all students could connect virtually. Even counselors who were able to reach students online or by phone reported struggling to form meaningful connections, as students were disengaged and felt detached from their school support networks. Some students were also reluctant to speak openly while in their own homes.

The return to in-person schooling this academic year has allowed counselors to begin cultivating the personal relationships with students that weren't possible during the height of the pandemic. However, it also has placed great demand on counselors to devise systems and programs to support large student populations that have faced significant challenges on account of COVID-19. Many counselors already felt burned out before the pandemic



## Noncounseling work limits counselors' availability at a time when students' needs are escalating.

started, and the additional stress and responsibilities of the last two years have made their jobs harder.

### A New Vision for School Counselor Engagement

As schools consider how to promote the academic, social and emotional, and postsecondary success of their students, especially as they continue to recover from the pandemic, school counselors are a critical resource. Here, we outline three possible strategies for teachers and administrators: clarifying counselors' roles, building teacher-counselor relationships, and advocating for improved counselor working environments.

#### 1. Develop a Shared Understanding of the Counselor Role Within Schools

To ensure school counselors are well positioned to meet students' developmental needs, *school leaders and teachers need to develop a shared understanding of the counselor role that is aligned with professional expectations.* Leaders looking to unlock their counselors' potential might begin by collaboratively developing clear priorities for the counseling program and how counselors' time can best be allocated to support student needs. Reviewing ASCA's copious resources about the counselor role and establishing strong counseling programs is a good place to start.<sup>21</sup> It is also essential that administrators, teachers, and counselors talk about counselors' duties and see if certain responsibilities could be distributed to other staff, thereby enabling counselors to have more time for direct contact with students. As school leaders increase their expectations of school

\*The AFT offers a remote course, "10 Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Heal," to boost resilience and promote mental health. For more information, AFT local leaders should contact Chelsea Prax: [cprax@aft.org](mailto:cprax@aft.org).

counselors, they also need to make sure counselor caseloads are reasonable and then hold their counselors accountable to these updated professional standards.

Once school counselors' capacities and roles have been agreed upon, school leaders, teachers, and counselors should ensure that the whole school community understands the scope of the counselor role across the academic, social and emotional, and post-secondary domains. Like Mr. Pham, too many teachers have known counselors whose caseloads are too high and who lacked the capacity to embrace an updated role. Teachers likely would

counselors' working conditions support their efforts at partnering with teachers, there are three factors to consider for cultivating these collaborations.

First, *clear, open, and consistent communication is an essential foundation for teacher-counselor relationships*, as it establishes mutual respect and trust. Many teachers, like Mr. Pham, are unsure where to turn when they see their students struggling. Yet counselors are eager to collaborate with teachers. They are trained to be data-driven interventionists, and teachers are key to providing the data that counselors need to best target their interventions. Both teachers and counselors have valuable insights on the challenges that students face inside and outside the school building; openly sharing this information is essential to supporting student success. As with any organizational culture, intentional relationship building among staff leads to better outcomes for all. These relationships are especially valuable in enabling teachers to be vulnerable when they are struggling.

Second, *allocating more time for counselors and teachers to meaningfully connect is needed to build strong teacher-counselor relationships*. One strategy is to invite counselors to join grade-level team meetings or serve on school leadership teams. Doing so not only creates more lines of communication but also signals to the whole school community (including students and families) that counselors are leaders whose input is valued. Collaborative relationships can also serve as the starting point for consultations to review student data, identify and address concerns, and share information.

Third, counselors are eager to *help students engage more deeply with instructional content*. As postsecondary advisors, counselors help students contextualize their learning in the "real world" and think about how their academics can help them reach their future goals. Distributive counseling, a practice in which school counselors provide teachers tools and resources to

implement counseling-like practices in their classrooms, is one way to achieve this. For example, counselors could bring social and emotional learning into everyday practices or embed career exploration into STEM courses.<sup>23</sup>

### **3. Advocate for Improved Counselor Working Conditions**

Improving students' access to school counselors and the quality of the supports they provide requires systemic change to the US education system. Educators and school administrators can play an important role in bringing about those changes by advocating for improvements in counselor working conditions. The school counseling field has actively lobbied district, state, and federal policymakers for decades to reduce counselor caseloads, develop comprehensive counselor evaluation systems, and improve counselor certification requirements, among many other things. Having the full support of their school colleagues will amplify the outreach efforts of counseling professionals.



## **Teacher-counselor partnerships can amplify the impact of both counselors and teachers on student success.**

engage differently with their school's counselors if they understood the school counseling role today. School leaders have an important role to play in setting expectations. For example, a principal can set aside time at the beginning of the year for the counseling department to present to teachers on the types of classroom lessons they can collaboratively deliver, discuss how to refer students in need of additional support, and outline possible classroom strategies for integrating social and emotional skill development in academic content areas. School leaders can also encourage teachers to have counselors sit in on lessons, as counselors often benefit from learning about instructional content and classroom dynamics firsthand.

### **2. Build a Culture of Teacher-Counselor Partnerships**

Teacher-counselor partnerships can amplify the impact of both counselors and teachers on student success. However, these partnerships are not always fully leveraged.<sup>22</sup> Assuming school

In the short term, school leaders, teachers, and counselors can advocate for improved conditions by urging district and state policymakers to use money from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to hire more school counselors. Several states have already used ESSER funding for this exact purpose. For example, Washington state has allocated \$1.88 million for implementing comprehensive counseling programs across grades K-12,<sup>24</sup> and Oklahoma is using over \$35 million for its new School Counselor Corps.<sup>25</sup>

Teachers have a special role in advocating for improved working conditions for counselors. Because there are far fewer counselors in schools than teachers, counselors are often not well represented at the bargaining table when union contracts are negotiated. Through collective bargaining, teachers and their union representatives can ensure that counselors' needs are met by advocating for lower student-to-counselor ratios and increased access to professional development that is specific to counselors' practice.

**A**lthough Mr. Pham thoughtfully engaged with a qualified and collaborative school counselor, this is not the reality in many schools. Too often, counselors and teachers work in silos or limit their collaboration to team meetings. Unless we rethink how teachers and education leaders leverage counselors' unique potential and reduce the barriers counselors face in fulfilling their roles, schools will not maximize the value of school counselors. All educators can play a part in bringing about a new way to draw on school counselors' professional skillsets. When counselors are well positioned and supported to carry out their responsibilities, everyone benefits. Ensuring that this is a reality for all students is long overdue. □

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# I Teach the Truth



BY MARCIA CHATELAIN

**"S**o, what do you do?"  
As a history professor, this question has felt like an invitation into a trap lately.  
"I'm a teacher."

"Oh, yeah? What do you teach?"

Sometimes I'm purposefully vague. I respond to the cab driver, the airplane seatmate, or the fellow traveler on the crowded train that I teach US history. I pray that it's left there.

"Do you have a specialty?"

"Um, yeah, US cities," I say as I reach for my phone or focus my eyes back on the page in front of me.

I don't want strangers to know that I teach African American history. Don't get me wrong; I'm proud of what I do. I'm proud to be part of a field that has advanced knowledge about race and revived the legacies of freedom fighters. And I'm proud that I have inspired scores of my students to commit to careers in racial jus-

tice, from legal advocacy to joining the ranks of scholars and teachers of the subject. Whenever I have opportunities to share African American history with my friends' curious children, older adults gathered at continuing education lectures, and learners in life stages in between, I feel overjoyed that I have chosen this career path. But these days, I can never tell what the stranger I have just met thinks when I say "African American history."

The recent and rapid organizing against content that has been falsely labeled as "critical race theory" has brought my work into a terrible, distorted focus in daily life. Critical race theory—the legal framework developed by the late Harvard University law professor Derrick Bell<sup>1</sup> in the late 1970s—has emerged as the misnomer for content that offers context, critique, or concepts about American history while upholding the values of diversity and expanding the American narrative. Over the past academic year, we have witnessed the evocation of "critical race theory" to justify an array of actions—from suggesting that Black History Month activities should be optional to banning books, restricting instruction in K-12 and higher education, and even shuttering entire courses of study at colleges.<sup>2</sup>

My beloved field is in the crosshairs of this most recent battle of our nation's culture war. Once maybe regarded as a niche or narrow area of history (although it is not), African American history has become one of many targets of legislative and activist efforts to end the teaching of honest, thorough, and accurate his-

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tory. African American history is not alone: ethnic studies and women's and gender studies are also targets of groups ranging from parents to politicians seeking to intervene in classrooms.<sup>3</sup> These reactions, practices, and forms of dramatics are not new,<sup>4</sup> but with each cycle of organized attempts to undermine the nuances of classroom subjects, teachers find themselves grappling with a growing culture of fear inside their schools.<sup>5</sup> I'm supposed to enjoy a level of academic freedom because of my position as a college professor. Yet, it is irresponsible to believe that my teaching is disconnected from the preparatory K-12 years. In trying and difficult times, it's important to remember that all of us who teach must be united against cultures of misinformation and disinformation.

### Education for the Common Good and on Common Ground

I'm vague about my life's work in history because I'm afraid that the person curious about it will soon turn hostile and cantankerous or be moved to explain what their child should or shouldn't learn. I'm thick-skinned, trust me, but I'm protective too. I believe in what I do, and I'm sure the critics believe in something also. The fundamental problem with movements to narrow learning is that they are not grounded in and cannot remain true to the purpose of an education.

Education—at all levels and in public and private settings—must clearly show how and why our work is invested in the public good, a common good that allows us to use our intellectual curiosity to deepen our understanding and feel more compelled to care for our neighbors. Good teaching provides us a pathway to creating a society based in mutuality. When we fail to introduce our topics grounded in these ideals, we are more vulnerable to the anxieties of the era.

My philosophical musings on what an education is or isn't may seem inadequate to steel you against tip lines designed to unmask the teaching of so-called critical race theory or the chilling effect of watching one too many YouTube videos of explosive school board meetings.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for the same reasons we ensure our students have aced the fundamentals of addition and subtraction before we lead them to multiplication, or the same reasons I introduce students to the 13th Amendment's abolition of slavery before explaining the importance of the 14th Amendment's position on equal protection, our teaching practice has to be rooted in agreement on our common ground.

How exactly do we find that common ground in light of the varied opinions and ideas about what school should or shouldn't be today?

Since 2014, I've spent a lot of time with teachers tackling this and other equally challenging questions. After police officer Darren Wilson killed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the nation watched in real time as a small town became the focal point of world news. The uprising in Ferguson that August inspired

me to start a social media campaign, #FergusonSyllabus, to encourage educators to devote some portion of the first day of classes to talking with students about the crisis in the St. Louis exurb.<sup>7</sup> Rather than perpetuate the silences that some children may have encountered around what was unfolding in Ferguson, I believed that teachers could guide students into thoughtful reflection about how the moment could be better understood through the knowledge they were acquiring at school. Whether it was a science teacher explaining the chemical composition and dangers of the tear gas detonated in Ferguson or an English teacher introducing the tradition of protest literature from past moments of American upheaval, #FergusonSyllabus encouraged educators to gather and share ideas online.

As this project grew and shaped other #Syllabus initiatives,<sup>8</sup> I received invitations from educators across the country looking for help with what we call inclusive teaching or diversity in the classroom. The collective emotions of bearing witness to the events in Ferguson—and later in Baltimore after the killing of Freddie Gray and in Charleston after the massacre at the Mother Emanuel AME Church—exposed something unsettling in school communities. Teachers

expressed that they didn't know how to talk to students about national tragedies. Principals struggled with setting rules and guidelines for appropriate engagement on these current events. Students shared their frustration that authority figures did not recognize that they had opinions and insights that deserve to be heard. Parents wondered if their children were emotionally and existentially strong enough to monitor the same current events that kept them up at night.

As an outsider to these school environments, I realized that out of a mix of shame, sadness, anger, and unpreparedness, administrators and educators were skipping steps in a difficult process. A number of well-intentioned and well-meaning diversity and inclusion initiatives were conceived of too rapidly, without attention to the fundamentals of delivering an education. As an outsider, I believed my role was often to refrain from telling educators what to teach (“read this book, not that one”) or what to say (“use these words, not those ones”). I know my audiences often wanted these answers, but I resisted. My job was to find out what exactly everyone was searching for in the name of inclusion. What does good teaching feel like? What events of your developmental years were shrouded in silence? Do you trust your colleagues to help you through this process? Can you explain why you are doing what you are doing? Six years later, when our school year was remade by the COVID-19 crisis and our national consciousness was shaken by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, educators again were reaching out to me to ask: What comes next? How would the moment described as “the racial reckoning” inform the start of fall classes? How was COVID-19 complicating the increasing calls for, as well as commitments to, anti-racism?

## Teachers are grappling with a growing culture of fear inside their schools.

Again, I dispensed the advice that I had developed six years earlier. Yet, I did not anticipate that the anti-critical race theory movement was being mounted to efficiently and aggressively dismantle this response.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of one academic year, schools that once sought my expertise in inclusion so they could actively implement programming and classes to expand their students' learning shifted to asking me how to defend themselves against anti-critical race theory attacks. In the fall, teachers who were chastened and awakened by reports of their students' experiences of racism and bias at school had been moved to action. They had internalized the anecdotes their students shared on social media, in school newspapers, and in student-written open letters.<sup>10</sup> Some parents demanded that schools address climates of discrimination, and others joined schools on their anti-racism journeys as volunteers and co-collaborators. By the spring, however, multicultural education committees had disbanded. Teachers were more anxious about books being banned than introducing inclusive content. Principals no longer issued statements about anti-racism, lest they find themselves on the local or national news. This pressure and stress on school communities is heartbreaking and discouraging.

### Cultivating a Culture of Trust

It is not clear if these efforts to constrict what is taught in schools will continue to grow next year. As teachers, we need to find ways to turn off the noise of the discord and prepare to care for and nurture our students. Educators can foster a spirit of transparency that acknowledges the dynamics that inform our work, models how to grapple with uncertainty, and shows that our classrooms are places in which students' intellectual growth serves them as individuals and members of society.

How do we do that? As you enter summer break and prepare new lesson plans, attend professional development workshops, and talk to your colleagues about the highs and lows of the past year, consider these reflections before determining what comes next for you.

1. Can you explain why you teach, in addition to what you teach? On the surface, this sounds simple, but in my experience, few educators spend time explaining to students the why of their classrooms because the what is all-consuming. Although students may ask "Why are we learning this?" to express their confusion or frustration, we can use the *why* to strengthen the work of teaching. Why are we gathered in a school to explore the past? Why are we conscientious of the ways that people in other parts of the world live? Why are we recognizing this achievement or contribution? These questions can also create space to explain to students how your intellectual curiosity has shaped you. Explaining why you teach social studies, your initial engagement with the topic, and your specific interests can help students identify their own passions.

2. Where are you meeting your students? The relationship between student and teacher is akin to two people going on a walk. The classroom is the path, and at various points each person can decide how fast or how slow they will move or if they will turn around or diverge from the path. Teachers are used to being the guiding force, but in all matters of inclusion, it's helpful to recognize that sometimes students can lead. Why? Like us, students bring to the classroom their cultural contexts, their influences, and their views on the world. When teachers fail to consider what students bring, we often overlook what students can offer in the learning process. Students who are invited to contribute information about what shapes their worldview see their teachers as people willing to accompany them on their learning journeys. When educators enter a classroom, we are asking students to care about a topic or a set of ideas that is important to us. At the very least, we have to give students an opportunity to share what is equally important to them.

3. What kind of world do you bring to your students? In the terrifying climate of banned content and censored words, edu-

catators who are invested in a social justice framework for teaching may feel that their jobs are on the line with every thoughtful conversation. There is no denying that some of us feel more threatened and vulnerable than others. There is no easy solution to this, but I encourage teachers to think of engagement in difficult history and contemporary social issues as a matter of preparation. In my years consulting with schools, I found that teachers who felt

## All of us who teach must be united against cultures of misinformation and disinformation.



moved by a particular moment—whether it was the anxieties borne out of the 2016 election or the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida—wanted to radically upend their teaching. Teachers who had never broached the topics of racism or xenophobia or gun violence believed that the moment was too urgent to ignore it. I applaud the determination of teachers who are moved to action. But I caution against radical shifts in tone or topic in any classroom because reactive teaching rarely turns into sustainable practice. If a teacher says, “This issue is too pressing not to talk about it!” I often respond with questions about their classroom environment: Do you regularly ask students to debate topics? Do you use writing exercises as an opportunity for students to

each has their own set of circumstances that informs how they approach the material. We are members of faculties that do the same job, but our identities can make executing our responsibilities more or less challenging. Most of us teach alone,

without colleagues present, but our teaching can be scrutinized by stakeholders who may never enter our classes—school boards, parents, and even cable news reporters. In light of the strange position we are put in as teachers, having trust in our own abilities is only as valuable as our trust in our colleagues and the systems in which we work. Many times, I have visited a school after a disruptive event that involved students engaging in racist acts in person or online, and that aroused discomfort across the whole school community.

## Movements to narrow learning are not grounded in or true to the purpose of an education.

The first question I ask is, “From where you sit at this school, what happened?” The answers, often shared among colleagues, reveal as much about the power dynamics among educators as they do about the upsetting incident. We often focus on students’ behaviors and attitudes, but rarely do we take a step back and ponder if the tense dynamics among the student body mirror the strained relationships among faculty and staff.

5. How can you cultivate more trust? Often, as colleagues recount their views on incidents and share where they stand proximate to those incidents, their counterparts begin to recognize the needs of their coworkers. This is the first step in introducing trust as a prerequisite for a schoolwide (or even an individual) commitment to addressing potentially controversial or challenging content. If teachers cannot trust their colleagues to help them confront injustice in their classrooms or if curriculum coordinators do not have a clear sense of the apprehensions of their schools’ faculties, they can’t do their best work. Cultivating a culture of trust means that when a teacher is offending or overlooking students, a colleague can guide them toward more responsive teaching. It means that when change is necessary, no one feels alone. And it means that educators have engaged in deep conversations that prepare them to explain their choices when challenged.

Although indicators suggest that with COVID-19 mitigation, we may return to some sense of normalcy in our schools, we do not know exactly what the upcoming school year will bring us. As with every year, we will meet new students and encounter old students with excitement about what is to come: this could be the year one of our students discovers their passion and another develops a burgeoning talent and newfound confidence. We will welcome some teachers to the first year of their careers and celebrate others’ retirements. Everything else is uncertain. What we can be assured of is that what we do matters, and each new school

*(Continued on page 37)*

share what is on their minds? Have you ever placed topic A or topic B on your syllabus for discussion? What are your agreed-upon practices for respectful dialogue? Do you have a sense of who among your students may feel most vulnerable if you have this discussion? How will you foster independent critical thinking among your students? These reflective questions are not designed to discourage tackling difficult topics; rather, they are ways of awakening an awareness of the importance of forming community standards and building trust—both of which are necessary for thoughtful engagement.

4. Whom do you trust? Teaching is a strange action. We teach in front of a group of learners who we recognize collectively, but





At the Lynn, MA, Back to School Fair, Lynn Teachers Union (AFT Local 1037) members and AFT President Randi Weingarten distributed food and health and wellness resources for children and families.

# Back to School for All

Helping Students Recover by Creating Safe and Welcoming Environments

By Todd E. Vachon, Kayla Crawley, and James Boyle

**W**hen it comes to in-person learning, the AFT has a very clear message: our students need to be in their schools and on their campuses. The COVID-19 pandemic has created far-reaching challenges for educators and learning institutions, but with adequate safety measures, schools can be open. And they should be. The positive effects of in-school learning are well documented.<sup>1</sup>

Starting from that premise, the AFT launched a national Back to School for All (B2S) campaign in the summer of 2021. According to AFT President Randi Weingarten, the B2S campaign was a concerted effort by teachers and staff across the United States to tackle barriers to safe, in-person learning and to ensure that all students feel welcome. “Our members have talked to thousands of parents, done hundreds of walk-throughs of school buildings, stood up vaccine clinics, given away books, and yes, had some fun doing it,” Weingarten noted.<sup>2</sup> The campaign served as a catalyst for bringing students back into public schools, colleges, and universities through a vast public outreach effort. The AFT awarded a total of \$5 million to over 75 grantees covering more than 1,800 AFT affiliates serving some 20 million students.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the campaigns also countered misinformation about public health efforts, demonstrated the important role unions play in education and society, and helped build stronger relationships between local affiliates and the communities they serve.

Now that teachers, school staff, and AFT affiliates are preparing for the coming school year, we thought it would be a good time to review campaign efforts from last summer. What are some of the major lessons learned? What strategies and tactics were used? How effective were they? And how can teachers build on those efforts this coming school year and beyond?

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To answer these questions and more, we surveyed\* B2S grant recipients from both preK-12 and higher education affiliates and conducted focus group interviews with teachers, union leaders, and community partners from three case sites: Martinsville, Indiana; two communities in New York; and several communities in Texas. (For our case studies, see page 32.) We hope that readers draw inspiration from the work and stories of fellow educators who have been

strengthening their unions’ connections with students, families, and communities and working to ensure all students feel safe and welcome in their classrooms.

This work is all the more urgent because the United States saw an unprecedented decline in student enrollment in public schools, colleges, and universities over the past two years. The National Center for Education Statistics reported approximately 1.5 million fewer K-12 students attending public schools in 2020-21 compared with the previous school year—a decline of roughly 3 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Various disruptions triggered by COVID-19 and remote learning were identified as major factors

**“A lot of families were shocked that teachers were taking the time out of their summer to do this. They were super grateful. Families just honestly wanted to be heard.”**

—Gia Vallone

\*Grantees are quoted throughout this article. When individuals are not identified, the quotes come from anonymous survey responses.

**AFT Secretary-Treasurer Fedrick C. Ingram and the Chicago Teachers Union (AFT Local 1) distributed school supplies during Chicago’s annual Bud Billiken Parade to celebrate the new school year.**



MASSACHUSETTS PHOTOS: MARILYN HUMPHRIES, COURTESY OF AFT MASSACHUSETTS  
ALL OTHER PHOTOS: AFT



In the Bronx, NY, US Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona heard from students eager to get back to safe, in-person learning during a back-to-school event by the United Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 2).

driving many families to leave public schools. But COVID-19 is only part of the story. As we heard from many survey respondents and interviewees, enrollment had been declining or at best stagnating in the years leading up to the pandemic. Many cited the rise of school choice and voucher systems accompanied by aggressive recruitment efforts by private and charter schools. Shifting industries, job losses, and a lack of affordable housing and childcare were also cited as preexisting reasons for enrollment decline in some localities.

The decline has been somewhat worse in higher education. Total undergraduate enrollment at public four-year institutions was 4.5 percent lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2019.<sup>5</sup> Our survey respondents identified students needing to work, pandemic-related family illness or death, and anxiety about safety as among the major factors leading some students to not return. Some respondents fear that many of the students lost momentum and may not return to college unless someone reaches out, encourages them to return, and helps them to do so.

### **Crafting a Solution: Back to School for All Campaigns**

Against the national backdrop of declining enrollment, constrained budgets, and political division, the AFT launched its national Back to School for All campaign. The overarching goal of the effort, as stated in the call for grant proposals, was to “create welcoming and safe environments where all students thrive.” From our survey, we identified

a number of complementary goals set by state and local campaigns: safely returning to in-person schooling, increasing school enrollments, increasing vaccination rates, improving social and emotional well-being for students and teachers, building more collaborative relationships with school administrations, and strengthening ties between unions and their communities.

The campaigns used a variety of strategies and tactics to achieve their goals, including media promotions, worksite visits, tabling at local events, community canvassing, hosting vaccine clinics with community health partners, and more. About three-quarters of

respondents reported using a combination of social, earned, and paid media to get the word out about important campaign events and to reinforce messaging from phone banking and canvassing efforts. Just over half of respondents indicated they engaged in some form of internal member organizing to carry out campaign activities. About half reported tabling at public

**“When we seek to serve others first ... to share our knowledge, material resources, and union social capital with those most in need, the people will respond in kind.”**

—Survey respondent

events, and a similar number reported phone banking and text messaging. Importantly, many highlighted the value of being able to support families in need, indicating that hosting public events that provided necessary services to their communities bolstered not only event attendance but also overall respect for and greater understanding of the role that unions play in school communities.

When asked to rank their strategies and tactics, most campaigns surveyed found community canvassing to be the most effective. Some of the positive benefits included being able to have deeper conversations with community members about their specific needs, providing parents and caregivers an opportunity to clarify vital information impacting their decisions to return to in-person learning, and gaining insights beyond pandemic-related concerns on what the community needs for its overall well-being.

The survey data revealed some variation in tactics used by schools with differing demographic characteristics. Majority-Black or majority-Latinx/Hispanic school districts were more likely to engage in community outreach, while majority-white school districts were more likely to engage in internal member organizing. We also found vaccine clinics were more common among locals in school districts that primarily serve students of color. For example, 33 percent of respondents from majority-African American schools reported hosting vaccine clinics, whereas just 11 percent from majority-white schools did so. This makes sense given the initial hesitancy about vaccines among many African Americans<sup>6</sup> as well as the structural barriers that often made it harder to access free vaccines in many under-resourced neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup>

Grantees also used printed materials (flyers, cards, surveys), technology (phones, texting, social media), union staff time, advertising (radio, TV, billboards, print, internet), and political capital (voices of elected leaders and community leaders). Some locals distributed resources such as backpacks, books, hand sanitizers, and KN95 masks. Others worked with social service organizations to connect community members with food pantries and rental assistance. Notably, over three-quarters of campaigns surveyed indicated that volunteers were used in their campaign. Some campaigns compensated members for participating, although most members volunteered their time.

Some of the major challenges reported by preK-12 locals in the survey included a polarized political climate, school budget constraints, teacher shortages, vaccine hesitancy, and negative perceptions of teacher unions in some areas. Respondents from higher education locals overwhelmingly said that budget cuts were a major challenge during the pandemic. Other issues included increased difficulties with students being able to finance their education as well as member work overload. Recent reports have documented that the transition to online learning greatly exacerbated the workloads of many educators, at both the higher education and K-12 levels.<sup>8</sup>

Across most of the preK-12 locals surveyed, respondents noted that public support for union-led vaccine clinics was high in most instances, but securing participation required education and conversations in areas where community members were more hesitant. Only a few locals reported facing anti-mask and anti-vaccine protestors.

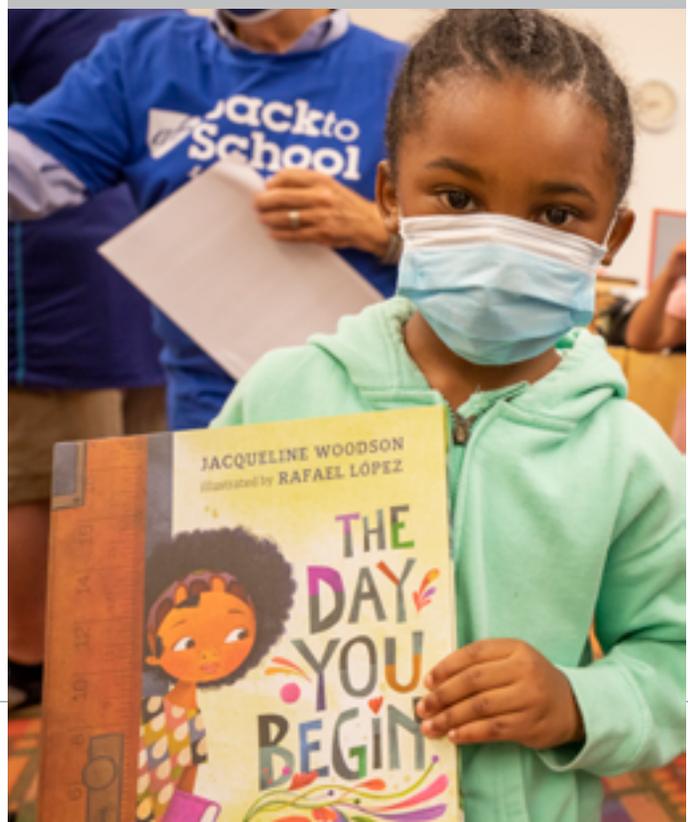
Beyond pandemic issues, some locals were grappling with negative public perceptions of the union—or unions in general—particularly in more politically conservative regions. “The biggest challenge,” one survey response said, “was to engage the community in a short amount of time and establish relationships with school district stakeholders. Many people fail to understand what unions actually do. It’s not just about protecting teachers—it’s also about engaging communities. And due to [our political climate], many people think that unions are socialist organizations, which causes trust issues in the beginning.”

Community canvassing to provide information and resources—meeting parents and families where they are—was an effective way to counter the false and negative narratives about teacher unions. The distorted media conversation around the return to school after the winter break this past January was partially based on a lack of understanding in the public about what teachers’ unions actually do. B2S campaigns are a good vehicle to educate the community before those false narratives take root.

**“We have been working in solidarity with community organizations and building up those relationships.”**

**—Alejandra Lopez**

AFT-West Virginia distributed books to Charleston elementary and middle school students returning for the fall. These were the first books some students had ever received.





In Broward County, FL, AFT President Randi Weingarten visited New River Middle School, where Broward Teachers Union (AFT Local 1975) members collaborated on protocols to ensure safe, welcoming environments for students.

While canvassing proved to be a vital campaign strategy, it also presented some challenges. For some affiliates, gaining access to reliable and accurate contact information for students who had left schools was a major challenge. This was especially true when the relationship between the union and school leaders was strained. Affiliates with a history of collaboration with district administrators were generally able to secure support for canvassing efforts, including sharing vital data to employ more-targeted outreach efforts.

Other challenges included a general reluctance by many members to knock on doors because of discomfort, fear for personal safety in some areas, or feeling overworked and lacking the time or energy. Some locals were able to overcome this challenge by incentivizing canvassing. Offering compensation was a good motivator. As for the discomfort of speaking with strangers, many noted that once teachers started talking to community members, they realized how enjoyable and valuable the process was. In essence, the experience itself became an intrinsic motivator for members to continue their involvement in canvassing. Addressing safety concerns, one affiliate partnered with a local political consulting firm to hire canvassers who lived in the community.

Our data suggest that some of these challenges varied based on the demographic composition of communities. For example, school districts serving mostly students of color were more likely than districts serving mostly white students to report inadequate economic resources as a major challenge. Teacher shortages were a major concern mainly among districts with majority-Latinx student populations and majority-Black student populations, which were about 30 percent and 19 percent, respectively, more likely than majority-white districts to report serious issues with teacher staffing.

## Takeaways from B2S 2021

In the survey, 86 percent of grantees reported that their campaigns were successful. Of that number, 24 percent said the campaigns were highly successful. Looking at these successes as well as the many challenges that teachers faced during their campaigns, we identified several key takeaways that can inform future back-to-school campaigns.

### Engage the Community

Community engagement was a central piece of most B2S campaigns. As retired teacher Hobie Hukill of Alliance/AFT in Dallas told us: “We saw this as an opportunity to make contact with the community—the folks in the neighborhood who are almost always overlooked—to begin a dialogue and sustained community connection.” Like many others, their campaign’s goal was to establish the union as a reliable and well-recognized resource for the school community and to demonstrate that teachers are on their side.

Rochester teacher Molly Bianco said, “Our goal was to get into the community, build those connections, and see where the needs are for our kids and our families.” Considering the new hardships for students and families that were created by COVID-19, Bianco said she wanted to show “how teachers and the schools can be a foundational point for resources and any type of support the family needs.”

Some of the major benefits of community engagement reported by B2S grantees included countering misinformation, building trust among parents and the community, improving perceptions of the union, building power, and increasing support for public education more generally. One grantee shared: “When teachers were coming to their doors and helping them, providing good information, we were able to counter some of the misinformation that was out there.”

By meeting parents where they were and listening to their needs and wishes, many locals were able to build new levels of trust in their communities. This of course improved public perceptions of the union. In the case of Aldine, Texas, the campaign effort created a new sense of openness and shared interests. As one respondent told us, “We actually had to turn people away because they wanted to join the union—not knowing they had to be teachers to join.”

Across most campaigns surveyed, leaders felt that students and parents were incredibly grateful for having a teacher check in on them and ask about their experiences. According to one leader from a higher education local, their greatest moment was “joining with fellow phone bank volunteers to call students who were shocked that a faculty member was actually calling them to check in and see if they were okay, to say they were concerned about and missed them, and to offer assistance in getting them back to their career path.” Beyond surprise and gratification, their phone banking resulted in 18 percent of the targeted students reenrolling.

**“This is really a member-organizing opportunity.... It can help build the bench of potential future leaders.”**

—Laura Franz



Dozens of AFT volunteers helped distribute books and school supplies and staffed games at the New Bedford Federation of Paraprofessionals (AFT Local 2378) Back to School for Everyone fair in New Bedford, MA.



At McKinley STEMM Academy in Toledo, the Ohio Federation of Teachers arranged for students to work with an artist from South Africa on standards-aligned projects that stimulated their excitement for learning.

Witnessing parents become more engaged was also a notable moment for many campaigns. As one respondent said, “Hearing from parents how much they appreciated the extra effort in reaching out to make sure this year was off to a good start truly encompasses why we applied for the grant.” Rochester teacher Gia Vallone told us: “A lot of families were shocked that teachers were taking the time out of their summer to do this. They were super grateful. Families just honestly wanted to be heard.” Reporting how the community responded positively to their outreach efforts and how well-attended their events were, one campaign leader told us their enrollment ultimately ended higher than pre-COVID-19, “with families moving to our district because of our engagement with the community.”

Having experienced the value of community engagement, many respondents advocated strongly for incorporating it into the union’s regular work going forward. As one respondent said, “We must get into our communities more and talk to parents at their doorsteps instead of thinking they will meet us at ours.”

Albany Public School Teachers’ Association (APSTA) President Laura Franz said it reminded her of the importance of making connections between the work teachers do and the people they serve. She said they plan to be more intentional about creating the time and space for community engagement moving forward. According to another survey respondent, “When we seek to serve others first, and seek ways to share our knowledge, material resources, and union social capital with those most in need, the people will respond in kind.”

Through this work, B2S campaigns offered many grantees an opportunity to see the shared interests they have with their community members as well as the long-term value of taking a social-movement approach to organizing and bargaining. For example, San Antonio Alliance President Alejandra Lopez explained that her local has been pursuing a “bargaining for the common good” approach in recent years and that the B2S campaign further rein-

forced their resolve to build strong community partnerships. “We don’t have collective bargaining, but we still follow that model. We have been working in solidarity with community organizations and building up those relationships.”

The San Antonio Alliance worked closely with community partners to develop a platform that informed their school board election efforts. “We had a massive canvassing program. We had field organizers out knocking on doors using a script that was much more rooted in a concrete vision for transformation in our district,” Lopez explained. These efforts have begun to build real power as indicated by the victory of their preferred candidate in the local school board election and the establishment of an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief stakeholder committee. “We’ve been consistent with our message,” she added. “Nothing about us without us. Any decisions that are being made in this district should be made with workers, students, parents, and community.”

Community engagement has been an essential element of the labor movement from its inception—from the sit-down strikes of the 1930s<sup>9</sup> to the farmworker strikes in the 1960s<sup>10</sup> to the recent teacher strikes.\* In fact, many of labor’s greatest victories have in some way depended on strong community support and often consisted of demands that reflected the values and needs of the whole community.<sup>11</sup> This should come as no surprise because union members are also parents, homeowners or renters, taxpayers, neighbors, and community members.

Community-engaged campaigns like B2S can tap into all of those identities and their associated hopes and dreams, instilling a sense of pride among members as they fight not only for themselves and their coworkers but also for and in partnership with their neighbors and the broader community. In sum, community engagement is essential work for all unions, but perhaps especially so for teachers’ unions, whose position in society offers tremendous opportunities to promote equity and further the causes of economic and social justice.

### Start Early

The most common response we received when asking campaigners what they would do differently next year was this: start earlier.

A majority of respondents wished they had more time to plan their campaigns. This sentiment was also echoed by many participants in the case study interviews. Given the constraints caused by the pandemic, all of the campaigns we examined still conducted impressive and groundbreaking work in their schools and communities. However, looking forward, future campaigns can definitely benefit from pre-summer planning and member recruitment. Many leaders explained that it is much easier to recruit members for summer projects during the school year rather than after school lets out for the summer. Moreover, some locals also placed B2S campaign work within their larger strategic plan to regularly secure more member and community participation.

### Organize Member-Led Campaigns

The B2S campaigns were largely member-driven efforts. According to APSTA President Laura Franz, “From a local leader standpoint, ... [B2S] offers pathways for members to get involved with

\*To learn more about recent teacher strikes, see “Organizing and Mobilizing: How Teachers and Communities Are Winning the Fight to Revitalize Public Education” in the Spring 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/spring2021/casey](http://aft.org/ae/spring2021/casey).

the union that go beyond bargaining or directly confronting management. This is really a member-organizing opportunity that allows people to engage with both the community and the union. It can help build the bench of potential future leaders.” This is an important consideration, particularly for locals looking to build their members’ capacities and skills.

Many affiliates that did use paid staff leveraged that support to train members and collect data and information, keeping the focus on putting members out front because education professionals are the most well-positioned school district stakeholders to reconnect students and families with their schools and help the larger community understand the value of public education.

Recognizing that B2S works best as a member-driven effort, locals that did not have much experience with canvassing and other campaigning tactics sought staff support from their state or regional leadership for training and education. Many leaders we interviewed said that developing these skills for the B2S campaign is now part of a long-term effort to build a group of member leaders who can aid in future electoral and community organizing efforts.

#### Create Varied Opportunities for Involvement

We heard many times that canvassing was typically the most effective tactic, but it was often challenging to identify and recruit

members willing or able to participate in door knocking or phone banking. This highlights the importance of offering myriad ways for members and supporters to get involved. Designing a comprehensive campaign with earned and paid media, social media, public events, data collection, and other efforts supporting the core canvassing activities creates a variety of opportunities to engage a broader set of members in the union efforts. Some are more artistically inclined, others more social, some analytical—these are all valuable skills, and the more hands involved in the work, the lighter the lift is for each.

Equally important is offering opportunities with varying levels of commitment. Our survey revealed that being overworked cuts across every sector of education, so providing a range of commitment levels helps members feel a sustainable balance among work, union, and personal life. Multiple respondents noted that this approach allowed members to engage at their own comfort level, perhaps just a few hours per week. Even if campaign work is taking place mostly during the summer, campaign leaders

should also recognize that all educators need a break, especially during the pandemic.

Providing some compensation for campaign activities is also a good recruiting tool and helps support members facing layoffs or reduced hours. According to one survey respondent from an institution of higher education, “With low levels of full-time employment, college-proclaimed budget shortfalls, and

**“Our goal was to build up a committee of parents and community members that could ... have more of a voice going forward on all issues.”**

—Gail Buhler

AFT-West Virginia members listen during a back-to-school press conference commemorating the 10th anniversary of the AFT-First Book partnership, which has resulted in over 60,000 books being given to children throughout West Virginia.





In Massachusetts, United Teachers of Lowell (AFT Local 495) engaged the entire community with its Back to School for Everyone fair: the local library, fire and police departments, election office, racial justice task force, and small businesses.

related staffing shortages, ... our members ... are exhausted.... Being flexible in offering multiple small commitment opportunities on a num-

ber of projects was key. Being able to pay volunteers—most of whom were part-time faculty and staff—thanks to support from the AFT helped in volunteer recruitment efforts and most importantly helped these colleagues that were hit hard employment-wise during the pandemic.”

#### Engage All Stakeholders

Many respondents discussed the importance of engaging a diverse set of stakeholders—students, parents, support staff, and other school employees—to participate in campaign activities. Many campaigns emphasized the importance of involving students to help with canvassing, phone banking, and coordinating events. According to one leader, their greatest moment was “seeing our students emerge as organizers and leaders serving their communities [and] helping others meet basic needs such as food and water, school supplies, and sanitation supplies.”

The San Antonio Alliance had collaborated with students prior to COVID-19, and as a result, students naturally plugged right in to the B2S work. “We’ve been working in solidarity with students for a couple of years now. The students have organized themselves into a student coalition. And so we were very intentional about offering support. We offer our offices and backyard for them to meet. We’re not here to tell you what students want; we’re here to make sure students are at the table and meaningfully engaged,” said local President Alejandra Lopez. Education Austin’s staff director, Gail Buhler, shared that “voices of the parents, the community, and the teachers were being diminished. Our goal was to build up a committee of parents and community members that could work on not just return-to-school issues with COVID but also be sustainable and have more of a voice going forward on all issues.”

Engaging a broad set of stakeholders can help B2S organizers better deliver on the promise of a high-quality public education that serves the interests of their communities. Including the voices of parents, students, and other school staff can broaden the scope of demands that are made and also strengthen support for back-to-school efforts. As one survey respondent stated, it is “human interaction at its best—cooperation toward a common purpose.”

#### Build Year-Round Organizing Infrastructure

Most grantees said they hoped to extend the work they began with their B2S campaigns. One survey respondent said, “I honestly hope we can do this annually and offer as much as we can to our families and students. They deserve it!” Some grantees were following up with new and returning students during the school year to see how they were doing with attendance and participation in school. Others committed to make their fall festivals or B2S community nights annual events in partnership with their school administrations or are continuing their community outreach efforts to build their contact lists for next year and beyond.

The San Antonio Alliance incorporated B2S work into its strategic plan to ensure it isn’t forgotten or left to the last minute during

the school year, when so many other pressing issues arise. Aldine AFT reported that “the work that has been done in this campaign was just the start, but now it’s time to help meet the needs of members, schools, students, and the community as a whole.”

Beyond continuing their B2S efforts, many spoke about the need for building a more permanent organizing infrastructure that could be operational year-round, including a bench of canvassers, strong ties with parents, and regular contact with the community. One survey respondent said, “We need more strategic and planned efforts to organize our communities. This must be continuous and ongoing.”

“We’ve been thinking about how to keep some of this going, because I think it’s important that we’re having conversations not just during the political times but outside those times and building those relationships,” said Zeph Capo of Texas AFT. He added that they were currently thinking about how to systematize their program with canvassing team captains as well as hiring and training retirees and training volunteers in order to function year-round. “That’s what we’re trying to think about now because those folks are really what allow you to have continuous improvement in your work.”

By always organizing, local unions can be better prepared for annual B2S efforts and for serving the needs of students, teachers, and communities throughout the year. For example, one respondent told us how the B2S effort helped their local become better organized for a later campaign in their district: “It gave us information to organize a subsequent campaign.... We used the data and internal organizing structures learned from the B2S campaign in order to be more efficient.”

This can be applied to school board elections, contract campaigns, legislative efforts, and more. In short, having a strong relationship with the community through year-round organizing can build real power to pursue the shared interests of the many stakeholders in the school community.

#### Collaborate with Management as Much as Possible

From Rio Rancho, New Mexico, to Lynn, Massachusetts, one of the biggest lessons from the 2021 B2S campaigns was the importance of collaboration between the union and school leadership. Locals that historically have had good working relationships with their school administration or school boards were able to quickly draw on those ties to make their B2S campaigns more effective. Hobie Hukill of Alliance/AFT in Dallas told us: “Compared to the difficulties they had with the administration in some other counties, I can say that [Alliance/AFT President] Rena Honea’s connection with the administration gave us credibility. Everything else was magnificent. We actually got lists from them, which other counties fought tooth and nail for several weeks to get. It’s just one of those things where face-to-face credible contact over time makes a difference.”

Having a collaborative relationship with the administration often meant the difference between access to reliable lists for canvassing versus creating lists from scratch that were typically less accurate or less focused. It also played an important role in access to school facilities and other resources that helped make various B2S campaign events possible. Several teachers in districts with

more collaborative relationships told us how much the administration appreciated the plans the union initiated and offered support to achieve the shared goal of getting kids back to school.

Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, described how the district had been attempting to do outreach previously, but its efforts were not very strategic, lacked a basic understanding of organizing principles, and, as a result, were ineffective. She said, “[the district leaders] were overjoyed when they saw that we had a plan for [distributing information] and for canvassing in the neighborhoods, and all we needed from them was to identify the areas

**“This campaign demonstrates what success we can have when we’re in alignment ... working directly with the district for the betterment of the community, the kids, and families.”**

—Zeph Capo

AFT Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus and McAllen AFT (Local 6329) gave books to elementary students in McAllen, TX. The local also hosted a vaccine clinic.





In Scranton, PA, the Scranton Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 1147) hosted community block parties with food trucks, music, arts and crafts, and COVID-19 vaccines for the community.



where the most students were missing so we could actually make the calls, [drop off the informational literature], and canvass.” The district provided a space for phone banking and shared the necessary data for targeted outreach. “It was an experience for them to see how we organize—they did not know what real organizers do,” she said.

Countless other grantees described how the union had brought the plan, had the skills, and provided boots on the ground, while the administration was asked to provide data and sometimes facilities. A good collaborative relationship made a big difference when the time came to make this ask. Zeph Capo of Texas AFT told us, “There was clearly a definitive difference where districts were more collaborative with us, and we were working together closely—those were the districts where we were better able to close the gap, bringing more kids back to school.” A good example is the enrollment gap in Dallas, which decreased from 20 percent to just 8 percent, a reduction that was predicated on good union-district relations. Capo continued, “I do think this campaign demonstrates what success we can have when we’re in alignment—teachers and the Alliance/AFT working directly with the district for the betterment of the community, the kids, and families.”

In areas where the relationship between the union and the administration was antagonistic or strained, it was more difficult to identify and locate students whom the campaign was aiming to bring back to school. “Having access to that data would have made for a better campaign for us. We could have ... canvassed the people who said, ‘I’m not sending my child back,’ and instead we were ... just door-knocking families that we know were in the

city schools,” APSTA President Laura Franz told us. With a more collaborative relationship, she said, “we could have made better use of our canvassing time and their social media resources and all the other things that the district could have supported us with.”

Many anonymous survey respondents indicated that their biggest challenge in the campaign was lack of cooperation from their school administration or school board. One respondent said, “Our biggest challenge was that our school district did not want to partner for the first nine weeks of the campaign, which meant that they did not share data for our canvassing program.” And another stated, “Most of our challenge depended on the willingness of the district to share data in order to reach the right families. A partnership with the district would have led to a more fruitful campaign.”

Some locals in this situation opted to go past superintendents and speak directly to school board members. According to one local, “Although it was initially frustrating that the superintendent would not partner with us, we learned that if we approached individual school board members and explained the benefit, ... we could get support for our initiative.” Others confronted the challenge by using public voter registries or existing lists the union had generated for previous campaigns.

Many locals that took this approach expressed that, despite not always directly targeting families who had disconnected from schools, it was still useful for the union to connect with the broader community. This broader targeting strategy also proved to be particularly useful for unions in districts facing intense competition with charter schools, many of which regularly engage in similar canvassing strategies to market their schools to families.

Given how critical union-management collaboration seemed to be to the success of B2S campaigns, some locals saw their campaign as an opportunity to hit the refresh button on their

**“When we all get in it together, and we put all of the other stuff aside, great things happen for our people and our kids.”**

—Shannon Adams

relationship with their district leadership and demonstrate that the union can be a real partner in reaching out to the community. According to one respondent, “One of our goals was to have a better and more trusting relationship with our central office. We are constantly reaching out to them to see how we can support enrollment, school immunization, and vaccination clinics.”

Another local said that staying in touch with relevant stakeholders from the district was critical to overcoming challenges that their campaign faced: “We maintained positive communication with members and all stakeholders, working with the superintendent.”

The campaign in San Antonio sought to build greater trust with the school board as well, which by most accounts has historically been very anti-union. According to recently elected union-backed school board member Sarah Sorensen, the efforts did help to build some bridges. “I actually am very hopeful,” Sorensen said, “that this shifts the tone in terms of the way that the board, the union, and the administration work together so that there will be a positive relationship. And I am excited to see what opportunities will grow out of this.”

San Antonio Alliance President Alejandra Lopez agreed: “We have historically had a very antagonistic relationship with the school board members.... It was a real shift for them to be thanking the union for knocking on doors to get people to the vaccine town hall.”

In some cases, a recent change in district administration had opened an opportunity to build new and better relationships or to work collaboratively for the first time with a less antagonistic administration. Commenting on a recent shift in her district, Shannon Adams, president of the Martinsville Classroom Teachers Association, said, “I hope administrators read this. When we all get in it together, and we put all of the other stuff aside, great things happen for our people and our kids.... If we want to save public education, that’s what it takes. If teachers aren’t organized, they need to get organized and stick together, start working on their collective voice, and then be cooperative participants in moving forward. It’s the only way we protect public education for the community.”

Even for locals that were not able to establish a good working relationship with management last year, many expressed an eagerness to go back to their administrations this year. They plan to highlight the successes of their campaigns and begin a fresh conversation about how much more could be done to engage with families and the community if management and labor work together.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic created—and continues to create—tremendous challenges for educators and educational institutions alike. But teachers and their unions have confronted these challenges head on, adapting their practices, advocating for their members and students, and fighting to ensure the best possible education for all.

To this end, the AFT has consistently urged school leaders and other public officials to follow the science on safety measures. “When science and evidence speak,

we listen,” AFT President Randi Weingarten has said in several news media interviews. Public health mitigation strategies—most especially vaccination—are essential for safe in-person schooling. And in-person learning is essential for providing high-quality instruction and supporting the social and emotional development of our children from pre-K through young adulthood.

Through the AFT’s Back to School for All campaign, teachers have begun to build stronger relationships with the communities they serve. Countering misinformation about vaccines and school safety, they have done what teachers do best: educate. Providing vaccine clinics and material resources in underserved communities, they have helped support social justice. And advocating for common-sense safety measures while welcoming students back to school, they have helped to create safe, nurturing learning environments and to reassure families.

There is still much work to be done, and many of the same challenges still exist as we prepare to start another school year this fall. The B2S campaign provides great examples of the work that is needed to rebuild support for and participation in public schools, colleges, and universities. The single most important step any affiliate can take right now is to begin making a plan and pulling together a team to do the vital work of community engagement. This is no longer just an option; it is an essential piece of union work. □

*(Endnotes on page 37)*

Thanks to collaboration between the North Bergen (NJ) Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 1060) and school leadership, North Bergen students are learning in person safely.



# Experiences from Three B2S Campaign Sites

To get a better sense of what some of the B2S campaigns looked like on the ground, we spoke with teachers, community members, and union leaders at three case sites—Martinsville, Indiana; two communities in New York; and several communities in Texas. Each is described below.

## Transition Plans and “Returning Joy” in Martinsville

Martinsville is a town of about 11,000 residents in Morgan County, Indiana. The school district includes 10 schools (7 elementary), serves about 4,000 predominantly white students, and employs 281 teachers. Being in a rural area, the elementary schools are small, and the bus rides to the centralized upper-grades schools can be quite long for some students.

Like other school districts across the country, Martinsville has seen a decline in enrollment that began prior to COVID-19—a result of population changes, economic shifts, rising competition from school voucher systems, active recruitment campaigns by charter schools, and, in some cases, dissatisfaction with previous school administrations. But the problem was exacerbated by the pandemic. In particular, the decision by the district to not offer a virtual option (citing equity concerns) led many parents to seek alternatives for remote options or to homeschool their children. Other parents chose to move their children because of an opposition to mandatory face masks in public schools. Altogether, district enrollment was down by 300 students at the start of the 2020–21 school year—about 8 percent lower than the previous year.

When Martinsville Classroom Teachers Association (MCTA) President Shannon Adams saw the AFT’s call for B2S grant proposals, she jumped on it. Working with MCTA members, school administrators, and parents, the local union crafted a multi-pronged plan to “return joy” to the schools. When asked what she meant by returning joy, Adams explained that schools are an important part of the community in rural areas, and during the first pandemic year, only parents were allowed to attend their child’s arts or athletic performances, leaving other community members cut off from a significant piece of local culture. “Students could not even come watch their friends perform,” she said. “School felt sterile and unwelcoming, despite our best efforts.” The



In Indiana, the Martinsville Classroom Teachers Association (AFT Local 6548) worked with the Martinsville school district to reach out to families of 300 students who were “lost” during the pandemic.

resulting B2S campaign was designed to send a message to the community that the public schools were open, safe, fun, and, as Adams said, “the best game in town.”

“When we found out we got [the grant], I sent a video out—I think I was crying, ... and I hadn’t brushed my hair—I was just so excited. I had to ... do a quick presentation ... to our members, and the word got out.... I ran into a school board member that morning.... I said, ‘We’re going to help get our kids back in schools!’” The major components of the plan included direct mailings to the community, a community night, targeted canvassing, a booth at the county fair, visible signage throughout town, and, perhaps most innovative, assigning transition assistants to each newly enrolled (or reenrolled) student as they navigated their first 8 to 10 weeks back in the public schools.

The community night event was coupled with the school’s annual “red and blue” scrimmage football game. The MCTA offered a free movie following the game and bounce houses and other activities

during the game, including giant Connect 4 and Jenga and multiple cornhole boards. The association also provided a concession coupon to every child to purchase a hot dog or snack at the food stand. Tables were set up for each of the 10 school buildings and were staffed by volunteers to talk with families about school, programming, classrooms, and culture. Fortuitously, the district had just built a new field house, making the event an opportunity to provide a sneak peek of the new facility, which was a big deal for the community. Reflecting on the event, Adams said attendance was great—about 300 people—and everyone had a good time: “Just bring bounce houses and they will come.”

Direct mailings were used to promote the community night event (about 4,500 mailed), and they were also used to reach households with children who were not enrolled in the district’s public schools. These targeted mailings included information about the school system and its amenities as well as a QR code linking to a

teacher-made website with more information and easy access to enrollment forms. The school district helped with the postage—freeing up some MCTA resources for other parts of their plan.

In conjunction with the mailings, the teachers had a large banner placed in a highly visible area of town. The banner let thousands of community members know the public schools were open, safe, and the best educational choice for local children. Rounding out the campaign's visibility was the MCTA booth at the Morgan County Fair, a popular event with thousands of attendees each day. There, teachers had conversations with families and asked what they needed to feel comfortable with the idea of returning to school. (The teachers even won the prize for the best-decorated booth.)

Beyond these public appearances, the Martinsville teachers pulled together a team of eight member-canvassers who went out in pairs to knock on doors in areas with high concentrations of unenrolled students. Teachers were equipped with flyers, school enrollment forms, and school backpacks with some starter supplies for families in need. "I can guarantee," Adams

think we doubled, maybe even tripled, our budget [for canvassing and school supplies], but for good reason—because that's where we were getting the greatest impact."

The final piece of the Martinsville plan, which dovetailed with the canvassing and was one of the more innovative B2S recruitment tools we encountered, was the creation of transition plans for new and returning students. School workers sought out "lost" students, engaged their families in deep conversations about their child's education and the district, and developed a strong relationship with the student and family. Then they created an agreement to be that student's "transition person" as they were welcomed back into Martinsville schools. The transition person was to be the key contact person for the student for the first 8 to 10 weeks of school, helping them (re)acclimate, answering questions, offering advice, and providing personal support.

"The transition piece," Adams said, "was about having someone that the student felt comfortable with, and they were going to help solve any issues they had. They were their contact person, and it was that person's job to make sure that all of their problems were taken care of." At first, the MCTA thought all the transition people would be teachers, but they ultimately decided to include other district employees, including paraprofessionals, school staff, and a bus driver.

The Martinsville B2S plan had many bright spots and offers many lessons and ideas for other local unions to engage with their communities to bring more students back to public schools this year. Although Martinsville has a very conservative political climate and the statewide voucher system in Indiana is one of the most robust in the country, the MCTA reported overwhelming support from families, who were excited to see teachers at their door and loved the opportunity to talk about their children and grandchildren. The transition teamwork was rewarding for both the incoming students and the transition people, who played an important role of building trust and a feeling of belonging. In the end, Martinsville student enrollment in the 2021–22 school year was up by 150 students, representing about half of the lost students returning to in-person public education.

"One of the biggest takeaway lessons," Adams said, was "if we want our public schools to thrive, then our public needs to see our schools outside of the school, and the way they do that ... [is to] see our people talking to them, listening to their needs, and saying, 'Hey, let me tell you

what we have to offer.' That's the only way our public really knows who we are."

## Harnessing the Power of Conversation in New York

Despite having a progressive state political climate, members of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) confronted significant challenges during the pandemic and the return to in-person learning. Representing more than 600,000 teachers and education professionals, NYSUT is home to more than 1,200 local affiliates. According to Executive Director Melinda Person, the goal of NYSUT's B2S campaign was threefold: providing stipends for parents to prepare their kids for a return to in-person learning, doing community outreach to discuss safety and provide accurate information on vaccines, and conducting a parent survey.

We had the opportunity to speak with teachers from the Albany Public School Teachers' Association (APSTA) and the Rochester Teachers Association (RTA) to gain insights into what their campaigns looked like on the ground, including some of the challenges they had to overcome.

We learned that both locals faced significant budget cuts. During the pandemic, former governor Andrew Cuomo's administration threatened a 15 percent cut to local school budgets, a significant cut on top of what was already reduced funding for public schools in the state. While NYSUT was able to effectively challenge the constitutionality of the proposed cuts in court, superintendents in some school districts made budgetary decisions that anticipated these reductions in funding.

According to APSTA President Laura Franz, the district laid off nearly 275 people in the fall of 2020. Many of these positions were not restored until May 2021. The funding cuts and layoffs increased workloads for teachers, who faced larger classes and increased course loads on top of the logistics challenges created by remote schooling. Not surprisingly, the experience strained the relationship between the local union and district leadership. Both Albany and Rochester saw declines in enrollment across 2020 and 2021.

On top of budgetary shortfalls and layoffs was an absence of meaningful guidance about the return to in-person schooling from either state or local leaders. Franz noted, "We spent all summer thinking we're just going to open up schools like normal.... July and August are when you plan and figure out what you're going to do next. In the absence of that guidance, none of us knew what we were going to do next."



said, "the parents we spoke with never had anybody come to their door and say, 'Tell me about your kids' education and tell me what you want.'" Based on one of these conversations, the MCTA worked with the transportation company to create a new bus stop, which made for a safer pickup for one student whose family then returned to the public schools (and was very thankful!).

Overall, the canvassing experience was great, Adams said, but she confessed that getting members to participate was initially more challenging than she had anticipated. "A lot of people don't feel comfortable canvassing—it's perceived as somehow confrontational, which it totally is not." The MCTA therefore decided to incentivize canvassing by offering stipends for participation. "I

The guidance was not issued until August 18, 2021, with students returning to schools on September 5. “That’s ridiculous,” Franz noted. “A lot of parents were concerned about the lack of planning, and it was really hard to reassure people because we were feeling the same way.”

Rochester teachers Gia Vallone and Molly Bianco also noted that although the district has largely failed to address enrollment decline, much of the public discourse has conflated RTA with the school board and superintendent. “I think the relationship between our district as its own board of education entity and the union gets very blurred, especially with the media,” Bianco said.

RTA members saw their B2S campaign as an opportunity to draw a sharp contrast between their union’s support for a safe and just return to in-person learning and what

they saw as a lack of action by school leaders to make those goals a reality. Both RTA and APSTA viewed their campaigns as a means to build stronger relationships and trust with their local communities. Vallone said she wanted to better understand how teachers could serve their students and families, but the campaign was also an opportunity to help the community better understand the union’s role. “Having those conversations just helps us to be on the same page and move forward together,” she said.

Similarly, Franz explained that the goal of APSTA’s campaign was to “foster community connections between teachers and families about a safe, in-person return to school, as well as making sure we were communicating and educating about vaccines.”

Both campaigns sought to accomplish these goals primarily through canvassing in areas of their districts that had been hard-hit by the pandemic. APSTA was able to pull from the ranks of their laid-off members—many of whom were also residents of Albany—as well as other teachers in their membership. Franz said the most effective way to recruit canvassers in her local was calling members and being diligent about follow-up.

Similarly, despite having never canvassed before, Vallone and Bianco in Rochester were both recruited by their local leadership. NYSUT provided extensive training and technical support to all locals engaged in canvassing, which Vallone and Bianco found helpful in building their confidence and skills.

The scripts used by APSTA and RTA canvassers were more open-ended than

those used in a traditional Get Out the Vote effort. This allowed for more organic conversations focused on what parents and community members needed and wanted out of public education. According to Franz, APSTA wanted “to communicate to parents about what we were doing as a union, that we wanted students back, and that we wanted a safe working and learning environment. We also wanted to ask about why parents were [deciding not] to send their students back, and what we could do to help facilitate that return.”

RTA was also looking to understand parental concerns, in addition to increasing membership in the Rochester Community Coalition to Save Our Schools, a community-labor coalition fighting for adequate funding of public education in the district. In this way, RTA struck a balance between overcoming the short-term barriers that parents were facing in the return to in-person schooling and building the long-term power required to create a more accessible and responsive public education system in the city.

The APSTA and RTA campaigns both reported receiving little assistance from their district leadership, due in large part to strained relations between labor and management. Both unions believed that better data from the district could have increased the impact of their canvassing efforts. NYSUT helped by providing affiliates with local voter files (which are public records) to develop canvassing turfs. Both locals stated that these lists were effective, albeit less targeted—but even if canvassers

**“I can guarantee the parents we spoke with never had anybody come to their door and say, ‘Tell me about your kids’ education and tell me what you want.’”**

**—Shannon Adams**



In Albany, NY, AFT President Randi Weingarten and leaders from the Albany Public School Teachers’ Association (AFT Local 2455) and New York State United Teachers spoke with parents about students returning to school.

were knocking on doors of people who were not families in the district, they were still increasing public awareness and support for the union's work for a safe return to in-person schooling.

In other words, while collaboration with administration can *contribute* to success, it does not *determine* success, and B2S campaigning can still be a great way for locals to engage with their community—even if district leadership chooses not to. As Franz argues, “We are as much entitled to go and connect with families in the community as our district leadership is.”

Both locals reported that B2S gave members a firsthand lesson about the pressing needs in their communities, as well as the opportunity to deepen community partnerships to help create a long-term transformation in their cities' public school systems. According to Bianco, “Parents and families are our partners. It's super important to hear them, listen to them, and work together in partnership to do what's best for our kids. I've always thought that, but this [campaign] just put it in your face. It's so easy to separate school and community.”

Similarly, Franz underscored how the campaign illustrated clearly that there is more commonality than difference between educators and their community. “I think it reminded me of the importance of making that community connection between the work we do with the people we serve and reminding me that we all have a common goal to provide our students ... with the best possible educational outcomes that we can. We are more alike than different, and we need to continue to connect and communicate around how we are trying to achieve that.”

### Building Labor-Community Connections in Texas

In Texas, some union leaders were projecting public school enrollment would be down by 8 to 10 percent statewide before the start of the 2021 school year, based on their conversations with community members. But actual declines in AFT locals were much smaller. According to union leaders we interviewed, Aldine reported a decline of 3,800 students from 63,130 students in the 2019–20 school year, San Antonio reported a decline of 3,000 from 48,495 students, and Houston was down 12,000 from 209,309 students. Other districts in the state experienced similar levels of decline. In many cases, declining enrollment predated COVID-19, due in part to the rise of charter schools and their active advertising and recruitment campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

“We have been monitoring the charter work in Texas,” Texas AFT President Zeph Capo told us, “and they put quite literally millions and millions of dollars into advertising, commercializing their programs, and we simply just don't do that in [traditional] public schools.”

Political concerns related to COVID-19 have also impacted school enrollment significantly in Texas. Specifically, with a state government that was preventing local school districts from making decisions about masking and other safety protocols, along with little reliable information about school safety plans being shared with parents, the charter and private schools in Texas jumped on the opportunity to recruit even more public school students by offering the safety measures (or freedom from them) that some parents wanted for their children.

Capo explained, “There was so much going on that people didn't know which way they were going, whether there were going to be mask mandates or not,” and it inhibited decision making. Ultimately, several public schools defied the governor's ban on mask mandates and were triumphant in court, securing the right to require masks in school buildings.

In the midst of this confusion and uncertainty, several B2S grants were awarded in Texas, including a statewide grant and a number of smaller grants to individual affiliates. According to Capo, the primary goals for the statewide campaign were gathering and disseminating reliable information to communities about the operating status and safety of public schools; retaining and bringing lost students back into public schools; and supporting decision making on schooling from a local level—by community members, teachers, students, parents, and local elected leaders.

Additionally, teachers from the Aldine, Austin, and Houston locals described leadership building and making strong community connections as two of their goals in order to provide greater teacher and community voice in their districts. Representatives from Education Austin told us they were trying to create strong and enduring partnerships with parents and community—a long-standing goal that the campaign helped to jump-start. Similarly, teachers in San Antonio talked about listening to their members, students, and community members to identify issues and build a unifying campaign, and teachers from Dallas spoke about building a better relationship with their district and school board.

Unlike in Martinsville and New York, teachers in Texas are not permitted to engage in collective bargaining with school

**“We all have a common goal to provide our students ... with the best possible educational outcomes.”**

—Laura Franz



Texas AFT members assured their communities that masking and other strong protocols were in place to support safe in-person learning.

districts, a factor that influenced the nature of grant proposals coming from the Lone Star state. Local campaigns in these highly diverse school districts comprised a range of tactics, including community canvassing, worksite visits, phone banking and texting, internal organizing of members, vaccine clinics, tabling at public events, and offering educational sessions about topics such as vaccines, masks, ventilation, distancing, testing, and/or outbreak protocols. A common theme was the concerted effort to build deep and lasting relationships between the union and the community. “Certainly part of our interest,” said Hobie Hukill, a retired teacher and canvasser from Alliance/AFT in Dallas, “was to make direct contact with the folks in the community—the parents, the grandparents, and uncles and aunts—to establish our union as a go-to resource, a reliable source of information and support that was on their side.”

In addition to making community connections, some Texas affiliates sought to empower communities by increasing their influence in local policy decisions. The San Antonio Alliance exemplified this effort by hosting regular community-labor town halls at outdoor venues. The meetings typically attracted around 40 attendees to discuss school and community concerns, including how best to use the public money



Members of the Houston Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 2415) have reason to celebrate: they braved the summer heat to help students enroll in the Houston Independent School District.

**“Not only did we work on getting students back to school, but we had to be able to get the assistance [families] needed.... We were able to get them that information and build trust.”**

*—Jackie Anderson*

allocated by the state through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program.

As part of a progressive labor-community coalition, the teachers also helped to elect a pro-public education member to the school board and ultimately won the establishment of an ESSER stakeholder committee to ensure community participation in decisions on resource allocation. San Antonio Alliance President Alejandra Lopez told us: “We knew that there was a timeline on these funds, and we tried to think, what would best position us to continue to have robust community engagement around these funds? We settled on getting a stakeholder committee to ensure community engagement around the ESSER funds as a vehicle to have more democratic decision making.”

The Houston Federation of Teachers dedicated much of its efforts to providing material support to students and families in need, including helping them access rental support and meet other basic needs. Describing the dire nature of the situation in some communities, local President Jackie Anderson explained: “The places where a lot of people worked had closed down, so they had no income, and we are talking about both parents without a job, unable to

provide food and shelter for their children.”

As part of its B2S campaign, the Houston Federation of Teachers equipped canvassers and phone bankers with resources and contact information to connect families with much-needed public services. “Not only did we work on getting students back to school,” Anderson said, “but we had to be able to get the assistance they needed ... because if they don’t have a place to live, they’re not going to be able to send their students to school.”

Local canvassers also helped connect families to healthcare, utility bill relief, food drives, and information about the safety of vaccines and where to access them for free. “They have to have those basic needs met,” Anderson said, “and so we were happy that we were able to get them that information and build trust.”

Economic challenges were pervasive in Aldine as well, a Title I district serving a student population that is 80 percent Hispanic and 18 percent African American and where 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. “Many of our families have two and three generations in the home,” Aldine AFT President Candis Houston told us, which made many families reluctant to send children to schools without a mask mandate in place.

An important part of Aldine AFT’s B2S campaign was a series of fall festivals organized in partnership with the school district and hosted at each of the high schools. The festivals were a place where the community could meet the teachers—all proudly wearing their AFT shirts—but they were also used as free vaccination clinics. “We partnered with Harris County [Public] Health to provide those vaccinations,” Houston said, “and since the county was no longer giving gift cards as an incentive for being vaccinated, we provided Visa gift cards ourselves out of

the grant money, just to show appreciation and create an incentive.”

In the face of the difficulties created by inadequate and confusing state government policies around school safety and the inability to bargain directly with school districts, the Texas teachers’ locals had to take a social-movement approach in their efforts first to ensure that schools were safe and second to bring kids back into the buildings. By standing up for strong school safety protocols, including supporting mask mandates that the governor had banned, the local union canvassers were reflecting the desires of their school communities and, in the end, created a pathway to a safe school reopening for students and teachers alike.

“The families that we were talking to felt that [Governor Greg Abbott] was no friend of theirs for a whole multitude of reasons,” Hukill from Dallas told us, “and in an odd way, that was helpful to us. They appreciated us standing in opposition to the craziness he was putting out, ... and we were well-received for just being on the right side of the issues.”

By reaching out to, listening to, speaking with, and aiding local communities, Texas teachers began to build stronger relationships with parents and often with school district administrators and school boards as well. In the end, the combined Texas B2S campaign efforts helped reduce the enrollment gap from an expected 8 percent decline to an estimated decline of just 2 percent—no small feat in the face of great adversity. When reflecting on what they would do differently next year, Capo said he would definitely start earlier. And what would help? “Support for really solid year-round organizing infrastructure, ... [and] a team that can be around more often than just when there’s a program going on. That’s really important.”

Many of the Texas locals we interviewed expressed similar feelings about needing to plan sooner for the following year. There were also some unique suggestions about needs for next year, including greater access to shared materials and resources. Candis Houston of Aldine AFT raised the concern that a lot of smaller locals don’t have the staff to create materials on their own. She said that to the extent materials “can be provided [or shared] that can be adaptable to our own use, [that] would be very helpful”—an idea that can now perhaps take shape after the insight and experience gained from the first year of the campaign.

—T. E. V., K. C., and J. B.

*(Endnote on page 37)*

## Honest History

(Continued from page 19)

year provides an opportunity to correct misinformation and bring people and communities closer to the learning we so value. And as I start to travel again and talk to strangers about what I do, I will overcome my reservations about sharing the details of my life's work.

What do I do?

I teach African American history. I teach the truth. □

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## Back to School for All

(Continued from page 31)

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## Experiences from Three B2S Campaign Sites

(Continued from page 36)

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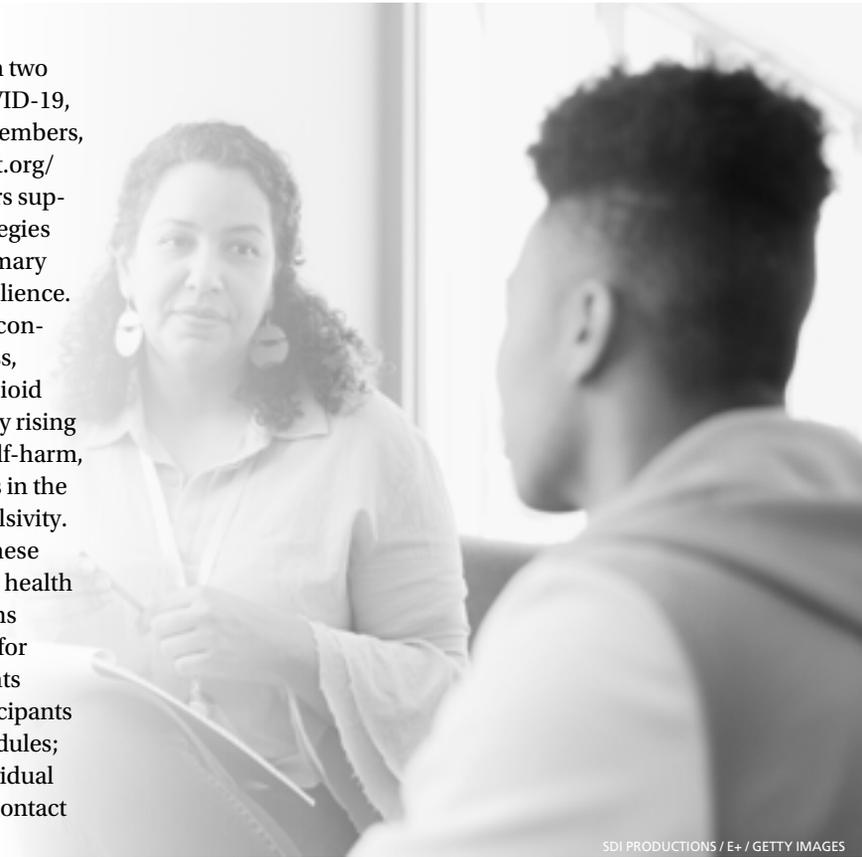
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## AFT Supports for Trauma and Healing

May was a devastating month for the United States. With two mass shootings and reaching 1 million deaths from COVID-19, students, families, and educators are reeling. For AFT members, we offer a free trauma counseling benefit; please visit [aft.org/benefits/trauma](http://aft.org/benefits/trauma) to learn more. And to help our members support their students, we offer “10 Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Heal,” a remote learning course on primary prevention skills to promote student well-being and resilience.

While students’ mental health has long been a grave concern, it is now a national public health crisis. Social stress, isolation, and loss of loved ones to the pandemic, the opioid crisis, and senseless violence have translated into steeply rising rates of child and adolescent anxiety and depression, self-harm, and suicide. Declining mental well-being also manifests in the classroom, leading to withdrawal, aggression, and impulsivity.

In the AFT’s course, educators can learn to address these trauma responses in ways that support students’ mental health and increase their readiness to learn. The course contains 10 modules, each focused on a research-based practice for responding to student trauma, including helping students manage triggers and supporting grieving students. Participants can receive 20 credit hours for completing the course modules; locals may also request skills training workshops on individual strategies to meet specific needs. For more information, contact Chelsea Prax: [cprax@aft.org](mailto:cprax@aft.org).



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## Children’s Book Highlights Working Immigrants’ Contributions to the Labor Movement

The American Labor Museum/Botto House National Landmark has stood as a beacon of light on labor and immigrant studies since 1982. To commemorate its 40th anniversary, copies of the book *The 1913 Paterson Silk Strike: The Children’s Story* are being distributed by AFT New Jersey and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) to public school fourth-grade classrooms, school libraries, and public libraries throughout New Jersey.

The book, funded through a grant by the New Jersey Historical Commission, was coauthored by two of the museum’s leaders: Dr. Angelica Santomauro, executive director (and NJEA member), and Evelyn Hershey, education director. It tells the story of the biggest strike in Paterson’s history through the eyes of four children: two young brothers who needed to work in the silk mills to financially help their family, and a brother and sister who had the privilege of attending a public school because they did not have financial responsibilities. Although the characters are fictional, the story and illustrations are historically accurate. Teaching materials that accompany the story give readers a greater understanding of the role of labor unions, democracy, and civic engagement.

*The 1913 Paterson Silk Strike: The Children’s Story* may be purchased for \$10 through the American Labor Museum website at [go.aft.org/a93](http://go.aft.org/a93)—and a 40 percent discount is available for educators outside of New Jersey by contacting the museum at [labormuseum@gmail.com](mailto:labormuseum@gmail.com). To learn more about the American Labor Museum and access lesson plans and supplemental materials about the strike, visit [labormuseum.net](http://labormuseum.net).



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# Summer



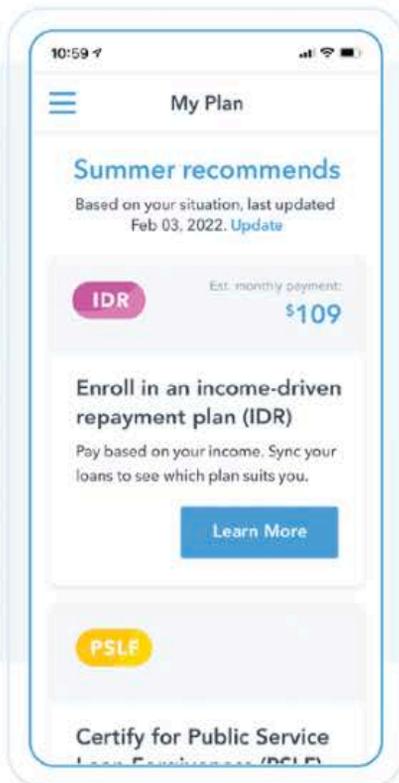
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