



PHILADELPHIA

FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Jerry T. Jordan, President

Testimony Submission: Basic Education Funding Commission

September 14, 2023

On behalf of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, and the more than 13,000 members we represent, I am pleased to be here today to offer insight into the urgency of rectifying the decades-long disinvestment that has left our young people—a majority of whom are Black and Brown and experiencing poverty—shortchanged year after year.

While the focus of my testimony today is not on the ongoing facilities crisis per-se, I would be remiss not to discuss the impacts of last week's heat wave on the first week of school. As you know, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of District schools were dismissed early, which was of course an immediate response to the situation before us: a heat wave. But the dismissals are actually emblematic of a [much larger crisis](#)¹, and that is the **ongoing refusal by our Commonwealth and quite frankly our country, to provide Black and Brown children the resources they need to thrive**. And that manifests itself in countless ways each day, including learning in buildings so old and with such deferred maintenance that their electrical systems could not even handle air conditioning units even if they were provided. *The buildings in which we expect our students to learn and our educators and staff to work would never be deemed acceptable in a wealthier, whiter school district.*

While the focus of my testimony today is on trauma and stress and its impact in and out of the classroom, the facilities crisis is an *egregious example* of how **our societal failures have perpetuated ongoing stress and trauma**. I have heard countless of our youth speak out about the message that the state of facilities imparts upon them: that no matter how much their teacher cares about them, *learning in a dilapidated school building gives them quite another message*.

And therein lies the crux of the impact of underfunding: students, families, and staff alike can do all the 'right things' to help our students grow and thrive. But when that growth is stymied by an ongoing refusal to invest in their futures, our young people suffer profoundly.

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(2023, September 6). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/heatwave>

There are countless studies and reports on what the real life impacts of the ongoing underfunding has on our young people. I am providing a few research reports and recommendations with my testimony, and want to highlight this one quote, which comes from a [summary](#) of an Albert Shanker Institute study² titled *Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Opportunity*:

Breaking the cycle of segregation and K–12 funding inequity will require deliberate, large-scale interventions on both the housing and school finance sides of the equation. But the first steps are to acknowledge that racial/ethnic segregation and unequal educational opportunity are inextricably connected and to understand the history of how that came to be.

That is the solution. Investing in our young people and a deliberate, dedicated commitment to breaking down systems of oppression that have led us to this moment we are in today.

For decades, **our union has been at the forefront of the fight for equity and justice**. And recently, the AFT launched a campaign that identifies and makes key investments in *Real Solutions for Kids and Communities*. You'll see in some of the accompanying [documents](#)³⁴ that I've shared that resources are key. The AFT lays out a host of recommendations, including the expansion of the **community schools** model. And by resources, that means investing in human capital— it means additional school counselors, nurses, support staff; and it means lowering class size and increasing pay.

The last several years have been incredibly challenging, and the impact of many of the crises across this nation have been acutely felt by children of color and children experiencing poverty. And to navigate that trauma and stress, our young people need resources— resources that the government has historically refused to provide.

In an article on [Reimagining School Safety](#), authors Heather M. Reynolds and Ron Avi Astor note,

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial justice movements have made it very apparent that our current approaches to keeping students safe and healthy in schools need major restructuring

² Editors. (2022). What We're Reading: The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding. *American Educator*, 46(4), 40. <https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/wwr>

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Weingarten, R. (2023). Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 64-70. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten>

⁴ Weingarten, R. (2023). Where We Stand: Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 1. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/wws>

and reform. We lack mental health supports in many schools at a time when students need them most.

They go on to note that “[r]ecent data show that 14 million students in the United States attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.” And they conclude that “[a] large body of research has demonstrated the positive impact of whole-school and whole-child prevention approaches that focus on developing and maintaining a welcoming and supportive climate and minimizing the removal of students from school.”⁵

This is what the AFT is talking about when they outline [What Kids Need](#).⁶⁷

And finally, but most certainly not least, I want to address the **crisis of gun violence** and the devastating impact it has had on our young people. Last [school year alone](#), thirty three of Philadelphia’s public school students were killed and 199 were shot.⁸ School communities endured shootings on or near school campuses, and communities across the city endured the ongoing and profound havoc this crisis wreaks. Many students come into school having endured the loss of a loved one.

And once again, the thrust of this crisis is **systems of disinvestment and oppression**. In a 2022 article for Center for American Progress, Marissa Edmund [clearly illustrates](#) what this means:

Notably, gun violence has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities and is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods that have historically been underresourced and racially segregated. This is due to a combination of weak gun laws; systemic racial inequities, including unequal access to safe housing and adequate educational and

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Reynolds, H. M., & Astor, R. A. (2023). Reimagining School Safety. *American Educator*, 47(1), 22-25. https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor

⁶(2022, July 14). *FACT SHEET: ‘What Kids and Communities Need’ Campaign*. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from www.aft.org/sites/default/files/media/2022/wkn_fact_sheet_2022_final.pdf

⁷ (n.d.). *‘What Kids and Communities Need’*. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.aft.org/whatkidsneed>

⁸(2023, August 31). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN JOINS CEASEFIREPA, CONGRESSWOMAN MARY GAY SCANLON, AND ADVOCACY PARTNERS TO CALL FOR ACTION ON GUN LEGISLATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/ceasefirepa>

*employment opportunities; and a history of disinvestment in public infrastructure and services in the communities of color most affected by gun violence.*⁹

And here's what we know: **there are solutions, and the solutions are resource dependent.** Who can argue that the crisis so devastatingly outlined by Edmund above, and so viscerally felt each day across our city, does not need to be addressed in a comprehensive and holistic way?

Everytown USA, a national gun safety advocacy organization, has [outlined](#), in the literature I have shared with you, both school and non-school based solutions, ranging from gun safety laws to school investments.¹⁰

There are no quick and easy 'fixes' for a system that has been perpetuated by decades of disinvestment. But here's what we know right now: the court has ruled with finality that **the system by which we fund public education in our Commonwealth is inequitable**, it is unconstitutional, and it must be fixed; and it **must be fixed by the legislative and executive branches.**

Every lawmaker in our Commonwealth owes it to our young people to once and for all address the disinvestment that caused then fourth grader **Chelsea Mungo** to write to **Senator Hughes** and tell him that her school felt like a 'junkyard.'¹¹ Shame on anyone who sees Chelsea's pleas and those of students before and after her and refuses to act with the urgency this crisis demands.

I thank everyone here for their attention to this crucial issue, and I **urge you to act swiftly.** There are a number of resources and studies that I have included with my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁹ Edmund, M. (2022). Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color. *Center for American Progress*.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gun-violence-disproportionately-and-overwhelmingly-hurts-communities-of-color/>

¹⁰ Editors. (2022). Keeping Students Safe from Gun Violence. *American Educator*, 46(4), 11-13.
<https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/everytown>

¹¹(n.d.). *The Children of Philadelphia Have Been Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis.* Senator Hughes. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from
<https://www.senatorhughes.com/the-children-of-philadelphia-have-been-attending-toxic-schools-for-years-this-is-a-national-crisis/>

Footnote 1

(2023, September 6). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION*. Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/heatwave>

PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN ON ONGOING HEAT WAVE, URGENT NEED FOR INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS & REMEDIATION

September 6, 2023

Amidst an ongoing heatwave that has prompted early dismissals of over 1/3 of District schools, PFT President Jerry T. Jordan issued the following statement:

PHILADELPHIA--"The ongoing and worsening impacts of the worldwide climate emergency, coupled with decades of disinvestment in our system of public education, have put an enormous strain on students and staff as they returned to school. This week's unbearable heat wave has prompted the closures of over 1/3 of District buildings, closures that will continue (with additional schools added) through the rest of the week.

"While members and students alike enthusiastically greeted each other on Tuesday, in too many locations, the excitement and anticipation of the year ahead was tempered by the oppressive heat that has had a real negative impact on student and staff well-being.

"Throughout the week, my team has been visiting schools as well as working internally to address literal hotspots. While we recognize that the District's early dismissal was warranted in those schools it named, there are a number of additional locations that continue to suffer from malfunctioning or minimally functioning air conditioning. Even in newer buildings, these challenges are very real. Additionally, while dismissal before the afternoon heat is prudent, the mornings in schools without air conditioning have been intolerable. For just one example, the heat at one school our team visited was unbearable on the second floor even before the early dismissal. We have received dozens upon dozens of calls from frustrated members over the past few days, and the conditions they report are simply unacceptable.

"Ultimately, the environments in which we expect students to learn, and educators and school staff to work, are deeply reflective of our societal priorities. When, for decades, we refuse to invest in a robust and well-funded system of public education -- *specifically Philadelphia's, where the majority of our students are Black and Brown and experiencing poverty*-- we end up with

devastating consequences. Nowhere has that been more clearly illustrated than in the ongoing facilities crisis that has left students and educators quite literally poisoned by their school buildings. And now, the lack of facilities modernization and electrical upgrades in too many locations has left many buildings unable to even support portable or window AC units.

"Further, the fact that we continue to shirk our obligation to truly address the climate crisis--and in fact, we have extremists who continue to peddle lies and conspiracies about even the existence of a very real emergency--is deeply disturbing and will have irreversible consequences.

"It is past time for Pennsylvania's legislative and executive branches to once and for all rectify the immoral, inequitable, and unconstitutional funding system that has wreaked havoc on too many lives. Both the legislative and executive branches have been charged with addressing the decades of neglect. And it is past time for the Republican extremists in Washington to stop playing deadly and devastating games, and get to work in making bold, sustainable, and ongoing investments in public school infrastructure and other critical initiatives.

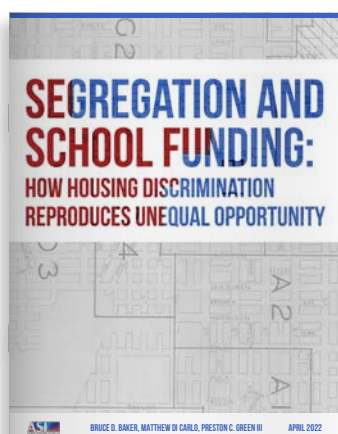
"I have been heartened by the incredible work of our members and our students to make this first week special, but *their resilience and fortitude in the face of a crisis such as this should not be necessary*. Every child and school staff member needs and deserves to learn and work in a safe and healthy school environment."

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Footnote 2

Editors. (2022). What We're Reading: The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding. *American Educator*, 46(4), 40. <https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/wwr>

The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding



A new report from the Albert Shanker Institute, *Segregation and School Funding: How Housing Discrimination Reproduces Unequal Opportunity*, lays out a clear path from redlining (which mandated housing segregation) to the creation of high-poverty Black and Hispanic communities where schools are underfunded—and students need educational enrichment. Here, we share a brief excerpt; for the full report, see shankerinstitute.org/segfunding.

—EDITORS

It is difficult to overstate the importance of segregation for race- and ethnicity-based school funding disparities in the United States. In many respects, unequal educational opportunity depends existentially on segregation.

Throughout most of the 20th century, white people decided where people of other races were allowed to live. An evolving array of strategies, from municipal laws to private contracts to federal aid programs, established and reinforced the systematic separation of households by race and ethnicity in the nation's burgeoning metropolitan areas. And they have been incredibly effective.

The effects of this segregation, past and present, are almost difficult to get one's head around; residence has dramatic and wide-ranging effects, direct and indirect, on virtually all important social and economic outcomes, including health, earnings, family status, social networks, and many others. School finance is but one of these areas, but it's an important one.

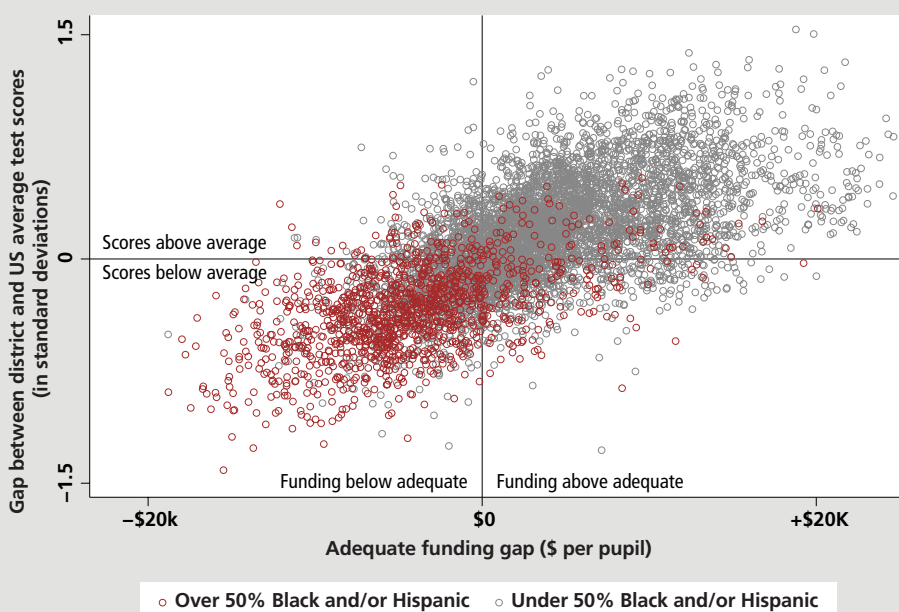
In the United States, school districts rely heavily on local property tax revenue, which means where one lives—particularly in which district—in no small part determines how well one's neighborhood's schools are funded. The mutually dependent relationship between economic and racial/ethnic segregation simultaneously depresses revenue and increases costs in racially isolated districts (because districts serving larger shares of high-needs students must invest more to achieve the same outcomes). This creates (and sustains) unequal educational opportunity—i.e., large gaps in the adequacy of school funding between students of different races and ethnicities living in the same metro area.

Across all US metropolitan districts, 89 percent of districts with Black and/or Hispanic student percentages at least 10 points higher than their metro areas (994 out of 1,116) receive less adequate funding than does their metro area overall. Nationally, a 10 percentage point increase in a district's Black and/or Hispanic student population above its metro area's overall Black and/or Hispanic percentage is associated with a decrease in relative funding adequacy of over \$1,500 per pupil.

It is, perhaps, more palatable to view unequal educational opportunity as a side effect of income and wealth segregation than it is to see it as the end result of racism and discrimination. Yet the reality is that economic segregation, while interdependent with racial/ethnic segregation today, has its roots in generations of institutional policies and practices to keep people separate based solely on their race or ethnicity. Racism built the machine, even if economic inequality helps keep it running now.

Breaking the cycle of segregation and K-12 funding inequity will require deliberate, large-scale interventions on both the housing and school finance sides of the equation. But the first steps are to acknowledge that racial/ethnic segregation and unequal educational opportunity are inextricably connected and to understand the history of how that came to be.

Student Outcome Gaps by Adequate Funding Gaps (US Metropolitan Districts), 2018



Nationally, we find that districts serving majority-Black and/or -Hispanic student populations are overwhelmingly likely to be funded inadequately and to have relatively poor student outcomes to match. (For details, see Figure 30 on page 78 of the report.)

Footnote 3

Weingarten, R. (2023). Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 64-70. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten>



Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

BACK TO SCHOOL is a time of hope and excitement for students, families, and educators. But this year, teachers across the country are wondering whether topics they teach and books they offer students will get caught up, baselessly, in the tempest of the culture wars. They might hear presidential hopefuls slander them as “groomers” who teach “filth.” These demagogues do nothing to help students in public schools—quite the contrary.

They are engaged in a coordinated attack on public schools (as I explain in my article on page 64) to starve public education and divert public school funding to private and religious schools through vouchers. Ninety percent of parents send their children to public schools, and the vast majority want public schools strengthened, not privatized.

What I’ve seen in classrooms all over the country as educators help their students recover and thrive, and what research has proven, together form a set of strategies and solutions that will help students and strengthen public education.

These strategies address students’ loneliness, learning loss, and literacy, and they are at the center of the AFT’s new \$5 million Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign. Our goals are to

- unlock the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader;
- ensure that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education;
- catalyze a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families;
- care for young people’s mental health and well-being, including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children; and
- fight for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

It starts with reading, the foundation for all academic learning. The AFT’s Reading Opens the World program has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we’re giving away 1 million more. Now we’re helping teachers develop their expertise in reading instruction through Reading Universe, a new online resource developed by working with real teachers in real classrooms. (For details on Reading Universe, see page 24.) And we’re reaching out to families with this issue of *American Educator*. We’re even printing 100,000 extra copies to give away at community events!

Another solution is experiential learning—learning by doing: like third-graders in Washington, DC, who role-play that they are officials addressing real issues affecting their city, and chemistry students in Cincinnati who get out of an escape room (their classroom) by solving puzzles that embed the content they just learned. Career and technical education is experiential learning at its best, and it prepares students not only for traditional trades programs, but also for careers in healthcare, information technology, and skilled manufacturing.

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and community schools help solve the challenges students and families confront today. Community schools wrap academics, healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, and much more around public schools—supports that students and families need to learn and live. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025. (To determine if your community is ready to launch and sustain community schools, see page 77.)



What I’ve seen in classrooms, and what research has proven, together form a set of solutions that will help students recover and thrive.

To further support young people’s well-being, we are working with parent and student groups to counter the harmful impacts of social media. In our new report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools* (available at go.aft.org/5wo), we call on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children—such as turning on the strongest safety features by default and implementing safeguards that deter students from overuse and protect students’ privacy.

Of course, we need appropriate funding for our public schools and the three R’s—educator recruitment, retention, and respect—so all students have the educators they need.

These solutions are worthy on their own; together, they are transformational. At the AFT, we are doing everything we can to scale and sustain them. And they should be a national priority, because we all want our young people to recover and thrive. □

Footnote 4

Weingarten, R. (2023). Where We Stand: Real Solutions for Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy. *American Educator*, 47(3), 1. <https://www.aft.org/ae/fall2023/wws>

Real Solutions for Kids and Communities

Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy



By Randi Weingarten

I'm so glad we're back at our first in-person TEACH since 2019.* It's been a tough year. Actually, it's been several tough years. And how do you "reward" yourself during your time "off"? By signing up for some sizzling professional development in sweltering Washington, DC. That's who educators are. Working together to improve our craft, recharging through our connection and camaraderie. That's what keeps us going.

Same with me. After Mike Pompeo, the former secretary of state and CIA director, called me the most dangerous person in the world,¹ our members had my back. Teachers, being teachers, reached out, telling me others who were so labeled: Mother Jones, the most dangerous woman in America.² Walter Reuther, the most dangerous person in Detroit.³ Martin Luther King Jr., the most dangerous Black man in America.⁴ You get the point.

Why were they dangerous? They challenged deprivation and discrimination. They fought for a better life for their families

and their communities. I'm honored to be in their courageous, righteous company. And that righteous company includes all of you—and teachers and school staff across the country. The malicious attacks and outright lies to which our members have been subjected are appalling. So why have Pompeo, the president he served, and others unleashed this vitriol against educators and their unions?

Remember the beginning of the pandemic? Parents showered praise on teachers and school staff. People saw just how essential the connection is between educators and public schools, and kids, families, and communities. And then the far right wing started their smears.

That's no accident. As extremists try to divide Americans from one another, they know that public schools unite us. As they wage culture wars in our schools, parents know we have children's best interests at heart. We teach. We help young people learn how to think critically—to discern fact from fiction, to be curious and tolerant, to learn the basics and discover their potential and passions.

That's why 90 percent of parents send their children to public schools. Most parents trust teachers, and they want public schools strengthened, not privatized.⁵

So why do extremists demonize, distort, and demagogue public education? And why don't they offer a single idea to strengthen public schools?

Because they don't want to *improve* public education. They want to *end* it. When they're not trying to slash public school funding, they are diverting it to private and religious schools through vouchers. That's despite the evidence that vouchers do not improve achievement. That voucher schools often discriminate

*To learn about the AFT's TEACH conference, visit aft.org/teach.

Randi Weingarten is the president of the AFT. Prior to her election in 2008, she served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2. A teacher of history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn from 1991 to 1997, Weingarten helped her students win several state and national awards debating constitutional issues. Widely recognized as a champion of public schools and a better life for all people, her recent commendations include being named to Washingtonian's 2021 Most Influential People in Washington and City & State New York's 2021 New York City Labor Power 100.

against children and families. And that vouchers siphon funds from already underfunded public schools.⁶

Never forget what Christopher Rufo, who invented the conflict over critical race theory, said: “To get universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.” Toward that end, he said, “you have to be ruthless and brutal.”⁷

Distrust. Ruthless. Brutal. That’s the playbook of fearmongers who call hardworking teachers “groomers” and say we teach “filth.”⁸ Of the culture warriors who censor honest history and ban books like *Autocrats*, and who pretend racism doesn’t exist. Of the bullies who target and torment LGBTQ kids and families. That’s the playbook of those who want to end public education as we know it.

And while the fearmongers are out of step with the vast majority of parents and the public, they are determined, well-funded, and, yes, ruthless.

Nowhere do you see this more than in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis hopes his anti-teacher “war on woke” will propel him to the White House. And it wasn’t enough for him to ban students from taking AP African American Studies. He’s whitewashing Black history with his new African American history standards that say enslaved people “developed skills” during slavery that “could be applied for their personal benefit.”⁹ It’s disgusting. And groups like Moms for Liberty, which was founded in Florida (and which has been labeled “extremist” by the Southern Poverty Law Center¹⁰), are attempting ideological takeovers of school boards. You may have heard of Shannon Rodriguez, a Hernando County school board member backed by Moms for Liberty, who targeted a teacher for showing a Disney movie with a gay character.¹¹ Well, Rodriguez also went after high school teacher Patti Greenwood for having stickers on her classroom door, including intertwined white and black hands wearing rainbow nail polish. Because like you, Patti wants all her students to feel safe, welcome, and respected. And Patti, who is the treasurer of her union, is here at TEACH with her local president, Lisa Masserio. Thank you for your courage and righteousness.

“Ruthless and brutal” is a thing in Washington as well. In April, some members of Congress called me to testify—a whole hearing

in my name.¹² Was it about how to help kids learn? No. About the resources schools need? Nope. About school infrastructure? Or civics? Or community schools? No, no, and no. They wanted to place blame for school closures during the pandemic—not on the pandemic itself or on officials who prioritized opening bars and gyms over schools. No. They wanted to make teachers, teachers unions, and me their political punching bag.

Never mind that in April 2020, a month after the pandemic shut down schools and most of society, the AFT released a comprehensive plan of action to reopen schools—safely.¹³ Safe for you and safe for kids. Never mind all the work you did during the pandemic to meet your students’ needs. Never mind that educators understood long before the pandemic the value of in-person teaching, learning, and connecting with students.

Frankly, if certain members of Congress didn’t interrupt as much as they did, I would have testified about everything we did during the pandemic—to reopen schools safely, to secure the support kids and families needed—and about what we all need to do to get it right if, God forbid, there is a next time.

But for a moment, let’s imagine I had a modicum of the power they ascribe to me. Here’s what I’d do: I would make sure that every school has enough counselors, nurses, librarians, therapists, teachers, bus drivers, and other support staff. That every kid has a rich curriculum that embeds joy and resilience—arts, sports, clubs, recess, field trips, summer camps, and a lot more. I’d abolish all unnecessary paperwork for teachers. There would be lower class sizes and less standardized testing—and it wouldn’t be high-stakes. The professionals who teach and support America’s children would be treated with the respect they deserve, with wages they and their families can live on comfortably. And, while we were at it, we’d do the same for every family in America.

Alas, I don’t possess those powers, but together *we do* have a superpower. Because in our union, in our democracy, we can achieve things together that are impossible alone. That is the essence of unionism: showing up when it counts; fighting, caring, and working together for the things that make life better—for our students, our families, our communities, and our society.



Host a Watch Party!

This article is based on Randi Weingarten’s speech at the AFT’s TEACH (Together Educating America’s Children) conference on July 21, 2023. She lays out five essential solutions for meeting kids’ needs, highlights educators leading the way, and shows how all of us can join the fight. Hosting a watch party is a great first step in joining the AFT’s Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

—EDITORS



Five Essential Solutions

The responsibilities placed on your shoulders probably feel impossible at times. It can be daunting to help even one child who is suffering with anxiety or who is struggling academically. Yet you give your all to meet the needs of *all* your students, too often without the supports you and your students need and deserve.

Even before the pandemic, the United States had a youth mental health crisis¹⁴ and a crisis of lagging student achievement, particularly for marginalized youth.¹⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have exacerbated loneliness, learning loss, absenteeism, and so much more.

No one has to cite drops in test scores or attendance for us to know that students aren't recovering as fast as we'd like and that many of our kids are not all right. Educators and families know the condition of our children better than anyone—how they are struggling and what they need.

Helping kids recover and thrive is your priority. I've seen it—in classrooms from coast to coast and in between; in cities, suburbs, and small towns. What I have witnessed, what educators like you have shown me, what research has proven—all form a set of strategies and solutions that have helped and will help young people and strengthen public education. But it must be a national priority. And it must be our union's priority.

Too often, things get siloed in education. We'll work on academic learning here and social and life skills there. But brain science—and common sense—show that physical health, emotional wellness, and feelings of connection all influence academic learning—in fact, all learning.¹⁶ Our brains aren't siloed, and our schools shouldn't be either.

How can we do this? By committing to these essential solutions that meet kids' needs:

- Unlocking the power and possibility that come from being a confident reader.
- Ensuring that all children have opportunities to learn by doing—engaging in experiential learning, including career and technical education.
- Caring for young people's mental health and well-being,

including by demanding that social media companies protect, not prey on, children.

- Catalyzing a vast expansion of community schools that meaningfully partner with families.
- And, of course, fighting for the teaching and support staff, and the resources, students need to thrive.

These are the foundations of the \$5 million, yearlong campaign the AFT is launching today, Real Solutions for Kids and Communities. These strategies work. And we will do everything we can to scale and sustain them: visiting classrooms and communities across the country, lifting up these solutions and the countless other things you are doing to help kids succeed.

Reading

It starts with *reading*: the foundation for all academic learning.

The AFT's Reading Opens the World program, in partnership with First Book, has given away 1.5 million books to children and families over the last year—and we're well on our way to giving away 1 million more. Sharing the joy of reading when kids choose their own books at these events is one of the best endorphin rushes you could have. The wonder in their eyes; the smiles on their faces.

But getting books in young people's hands is just the start. The ability to read is a fundamental right, and teaching children to read is the most fundamental responsibility of schooling.

The AFT has been advocating for an evidence-based approach to reading instruction for decades. That science of reading points to a systematic approach that includes phonics instruction along with giving students plenty of opportunities to read high-quality books, develop their background knowledge, and build their vocabulary.¹⁷

These principles must be included in teacher preparation programs, in curriculums, and in high-quality professional development.

And while some districts continue to ignore the science of reading or think tutoring alone will boost literacy, the good (and surprising) news is that our country is on the cusp of the most comprehensive approach to reading ever. New research from the Albert Shanker Institute evaluating state reading reform laws shows more consensus in this evidence-based approach than we have ever seen.¹⁸ School districts such as New York City¹⁹ and Detroit²⁰ are pledging to teach reading using this evidence-based approach.

This is good news, but teachers need to be supported in this work. This change won't happen overnight. The AFT is committed to fighting for and providing opportunities for teachers to learn, practice, and be mentored in evidence-based approaches. We're also investing in an exciting new project, Reading Universe, led by one of our longtime partners, WETA, along with First Book and the Barksdale Reading Institute, whose work in Mississippi* has moved fourth-grade reading achievement from the bottom of the country up to the national average.²¹

Reading Universe is an online, step-by-step pathway for teachers, paraprofessionals, and reading coaches to learn more

*For details on Reading Universe and how Mississippi is increasing reading achievement, see page 24.

about evidence-based reading instruction and then use it in their classrooms to complement any curriculum. It offers videos filmed in real classrooms, with real kids, in diverse settings around the country. There will be a focus on serving English learners, students with dyslexia or other learning issues, and students from marginalized communities.

Reading Universe will offer educators everywhere access to the strategies and skills that enable them to help kids be confident and joyful readers, regardless of the curriculum a district or school requires. And it's been built from the start with a cadre of skilled teachers and researchers.

I am thrilled to announce the launch of this powerful tool today. And to announce that it's free—yes, free—and available online to every educator, because all students need and deserve high-quality literacy instruction.

But reading, as important as it is, is just one part of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign.

Helping kids recover and thrive is our priority.

Experiential Learning

We know that many kids are disengaged or don't want to go to school at all. Honestly, I get it. There are a lot of school experiences that don't interest or inspire young people.

But not in Raphael Bonhomme's classroom. Raphael teaches third grade at School Within School on Capitol Hill, in the District of Columbia, and he is an AFT Civics Design Team member.

Raphael's students learn about local government by role-playing that they are DC Council members, addressing real issues affecting their city. At the end of third grade, his students create DC tour companies, researching the city's historical sites. They then role-play how they would attract people to take their tour.

Denise Pfeiffer, a high school chemistry teacher in Cincinnati, creates escape rooms in her classroom. Her students work in pairs, and, to get out, they have to solve puzzles that embed the content they have learned.

These are examples of *experiential learning*. And many of us do this. I had students in my Street Law classes at Clara Barton High School role-play housing court mock trials. And in my AP government course, my students acted out mock appellate court arguments.

Now, in the age of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT, this type of learning is essential to being able to analyze information, think critically, apply knowledge, and discern fact from fiction. Experiential learning engages students in deeper learning, provides them with real-world, real-life skills, and boosts academic achievement.²²

Career and technical education (CTE) is project-based experiential learning at its best. It is a 21st-century game changer. CTE prepares students not only for traditional trades programs like welding, plumbing, carpentry, and auto repair, but also for careers in healthcare, culinary arts, advanced manufacturing and aeronautics, information technology, graphic design, and so much more. And it works. Ninety-four percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate from high school, and 72 percent of them go on to college.²³

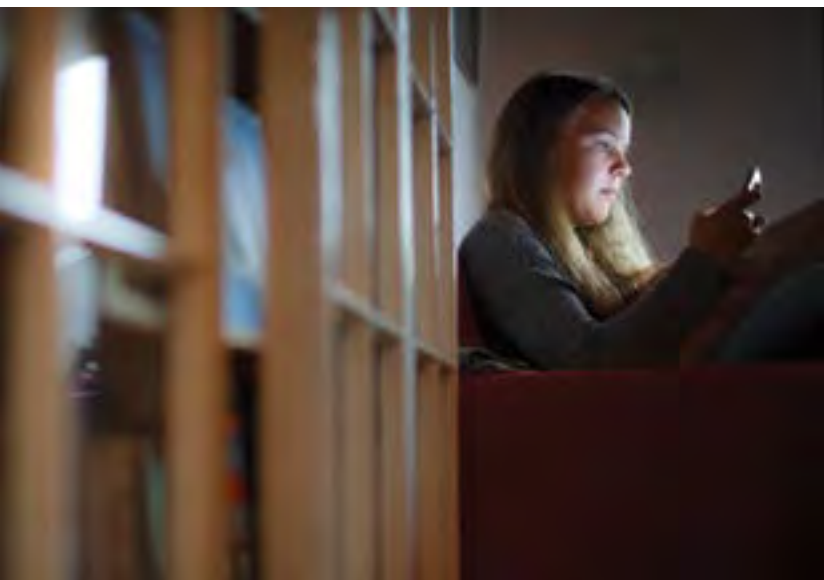
In June, the AFT's CTE committee visited Lynn Vocational and Technical High School in Massachusetts. Students in the culinary program catered a delicious sit-down breakfast for our group of 40 visitors. We saw beautiful porch swings and sheds handcrafted by carpentry students. Students demonstrated their knowledge of plumbing and pipefitting. These young people graduate from high school with lots of options and opportunities.

In Syracuse, New York, a new plant being built by the semiconductor manufacturer Micron will create tens of thousands of jobs. At the AFT's initiative, Micron is partnering with school systems and teachers unions in New York to develop a curriculum framework that prepares high school students for engineering and technical careers. And we are working with the region's school systems to develop the teacher training necessary to teach this curriculum.

In rural southeast Ohio, again with the help of our union, schools in New Lexington have expanded CTE to include everything from robotics for third-graders to a partnership with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to train high school students for in-demand electrical jobs. Their graduation rate has shot up to 97 percent, and 30 percent of students earn college credits before high school graduation.

By being intentional about this—starting by high school, identifying school-to-career pathways, partnering with employers, creating paid internships, and offering industry-approved credentials or college credit—we can set young people on a path to a career or higher education, or both, right out of high school.





Preparing kids for college, career, civic participation, and life— isn't that the job of public schools?

If you have been empowered to engage in experiential learning with your students, you know how transformational it is. And you know that standardized test-based accountability systems can't capture the richness of experiential learning. As I have advocated repeatedly, we need to reimagine our accountability systems to assess what is needed in today's world, not yesterday's, such as the ability to communicate, work cooperatively, think critically, troubleshoot, and be creative. These are the lifelong skills that will enable students to thrive no matter what the future holds, no matter what the next version of AI brings, no matter the challenges they may face.

Community Schools

Experiential learning prepares students for the opportunities of tomorrow, and *community schools* help solve the challenges students and families confront today.*

Hunger, housing insecurity, trauma, physical health problems—even the lack of clean clothing—all negatively affect children's ability to learn. And now, after the isolation, stress, and, for many young people, loss of loved ones during the pandemic, their needs are even greater.

Educators are heroic. You do it all in your classrooms. Who here keeps snacks for when students are hungry? Who's had to interrupt your teaching to comfort a student who is distraught? Who's had students with a health or family problem that interfered with their learning? How about this: Who would welcome having support services in your school that meet kids' needs and allow you to focus on teaching? That's what community schools do.

Community schools can wrap so much around public schools—healthcare, mental health services, food assistance, child care, enrichment, tutoring, and sports and afterschool activities. It all supports what students and families need to learn, live, and thrive. Through meaningful partnerships with families and deep community engagement, they become centers of their communities.

*Turn to page 77 to learn more about community schools.

United Community Schools, a network of community schools in New York City that has expanded into Albany, has higher rates of vulnerable students than other public schools. Yet they perform better on measures like college readiness and the progress of English language learners and students with disabilities.²⁴

Likewise with San Francisco's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Academic Middle School (MLK). Prior to becoming a community school in 2015, MLK struggled with enrollment and academics, and educators were burned out. Now, with support from 40 community partners, there have been significant increases in math and reading scores at MLK, and teachers are choosing to stay. And United Educators of San Francisco saw the possibilities and worked with a community coalition to pass Proposition G last November, which expands this community school model.

When I advocated for a broad expansion of community schools in my first speech as AFT president in 2008, our North Star was Cincinnati. Today, there is a constellation of community schools. We're in Albuquerque and Albany, El Paso and Pittsburgh, Masena and McDowell. AFT members have helped create more than 700 community schools across the country, and we are part of a movement calling for 25,000 community schools by 2025.

We are fighting to make community schools the norm, not the exception. And we have allies in this fight. California is investing an additional \$4 billion in community schools. President Joe Biden doubled federal funding for community schools. And Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson—the Chicago Teachers Union's and AFT's own—is dramatically expanding the district's community schools program, with the goal of all district schools functioning as community hubs through community partnerships.

Mental Health and Well-Being

While community schools can provide a safe and supportive physical environment for young people, there is an environment that threatens their physical and emotional well-being—social media and the online world.

Even before the pandemic, many experts connected the *harmful impacts of social media* and the nefarious practices of social media companies to the youth mental health crisis.²⁵

Social media can have benefits, but research has shown that teens who spend more than three hours per day on social media are at double the risk for experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.²⁶ Social media can increase bullying and diminish people's ability to interact face to face, and it has been tied to eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of being less than or left out.²⁷ Too many children have an addictive relationship with social media that families can't fix on their own.

Schools are also grappling with an increase in dangerous and disruptive behavior linked to social media, such as viral challenges. Challenges to destroy school property, or to slap a teacher, or to "swat"—the one that encourages students to report hoax shootings—are dangerous and traumatic for students, staff, and families.

And all of these detract from the primary mission of our schools, which is to protect and educate our children.

So as schools are struggling to hire mental health professionals and to provide training to teachers to better support students with their mental health, we are calling on social media companies to step up.

Social media companies have shirked their responsibility to protect kids. Facebook's own research showed how their algorithms harm users, especially adolescent girls. Did they change their practices to protect kids based on what they knew? No—they hid it.

These companies must protect young people, not prey on them for profit. It's not enough to issue press releases promising to "improve the viewing experience" when "Recommended for You" feeds send content that glorifies eating disorders, or to settle lawsuits with families grieving for children who received unsolicited videos about suicide.²⁸

Educators and families know our children are struggling and what they need.

The AFT is taking action. Working with ParentsTogether (a platform of 2.5 million parents), Fairplay for Kids, Design It for Us, and the American Psychological Association, we are calling on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to prioritize safety for children. Our report, *Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools*, calls for the following safeguards: (1) turn on the strongest safety features by default; (2) make changes that deter students from overuse and addictive behavior; (3) protect their privacy; (4) shield them from risky algorithms; and (5) directly engage and work with schools and families. Social media platforms could implement these today.²⁹

Our coalition of students, educators, and parents won't let up until they do.

I'm glad ParentsTogether is with us today. And I'm glad many students are here, including 15-year-old Ryan Lomber from Oregon. Ryan makes and sells art to fund her program to make everyone in her school community feel welcome and to bridge differences between people.³⁰

When we join in common cause and common purpose with parents, educators, students, employers, faith leaders, and the broader community, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals. That is why fearmongers and demagogues try so hard to divide. It takes work to create trust. But it's transformational. Look at New Haven, Connecticut, where educators and families went to the state capital together to fight back against school privatization and for much-needed education investments. And the Michigan Education Justice Coalition, which has trained thousands of people to get involved in their school boards. Thousands of parents and educators from Yonkers, New York, to the ABC Unified School District in California, from Houston to Detroit, have fought for the schools our kids need.

And, of course, we must continue to work collectively to combat the leading cause of death for children in the United States:

firearms.³¹ Parties, parades, concerts, and classrooms—all places where our children should feel safe; all places that have been devastated by gun violence. Here's an idea: ban assault weapons, not books.

Educators, Staff, and Resources

What I'm about to say is obvious to all of you, but we have to fight for it. We need *appropriate funding for our public schools* and the three R's: *educator recruitment, retention, and respect*.

The report of the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force that we released last year is chock-full of solutions: family-sustaining wages; time to plan and prepare for classes, collaborate with colleagues, and participate in meaningful professional development; and the power to make day-to-day classroom decisions.³²

It's easy to see what's needed. What is hard is making it happen.

But we have, in recent collective bargaining contracts. United Teachers Los Angeles' new contract includes higher pay and smaller class sizes, more funding for community schools, and support for vulnerable students. In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers' new contract increases pay and provides more ways for teachers to engage with parents and to support multilingual learners and students with disabilities. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators won an agreement for all schools to have mental health support teams. And the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers' contract requires an Instructional Leadership Team in every school that puts decisions about school operations and improvement in the hands of those closest to students.

We have allies in this fight, including the fight to pay educators more. New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham enacted a \$10,000 raise for teachers. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Rep. Frederica Wilson of Florida proposed bills that would raise teacher salaries. And President Biden called on lawmakers to give public school teachers a raise during his State of the Union address.

In years past, when I and others advocated for higher pay for teachers and *adequate and equitable education funding*, the





right wing would fire back, “money doesn’t matter.” But evidence matters, and I admire those willing to follow it, like researcher Eric Hanushek, who argued for decades that more funding didn’t lead to better educational outcomes. He has made a stunning turnaround. Hanushek has reviewed the most rigorous research on education funding and finds what you and I know—that money does, in fact, matter.³³ As the Albert Shanker Institute documented a decade ago, research shows that when schools get more money, student achievement goes up and students tend to stay in school longer.³⁴

But others still operate ideologically. As we speak, House Republicans are trying to cut billions in funding for public education. This will hurt preschoolers, English language learners, and millions of children from low-income families because these lawmakers propose *slashing Title I by 80 percent*. It’s inexcusable. (I am so grateful to all of the TEACH participants who lobbied on Capitol Hill to turn this around.)

Public education must be supported, not stripped. And thankfully we have allies here too. President Biden’s budgets reflect his unwavering support for public schools. Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker signed a budget last month with an additional \$570 million for K–12 education. In Minnesota, Governor Tim Walz approved \$2.2 billion in new K–12 spending over the next two years. And in Wisconsin, Republican politicians are reeling over the clever way Governor Tony Evers increased per-pupil spending *for the next 400 years*. Elections matter.

Together, These Real Solutions Will Succeed

The solutions I have outlined are worthy on their own. Together, they are transformational: Reading truly opens the world. Community schools help students and their families thrive. Experiential learning prepares young people to seize the opportunities in our changing economy. Together, everyone in students’ circle of care must work to address learning loss, loneliness, culture wars,

gun violence, and unrestrained social media. Educators must be supported, respected, and compensated befitting their essential role. And public schools must be adequately funded.

Those are the elements of the Real Solutions for Kids and Communities campaign that we are launching today.

Look, we know how to run contract campaigns and political campaigns. Let’s put that same energy and expertise into this campaign to win these solutions for our kids, for educators like you, for our public schools, and for our democracy. Because without public schooling, and the pluralism and opportunity that arise from it, there can be no broad-based, multiracial democracy.

We need you to tell your stories and showcase the great things happening in your classrooms.

We want to lift up the teaching and learning happening all over. We want to lift up these foundational strategies and solutions. We need to embed them into collective bargaining and enshrine them into district policies and state laws so they can be scaled and sustained.

And I bet, as we address hard issues like loneliness, literacy, and learning loss, we will have not only long-term allies rooting us on, but also people who we have at times been at odds with. Because everyone wants children to recover and thrive, and that’s only possible when our beloved community comes together and supports, not smears, public education and educators.

When we join in common cause, we multiply our power to achieve our shared goals.

Are you with me?

Ready to tap into the literacy tools in Reading Universe? Ready to give kids great, free books as others ban them? Ready to help kids with practical skills and critical thinking with experiential learning in your classroom? Ready to make community schools the norm? Ready to take on social media companies?

Are you ready to join this campaign to make every public school in America a safe, welcoming, and joyful place where educators are respected and supported, parents are happy to send their kids, and students thrive?

No one can do all of this, but we all can do something. And through our union, we can achieve great things together that would be impossible alone.

Never ever forget, in this fight between hope and fear, between aspiration and despair, between light and darkness, you are the hope, the aspiration, and the light. ☐

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2023/weingarten.

Footnote 5

Reynolds, H. M., & Astor, R. A. (2023). Reimagining School Safety. *American Educator*, 47(1), 22-25.
https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor

Reimagining School Safety



By Heather M. Reynolds and Ron Avi Astor

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial justice movements have made it very apparent that our current approaches to keeping students safe and healthy in schools need major restructuring and reform. We lack mental health supports in many schools at a time when students need them most.¹ We are punishing and removing students of color from schools at much higher rates than white students, and students with disabilities are three times more likely to receive a punitive punishment than their nondisabled peers.² Additionally, there are strong calls from communities across the United States to remove law enforcement from schools immediately,

with little planning or data-driven support. With the infusion of federal money into states and schools to help address student achievement losses and mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity for real change.³ This is an opportunity to create sustainable systems and infrastructure that help local districts address their most pressing safety needs through districtwide data-driven strategies that show long-term, positive outcomes for the entire school community.⁴

Recent data show that 14 million students in the United States attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.⁵ The National Association of School Psychologists⁶ recommends that the ratio of school psychologists to students be at least 1 for every 500 students. Only one state met this recommendation as of 2021, and over 20 states had a ratio of more than 1,500 students per school psychologist.⁷ There is no national strategy or infrastructure to lower the ratio of students to counselors, social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals to ensure more supports are available to struggling students.⁸

In addition to diverting resources that could fund better mental health supports, punitive school security and discipline policies have a strong negative impact on students of color and students with disabilities. More specifically, suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to law enforcement, and punitive discipline rates are disproportionately and consistently higher for students of color and students with disabilities in urban, suburban, and rural communi-

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ties across the United States, beginning even before students enter kindergarten.⁹ We should be asking what our schools need to be welcoming and supportive to all. And more importantly, how can policymakers help support that vision with infrastructure, training, and funding to ensure success and sustainability over time?

Shifting the Focus to Social, Emotional, and Mental Health, and a Positive School Climate

Reenvisioning education and schools across the United States must account for the large bodies of research showing that schools with strong, caring, culturally supportive, and positive climates can not only address issues of ongoing victimization but also prevent students from being victimized.¹⁰ Little evidence suggests that law enforcement strategies have prevented school shootings or made schools feel safer for students.¹¹ However, significant research has highlighted the negative impact that security, law enforcement, and punitive approaches can have on school climate, including lowering students' sense of belonging and safety and academic performance.¹² These negative outcomes disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities, which can lead to social isolation, disengagement, and dropping out of school.¹³ Given the existing evidence, policies need to shift from "hardening" practices (such as more police and metal detectors) to strategies that foster a positive community and civil relationships in schools.¹⁴

This change requires a shift of funding and support from policing, punishment, and surveillance to long-term investments in holistic prevention and empowerment of schools and communities. Given wide local, regional, and state variation in populations, the most effective and appropriate interventions are driven by local school safety assessments, capacity building, integration of academic and social goals, partnerships with community organizations, consideration of the voices of all school stakeholders, and collaborations with universities.¹⁵

The arguments to fund security measures in schools are generally based on fear, opinion, and often, political views.¹⁶ In most school shootings with mass casualties, schools had armed personnel either on campus at the time of the shooting or there within minutes,¹⁷ and their presence failed to prevent the shootings or stop the shooters from using weapons on school grounds (e.g., Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Robb Elementary School). Similarly, most mass shootings have occurred in schools that had security cameras, security protocols, and electronic monitoring systems.¹⁸ And finally, most shooters were students or former students who were familiar with the layout of the school rather than random strangers targeting a school.¹⁹

More than 20,000 school resource officers (SROs) work in schools across the country, which doesn't include the presence of armed security or "guardians" who are not active-duty law enforcement officers.²⁰ Federal funding (COPS in Schools and other grants) during the past several decades has encouraged schools to hire active-duty law enforcement to work full time in schools. Research on the effectiveness of SROs is mixed, and no definitive data have indicated that the presence of an SRO deters or lowers casualties in a mass school shooting.²¹

However, evidence suggests that punitive disciplinary policies and the presence of a law enforcement officer in schools can affect the numbers of students being arrested, with devastating effects on students of color and students with disabilities.²²

Although Black students represent 15 percent of student enrollment, they represent 29 percent of students referred to law enforcement and 32 percent of students subjected to school-related arrest.²³ Regarding students with disabilities, the rate of school arrests is three times that of students without disabilities, and it increases exponentially when police are present on campus.²⁴

Despite federal and state funding and incentives, most states have very limited guidance and legislation related to SRO training, and as of 2018, 18 states had "no laws on SRO certification, use,



Our Children Can't Wait

This article is adapted from chapter 11 of *Our Children Can't Wait: The Urgency of Reinventing Education Policy in America*. In this edited volume, scholars challenge inequality as something inevitable in America's schools and society, focusing on new, broader social policy responses to address persistent disparities in academic outcomes apparent by race and income. We explore the perspectives of multiple experts on interrelated policies beyond schools that profoundly affect students, such as neighborhood conditions, public health, community resources, housing, air quality, school safety, and segregation. An education policy playbook that looks both within and outside the school walls for solutions that begin to dismantle the entrenched forces of systemic racism in our country has never deserved greater attention or focus. That redemptive journey starts with making an unapologetic commitment to our young people. Our children can't wait.

—JOSEPH P. BISHOP

Joseph P. Bishop, editor of Our Children Can't Wait, is the executive director and cofounder of the Center for the Transformation of Schools in UCLA's School of Education & Information Studies. His research explores the role of policy in our society, specifically its impact on historically marginalized communities in education settings.



or training.”²⁵ The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the largest training organization for school-based police in the United States, recently released a statement about the importance of “local and collaborative” decision-making that focuses on “weighing the risk of harm” with potential benefits prior to hiring law enforcement to work in schools.²⁶

Creating a Positive, Supportive, and Welcoming School Climate

A large body of research has demonstrated the positive impact of whole-school and whole-child prevention approaches that focus on developing and maintaining a welcoming and supportive climate and minimizing the removal of students from school.²⁷ A positive school climate is characterized by respectful student, teacher, and staff relationships; teacher and peer support; clear, fair, and consistent rules and disciplinary policies; support for diversity and inclusion; effective school-home communication; and student engagement and a sense of belongingness in school and school activities.²⁸ Sharing some of the same core principles, social and emotional learning refers to supports and processes that help “children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”²⁹

School safety researchers know that there are promising, data-driven findings indicating that programs that focus on schoolwide or districtwide efforts to improve school climate and promote social and emotional learning can lower levels of victimization in school and increase feelings of safety for all students.³⁰ Strong evidence suggests that efforts to improve school climate or promote social and emotional learning are most impactful when

they are schoolwide or districtwide and involve all stakeholders. When these programs are implemented with consistency across a district, all students experience significant improvements in academic and victimization outcomes, along with a reduction in discrepancies in academic achievement and discipline among students of color, students with lower socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities.³¹

Restorative justice techniques and comprehensive threat-assessment teams are a promising alternative to punitive, zero-tolerance policies when these programs are part of the comprehensive safety plan for a school or district.³² Restorative justice practices focus on improving the overall culture and climate of the school through engaging in conflict resolution and problem solving; developing and nurturing positive relationships in the school environment; reinforcing positive communication strategies; encouraging all students to be actively involved in their school; and promoting, teaching, and reinforcing respect for one another.³³ Restorative practices, when clearly structured and used

schoolwide, can effectively disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.³⁴

Another effective alternative to zero-tolerance policies is comprehensive threat assessment.³⁵ Teams of trained school professionals use a step-by-step procedure to gather information and assess threats as either transient (not serious or intentional) or substantive (clear intent to carry out the threat). Appropriate interventions and supports are then instituted based on the needs of the student who made the threat and the safety needs of other students.³⁶ When threat assessment is implemented on a districtwide basis, multiple studies³⁷ have shown lower suspension rates across all racial and ethnic groups, a more positive school climate, fewer instances of bullying and violence, and increases in teachers feeling safe; one study found a 79 percent decrease in bullying.³⁸

Many schools have started to include positive social and emotional learning and climate measures but have not removed preexisting punitive approaches. The simultaneous use of punitive and positive approaches to safety in the same school or district can lead to confusion about student discipline and send inconsistent messages to students about behaviors and consequences. Rather than funding competing programs or policies with conflicting messages, there is a need to develop a unified whole-school approach to safety.³⁹ It is critical that school board members, superintendents, administrators, and teachers have access to research and training, both at the pre-service level and through professional development, on the devastating impact exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices can have on certain groups of students.⁴⁰ Adding social and emotional learning or a program focused on improving climate to a school or district while still utilizing policing or punitive discipline does not make sense, is confusing, and is not data driven. Yet many districts opt for both approaches as a form of political compromise without consideration of the mixed message this creates for the entire school community.

Key Components of an “Optimal” Vision of School Safety

The National Association of School Psychologists,⁴¹ in collaboration with NASRO and several other professional organizations, introduced recommendations that would allow districts to create and maintain comprehensive, research-based school safety policies. These recommendations include flexible and sustainable





funding streams that allow schools to address their most pressing safety needs by promoting school-community partnerships, multi-tiered support systems, inter- and intra-agency collaborations, and the use of evidence-based standards.⁴² Partnerships, assessment, and sustainability are critical to the success of any school safety program.

From a policy standpoint, funding, flexibility, incentives, and infrastructure to promote collaborations between universities and local decision-makers would make it more viable for districts to use data from a wide range of stakeholders to address their most pressing school safety needs. These partnerships should be integrated into the curricula of teacher-, social worker-, school psychologist-, principal-, and superintendent-preparation programs in universities. Such partnerships would set up a system for key school personnel to develop an understanding of how to create welcoming, safe, and supportive schools through procedures and structures for collecting and using local data and constituent voices to drive safety policies and procedures in every school. Creating and sustaining infrastructure in preparation programs to encourage local data-driven decisions also would create an opportunity to address issues of school safety in terms of race, gender, disability status, policing and social justice, and punitive safety policies in an academic setting. In addition, this would help university-based preparation programs build capacity to help school professionals understand data-driven, welcoming, and growth-oriented school safety policies and practices.⁴³ And local decision-makers need to be able to advocate for and have resources and funding available to support a whole-school approach to safety, which is more likely to have an impact and be sustained over time.⁴⁴

Avast literature indicates what works and what doesn't work in the field of school safety. Drawing from evidence-based programs and policies that have a positive impact on perceptions of safety in schools⁴⁵ will help policymakers focus on the best ways to address their community's unique school and community safety needs.⁴⁶ Federal policies and funding that encourage schools to examine strategies for removing zero-tolerance, policing, and punitive policies are vital for a seismic shift to occur in how we approach school safety. It is critical that local stakeholders and decision-makers have the support of university collaborators to collect and analyze their own data and make evidence-based decisions that are appropriate for their

district. Decades of research show that any "hardening" of security efforts needs to consider the potential impact on the climate of schools and the disproportionate impact punitive discipline can have on students of color and students with disabilities in terms of academic success and feelings of connection to school.⁴⁷

Federal and state policymakers need to direct legislation and funding away from school policing to more holistic, supportive, and nonpunitive practices. There are some promising signs, including the Every Student Succeeds Act allowing some flexibility for states to examine school climate and social-emotional variables to help meet the reporting requirements for school quality or student success.⁴⁸ Although not required, departments of education at the state level can choose to look at school climate and/or social and emotional learning through support from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments and/or apply for federal grant opportunities such as the School Climate Transformation Grant.⁴⁹ This is a promising step, but the funding for these initiatives is still miniscule when compared to the funding allocated to school-based policing. Incentivizing or requiring all states to evaluate school climate through providing infrastructure and financial support for collaborations between districts and researchers would likely increase the number of districts that include these variables in academic and safety-related discussions.

Years of research show us the value and effectiveness of inclusive and comprehensive safety programs and policies, prevention and investment in data-driven practices, and the creation of welcoming and supportive schools and districts.⁵⁰ Empowering districts to invest in long-term, research-based solutions can begin with national calls to examine punitive disciplinary policies in every district and to consider holistic and empowering models for safety. There are so much data to spark this conversation (e.g., Civil Rights Data Collection, Welcoming Empowerment Monitoring Approach). We now need structures and incentives for bringing decision-makers and researchers together over time for meaningful and goal-oriented interactions. Encouraging discussion and partnerships in the area of school safety is a key component of creating and sustaining holistic, evidence-based, financially viable, relevant, and data-driven school safety solutions that work for all. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor.

Restorative justice practices can disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.

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Footnote 6

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More: www.aft.org/whatkidsneed



Back-to-school time is a time for fresh starts: new teachers, new classrooms, maybe even a new school. It's a time to reconnect with old friends and make a few new ones. This year, back-to-school season feels especially important.

The past few years have been tough on kids, parents and teachers. We have confronted enormous challenges, including the pandemic and culture wars aimed at undermining public schools. Teachers are burned out. Parents are overwhelmed. And many kids are anxious. But as the new school year begins, we remain hopeful and excited that we can turn this around by focusing on what kids and communities need. It starts with getting kids what they need to thrive and live meaningful and fulfilling lives. We are looking forward to working with school staff, parents, administrators and the entire school community to make sure kids feel safe and welcomed in their public schools and have access to the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life. Instead of banning books and censoring curriculums, we will focus on providing a strong foundation in math, reading, science, critical thinking and practical life skills. We are renewing our commitment to be problem-solvers in finding solutions to staff shortages and school safety, in addressing student stress and trauma, and in fighting for school resources—all essential issues that must be tackled to make schools places where teachers want to teach, parents want to send their children, and students thrive.

Every element of the What Kids and Communities Need campaign has us working together for the sake of our kids. When we work together, we bring hope into our schools and our communities. We bring the promise of a brighter future. Come join us. We need every one of you.

Footnote 7

(n.d.). 'What Kids and Communities Need'. American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.aft.org/whatkidsneed>



Our public schools, our democracy, our freedoms and the well-being of our families and communities are all on the line. Amid growing extremism, so much is at stake. And while others attack our institutions and smear working people, America's educators, school and higher education staff, nurses, healthcare professionals and public employees are rolling up our sleeves to help our students, patients and communities build a better life for themselves and their families.

We are creating a stronger, more diverse union that provides a voice at work and in our democracy. Working with parents, allies and community partners, we're focusing on the basics people need to thrive: strong public schools, colleges and universities; accessible healthcare and a robust public health infrastructure; safe neighborhoods; and an economy that rewards work, not just wealth.

Our priorities in the upcoming months will focus on:

- Electing pro-worker, pro-community, pro-public education candidates up and down the ballot, so the people who represent us will share our values and help turn them into action.
- Supporting growth and diversity within our union and the broader labor movement, including strengthening collective bargaining so we can help build an economy that works for everyone.
- Defending our democracy and freedoms against unprecedented attacks and extremism, strengthening our civic institutions and protecting voting rights.
- Focusing on what our kids need, and what educators need to help kids succeed, especially in our public schools, colleges and universities.
- Demonstrating the value of belonging to a union and the important role unions play in communities.
- Engaging with our communities, deepening relationships and sustaining the coalitions necessary to build power so working people can have a better life.

Together, we can accomplish what would be impossible to do alone.

#WHATKIDSNEED

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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Press Release

In Address to Union, AFT's Weingarten Launches 'What Kids and Communities Need' Campaign, Celebrates Herculean Work of Educators, Healthcare Professionals and Public Employees

For Release:

Thursday, July 14, 2022

Contact:

Andrew Crook

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BOSTON—American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten [addressed more than 3,000 delegates today](#) at the union's 87th biennial convention, launching a landmark [What Kids and Communities Need campaign](#) and challenging the union's 1.7 million members to fight for freedom and democracy, uphold decency and dignity, and “knit the rich tapestry of our country together ... by rebuilding the essential foundations for a better life for all.”

In a wide-ranging State of the Union speech, Weingarten called out the politicization of schools and students. “Too many politicians ... stoke grievances rather than solve problems. They should be helping us help our kids and our communities, not making it harder with their culture wars and division,” she said. “Here’s how I see it: This moment can be viewed through the lens of fear or hope; despair or aspiration; self-interest or the greater

good. The members of this union definitively, defiantly and undeniably choose hope, aspiration and the greater good.”

She also honored and thanked the members for their heroic work. Healthcare members were on the frontlines of the pandemic, caring for patients, and the union secured \$3 million worth of personal protective equipment to keep them safe. In 2021, the union launched a \$5 million Back to School for All initiative serving 20 million students, helping safely reopen school buildings and supporting summer school enrichment programs, vaccination clinics and after-school reading support.

[What Kids and Communities Need](#) is a new effort to invest in public schools and communities and challenge elected officials on the federal, state and local levels to lead on education. The campaign centers around the essentials that kids need to recover and thrive, instead of politics and division: It focuses on commonsense initiatives like promoting reading and career and technical education, addressing the teacher shortage, investing in school-based enrichment programs that support student success, and encouraging candidates and elected leaders to get “back to basics” on public education.

The AFT is also urging parents and teachers to take action—by voting against politicians who are focused on things like book banning, culture wars and injecting division into our classrooms, rather than investing in mental health resources, literacy programs and efforts to reduce class sizes.

“While extremist politicians are trying to drive a wedge between parents and teachers by banning books, censoring curriculum and politicizing public education, we’re focused on investing in public schools and the essential knowledge and skills students need,” Weingarten said. “We’re focused on accelerating learning, not just catching up. We are fighting for the conditions students need to thrive, like state-of-the-art buildings, with good ventilation, smaller class sizes and mental health resources.”

The speech acknowledged that despite the remarkable work of AFT members nationwide, partisan extremists are hell-bent on “dividing Americans from one another, spreading lies and hate, and breaking all the democratic norms to enrich themselves and grab power.” In fact, [recent polling](#) shows that

Americans are fed up with politicians trying to politicize public schools and instead, want to prioritize teaching fundamental skills.

Weingarten encouraged delegates to remain focused on the essentials that help bring people together and build a better life: safety, including commonsense gun safety and protections for LGBTQIA+ students; partnerships between parents and educators; and the knowledge and skills kids need to thrive in today's world. And she reminded them that [88 percent of the public](#) believes educators and schools did all they could to help children during the pandemic.

Journey for Justice Alliance National Director Jitu Brown called the campaign an important step in the fight for educational equity for all students, saying: "It is way overdue to focus on equity, providing children what they need to reach their full potential. We cannot get there if we are not honest about our failures. We will not take our eyes off the prize; equity or else."

The campaign's specific commitments include:

- Awarding \$1.5 million in grants to parents and teachers through the AFT Powerful Partnerships Institute to support community engagement by helping parents and teachers find new ways to work together for the benefit of kids.

- Advocating for commonsense policies—improved climate, culture, conditions and compensation—to address the teacher shortage and teacher burnout through the AFT [Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force](#).

- Quadrupling the number of community schools over the next five years. Community schools help children and families get the healthcare, food assistance and other essentials they need in one place. The AFT and its affiliates already support more than 700 such schools nationwide.

- Promoting, supporting and extending critical career and technical education programs, and offering students reliable, accessible pathways to college and career opportunities. From cybersecurity to culinary arts, aviation and auto and transit tech to healthcare and green jobs—high-quality CTE programs can equip young people with the

knowledge and skills they need for career and life, and can serve as a catalyst for community partnerships like those in McDowell County, W.Va., and a new program in New Lexington, Ohio.

Encouraging kids to read more and improve their reading skills through a campaign to give away 1 million books so that they have books to read at home. The AFT has already distributed 612,686 books during [Reading Opens the World](#) events hosted by more than 100 local affiliates in 20 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Once the initiative reaches the 1 million mark, the AFT will commit to giving away 2 million books.

Red, Wine and Blue founder Katie Paris welcomed What Kids and Communities Need, saying: “Parent-teacher collaboration is key to student success, and we’re not about to let right-wing extremists tear us apart. We reject political division and embrace public education because we believe in the strength of our communities and the ideals of our country. Unlike the extreme politicians using our kids to distract and divide us, the parent-teacher team will always put our kids first.”

Weingarten told delegates they have a crucial role to play in these fraught moments. And she recognized that each member is in their important profession for a reason, heralding the AFT’s advocacy in repairing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, which has wiped \$8.1 billion of borrowers’ debt. She lauded the more than 100 AFT locals that joined the March for Our Lives in its National Day of Action for gun safety.

Weingarten urged members to organize and mobilize and to use the power of the union as a force for good in these perilous economic times. She reminded them of the broad popularity of labor unions, saying, “There is power in the union. Two-thirds of Americans support unions, the highest level since 1965. And nearly half of nonunion workers say they would join a union in their workplace if they had the chance. ... This is the moment for our movement. Unions built the middle class in America, and we can rebuild it through the transformative power of collective bargaining. The essence of unionism is simple yet powerful: Together we can accomplish things that would be impossible alone.”

She reminded members that with its roots in social justice, the union carries a unique responsibility to stand up for democracy, freedom and the sanctity of basic institutions, calling this moment in history a 10-alarm fire, and urging members to keep in mind that “everything is at risk: our freedoms, our democracy, our basic economic safety net.”

Weingarten ended with a particularly poignant call to action—to get out and vote, but also to acknowledge the basic humanity of all people, and to leave the convention feeling motivated, with a plan of action: “To stand up and be counted. To live our convictions. To engage, not withdraw.

“No matter how tired or how frustrated we are, we cannot be bystanders.”

The full text of the speech [can be found here](#).

##

The AFT represents 1.7 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.

Footnote 8

(2023, August 31). *PFT PRESIDENT JERRY JORDAN JOINS CEASEFIREPA, CONGRESSWOMAN MARY GAY SCANLON, AND ADVOCACY PARTNERS TO CALL FOR ACTION ON GUN LEGISLATION.* Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://pft.org/ceasefirepa>

CEASE FIRE PA CONFERENCE

City Hall

Thursday, August 31, 2023 | 3:00PM

Jerry Jordan, President, Philadelphia Federation of Teachers



Good afternoon. While I appreciate the opportunity to join so many valued partners today, I wish that events like these, where we once again call attention to the urgent need for legislative action around gun violence, were unnecessary.

- Again and again we gather, we rally, we march, we call out the deeply human toll of this devastating crisis, but *Republican leaders at both the state and federal levels rebuke our collective efforts to something so fundamental— **safety in our daily lives.***

In just a few short days, our students will enter their classrooms for the first time this school year— classrooms that educators have been working all week (and truthfully much of the summer) to prepare as they plan for the year ahead.

- This is a time filled with **hope**, with **anticipation**, and with the **dreams** and **aspirations** of the very future of this great city and nation—*our children.*
 - But once again, the year begins with the pervasive gun crisis that has wreaked havoc on so many of our young people's lives.
- Last school year alone, **thirty three of our students were killed** and **199 were shot**— these are numbers with names behind each of them—and these numbers and names should horrify us all.
- In just the last few days, we have seen the horrific racist murder of three individuals in **Jacksonville** and the murder of a **UNC professor.**

And as we begin the school year ahead, ***it is absolutely reprehensible that Congress would do anything but take the urgent action this moment demands.***

- There are legislative solutions that exist—and they are simple. I will defer to Congresswoman Scanlon to outline more about this legislation, but it should be no question that assault weapons have no place in our society.

Every day, guns rob our students and communities of so much.

-
- Children should be able to play outside,
 - Students and staff should be able to go to and from school – and work and learn in school buildings,
 - Neighbors should be able to come together for a block party,
 - and seniors should be able to take transit to go the doctor
 - ***without fear.***

But every day that Congress refuses to act, those fears are all too real. And the reality is far too deadly.

- Shame on every single elected official who refuses to act with the life and death urgency this crisis demands.

Thank you.

Footnote 9

Edmund, M. (2022). Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color. *Center for American Progress*.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gun-violence-disproportionately-and-overwhelmingly-hurts-communities-of-color/>



Gun Violence Disproportionately and Overwhelmingly Hurts Communities of Color

By Marissa Edmund June 30, 2022

Gun violence is a major problem in the United States as well as the key driver of the rise in violent crime across the nation.¹ Notably, gun violence has a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities and is highly concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods that have historically been underresourced and racially segregated. This is due to a combination of weak gun laws; systemic racial inequities, including unequal access to safe housing and adequate educational and employment opportunities; and a history of disinvestment in public infrastructure and services in the communities of color most affected by gun violence.

To reduce gun violence in these communities, U.S. policymakers must complement commonsense gun laws with investments in community-based violence intervention (CVI) initiatives and policies to address root causes of gun violence.

Gun homicides are on the rise in the United States, with young Black and brown people experiencing the highest rates

- Young Black Americans (ages 15 to 34) experience the highest rates of gun homicides across all demographics.²
- Black Americans are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide.³
- In 2020, 12,179 Black Americans were killed with guns, compared with 7,286 white Americans:⁴
 - While Black Americans made up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population that year, they were the victims in 61 percent of all gun homicides.⁵
- Black Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to be fatally shot by police.⁶
- 60 percent of gun deaths among Hispanic and Latino people are gun homicides.⁷
- Young Hispanic Americans (ages 15 to 29) represent 4 percent of the population yet are victims in 8 percent of all gun homicides.⁸

- In 2015, half of all gun homicides took place in just 127 cities across the country:
 - Gun homicides are concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods in these cities, which have historically been underresourced and racially segregated.⁹

Women of color are more likely than their white counterparts to be shot and killed with firearms

- Black women are twice as likely as white women to be fatally shot by an intimate partner.¹⁰
- American Indian and Alaska Native women are killed by intimate partners at a rate of 4.3 per 100,000, compared with 1.5 per 100,000 for white women.¹¹
- Guns are used in more than half of all homicides of women and are disproportionately used against Black women.¹²
- Even when firearms are not used to kill or injure, they are used to threaten women at alarming rates:
 - 4.5 million women alive today have reported being threatened with a firearm.¹³

Nonfatal gun violence has a lasting impact on individuals and communities

- For every gun homicide there are more than two nonfatal gun shootings.¹⁴
- From 2009 to 2018, the rate of gun-related assaults against Black and Hispanic Americans was 208.9 and 128.7, respectively, per 100,000, compared with 90.5 per 100,000 for white Americans.¹⁵
- Nine in 10 survivors of gun violence report experiencing trauma from their incident.¹⁶

Solutions: In addition to stronger, commonsense gun laws, policymakers must address systemic racial inequities.

- Policymakers should dismantle racist policies in policing, access to housing, education, and employment in order to address root causes of gun violence.¹⁷
- The country must invest in community violence intervention (CVI) programs:
 - CVIs focus on partnerships with those most affected by gun violence, government, and community stakeholders to bring community-specific solutions to gun violence.¹⁸
- Domestic abusers must be prevented from accessing firearms:
 - Gaps in legislation, such as the “dating partner loophole,” allow some abusers to access firearms even if they have been convicted of a domestic violence crime.¹⁹
 - In June 2022, President Joe Biden signed into law the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, a gun violence prevention package that included some, but not all, priorities to curb gun violence across the country. This package partially closed the dating partner loophole by prohibiting some dating partners convicted of domestic violence misdemeanors from owning or

purchasing a firearm. However, dating partners who are issued final protective orders can still possess firearms.²⁰

- Women in communities of color have unique needs and challenges that prevent them from both seeking help and accessing services. Solutions should, therefore, be driven by the needs of this group.

Conclusion

Communities of color disproportionately bear the brunt of gun violence in the United States. Commonsense gun laws as well as direct investments in the communities that are most affected by gun violence are crucial to ending gun violence and saving lives.

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Footnote 10

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Keeping Students Safe from Gun Violence

This article is adapted from How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe, by the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund in partnership with the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA). Together, as the report states, we are “working to ensure our approach to safer schools is driven by evidence, expertise, and care.” The full report, which is available in English (go.aft.org/9uh) and Spanish (go.aft.org/afl), includes detailed recommendations derived from high-quality research on helpful and harmful practices.

—EDITORS

For the last 20 years, students, educators, and parents have lived with the reality of increasingly frequent school shootings. The worst period for this violence has been in the 2021–22 school year, which saw nearly quadruple the average number of gunfire incidents since 2013. From an average of 49 incidents in every school year since 2013, this past school year saw 193 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of preschools and K–12 schools.

We need meaningful actions to keep our schools and surrounding communities safe, actions that address what we know about gun violence in America’s schools. It’s time for our leaders to adopt a multifaceted approach that provides school communities with the tools they need to prevent school-based gun violence. *How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe* focuses on approaches that have been proven most effective, such as keeping guns out of the hands of people who shouldn’t have them in the first place, fostering safe and trusting school environments, crisis intervention programs, access and lock upgrades, and trauma-informed emergency planning.

The report provides a proactive plan to prevent active shooter incidents and, more broadly, address gun violence in all its forms in America’s schools. Using what we know about school gun violence, our organizations have put together a plan that focuses on intervening before violence occurs. These solutions work hand in hand to foster safe and nurturing schools, to address violence at its earliest stages, and to block easy access to firearms by those who would do harm.

In order to effectively address violence in our schools, we must first acknowledge that school violence is, in part, a gun violence

problem. Many “comprehensive” school safety plans have been proposed over the last 20 years. Few have thoroughly addressed the issue common in all school shootings: easy access to guns for those at risk of committing harm. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA firmly believe that any effective school safety plan must involve an effort to enact gun safety policies that enable intervention before a prospective shooter can get their hands on a gun. These policies work hand in hand with school-based interventions to create safer school climates and to intervene before a student becomes a shooter.

When communities are focused on student well-being, schools can be places of care and compassion for the challenges kids face, while also creating the conditions for preventing school shootings and other violence. Given that most school-age shooters are current or former students and that they nearly always show warning signs, the locus of school violence prevention must necessarily center around schools. Therefore, our recommendations address both gun safety policies and school-based interventions.

Recommendations

Gun Safety Policies

1. Enact and Enforce Secure Firearm Storage Laws

The most common sources of guns used in school shootings and across all school gun violence incidents are the shooter’s home or the homes of friends or relatives. This is unsurprising, as nearly 4.6 million American children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked. Secure firearm storage laws require that people store firearms securely when they are not in their possession in order to prevent unauthorized access. Under these laws, generally, when a person accesses a firearm and does harm with it, the person who failed to securely store the firearm is responsible. Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia currently have some form of secure storage law. In addition, several cities have passed secure storage laws. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states enact and enforce secure firearm storage laws. In addition, policymakers should promote public awareness programs that can encourage secure gun storage and induce behavior change.



Any effective school safety plan must involve an effort to enact gun safety policies.

2. Pass Extreme Risk Laws

Extreme risk laws create a legal process by which law enforcement, family members, and, in some states, educators can petition a court to temporarily prevent a person from having access to firearms when there is evidence that they are at serious risk of harming themselves or others, giving them the time they need to get help. Extreme risk protection orders, sometimes also called red flag orders or gun violence restraining orders, can be issued only after a legal determination is made that a person poses a serious threat to themselves or others. They also contain strong due process protections to ensure that a person’s rights are balanced with public safety.

Because extreme risk laws are a proven tool with strong due process protections, they enjoy strong bipartisan support. Nineteen states and DC now have extreme risk laws on the books. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that these

states train law enforcement on the availability and use of these laws and that public awareness campaigns help to make knowledge of this option widely known. School officials also need to know that this tool is available to them as part of a comprehensive intervention with a student who is at serious risk to themselves or others.

Targeted gun safety policies and school-based interventions can address violence before it occurs.

3. Raise the Age to Purchase Semi-Automatic Firearms

Despite the evidence that most active shooters are school-age and have a connection to the school, few states have stepped in to close gaps that allow minors to legally purchase high-powered firearms. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA believe states and the federal government should raise the minimum age to purchase or possess handguns and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns to 21 in order to prevent school-age shooters from easily obtaining firearms. Under federal law, in order to purchase a handgun from a licensed gun dealer, a person must be 21. Yet to purchase that same handgun in an unlicensed sale (online or from a private individual), or to purchase a rifle or shotgun from a licensed dealer, a person only has to be 18. Only a few states have acted to close these gaps. Minimum-age laws can work in tandem with secure storage and extreme risk laws to cut off an easy way for shooters to obtain firearms.

4. Require Background Checks on All Gun Sales

Background checks are proven to reduce gun violence. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia already require a background check on all handgun sales. State laws requiring background checks for all handgun sales—by point-of-sale check and/or permit—are associated with lower firearm homicide rates, lower firearm suicide rates, and lower firearm trafficking.

Current federal law requires that background checks be conducted whenever a person attempts to purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer, to ensure that the prospective buyer is not legally prohibited from possessing guns. For example, when a person becomes subject to an extreme risk protection order, that record is entered into the federal background check database, and a background check at the point of sale prevents that person from buying a firearm at a gun store. However, current federal law does not require background checks on sales between unlicensed parties, including those at gun shows or online. As such, people with dangerous histories can easily circumvent the background check system. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states and the federal government act to pass laws that require background checks on all gun sales so that potential shooters cannot easily purchase firearms.

School-Based Interventions

5. Foster a Safe and Trusting School Climate

Supportive and trusting school environments are the strongest way to prevent school violence. One means of creating safe schools is to support them to become “community schools” that work with local partners to provide valuable services that help uplift the entire community. They not only become centers of education but fulfill a broader purpose of contributing to stable, healthy, and safe neighborhoods.

Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that schools utilize district, state, and federal funding to help schools partner with community members to move beyond the normal confines of a school, particularly in communities that experience high rates of gun violence. In schools facing high levels of violence in and outside of the school building, a community school might fund programs such as creating safe passages to and from school, granting alternatives to out-of-school suspensions that offer meaningful educational opportunities for students, providing family counseling, increasing access to mentoring both in and outside of school, and incorporating restorative justice into discipline policies. Significant resources must also be provided to assist students impacted by gun violence. Educators see that the trauma and anxiety that gun violence creates does not simply vanish. Students carry this trauma and fear with them inside and outside the classroom. All levels of government must invest resources to ensure that



every school has the appropriate number of mental health professionals on staff and that other mental health support programs are in place.

6. Build a Culture of Secure Gun Storage

In addition to enacting secure storage laws, policymakers and educators should encourage a culture of secure gun storage by increasing awareness of secure storage practices. Governors, federal and state departments of health and education, legislatures, nonprofit organizations, and local officials should also work together to develop and fund programs that increase awareness of the need to store firearms securely. Schools should distribute information to parents about the importance of secure storage. Thus far, school districts comprising nearly three million students have taken this vital action. Encouraging secure storage practices can make an enormous difference in reducing gun violence in school communities and would address the most common source of firearms used in school gun violence incidents.

7. Create Trauma-Informed Crisis Intervention Practices in Schools

The most important thing that schools can do to prevent active shooter incidents—and gun violence overall—is to intervene before a person commits an act of violence. To do this in a manner that serves students and protects the community, Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that schools, concurrent with other community partners, create trauma-informed crisis intervention practices involving the convening of a multidisciplinary team that responds when a student shows they may be in crisis. These teams receive information about a student



in crisis, evaluate the situation, and design interventions to prevent violence and provide appropriate treatment, support, and resources. State legislatures should also make funding available for schools to invest in personnel training and the mental healthcare resources needed to promote the restorative justice and de-escalation practices that trauma-informed crisis intervention requires. Based on what we know about school violence, it is critical to respond to many forms of student crises, such as

housing instability or substance abuse, not only threats of violence.

Most students facing crises will never commit an act of violence and must not be treated like criminals. Our recommended practice is the opposite of “zero tolerance” and is not based on a punitive or criminal justice approach and should not rely on exclusionary discipline as a means of intervention. A school needs to be a trusted place where students feel safe to share when they or someone else is in crisis, knowing that it will lead to help and support rather than punishment or prison. Any crisis intervention program must be paired with a rigorous assessment of efficacy and collateral harms to prevent disproportionate or unwarranted interventions. Any decision that leads to punitive action or law enforcement engagement requires thorough review by school district leaders, as these instances need to be the rare exception to a healthy program based on supportive intervention.

8. Implement Access Control Measures and Door Locks

The most effective physical security measures—the ones on which most experts agree—are access control measures that keep shooters out of schools in the first place. As a secondary measure, internal door locks, which enable teachers to lock doors from the inside, can work to deter active shooters who are able to access the school, protecting students and allowing law enforcement time to neutralize any potential threat. Preventing unauthorized access to schools through fencing, single access points, and simply ensuring that doors are locked can keep shooters out of schools. State legislatures should provide

funding for access control measures for schools to ensure that would-be shooters cannot have easy access.

9. Initiate Trauma-Informed Emergency Planning

Security experts agree that school personnel need to have an effective emergency plan in place to respond quickly to and neutralize any threat. Recommendations for effective planning include efforts to ensure that schools work with law enforcement and first responders to provide information about the school’s layout and security measures, that staff and law enforcement work together to ensure that they can identify the nature of a threat, and that schools make a detailed plan for their lockdown and evacuation procedures. Emergency procedures must be trauma-informed, meaning that their design should be buttressed by trigger warnings and access to mental health counseling and should never simulate an active shooter event. Trauma-informed emergency planning requires that the staff involved have tools to change emergency and evacuation planning in real time, should any activities prove harmful to anyone participating.

Supportive, trusting school environments are the strongest way to prevent school violence.

10. Avoid Practices That Can Cause Harm and Traumatize Students

Research shows that three practices—arming teachers, shooter drills involving students, and law enforcement in schools—are ineffective in preventing school gun violence or protecting the school community when shootings do occur, while introducing new risks and causing harm to students and school communities. We share the desire to respond to unthinkable tragedy with strong solutions. But as the report details, arming teachers is an ineffective and risky approach that does not stop gun violence in our schools. A wealth of research demonstrates that

allowing teachers to carry guns in schools increases the everyday risks to students. Similarly, frequent school shooter drills involving students, particularly those that simulate a real shooting, are having measurable impacts on the stress and anxiety levels of students, parents, and educators alike. Finally, the traditional model of law enforcement working in schools has not been shown to reduce school shootings or gun incidents, but the presence of law enforcement has played a heavy role in criminalizing students, particularly students of color, and can have a negative impact on learning outcomes for all students. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA urge our leaders to instead adopt solutions that are proven to address what we know about school gun violence.

Using the comprehensive plan outlined in *How to Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe*, policymakers and school communities can work together to prevent active shooter incidents—and gun violence more broadly—in their classrooms. These solutions form a thorough strategy by providing points of intervention at each level of a shooter’s escalation to violence and by creating a system where people with dangerous histories cannot easily access guns. Targeted gun violence prevention policies are designed to intervene when a shooter is intent on getting their hands on a gun. School-based strategies work to provide holistic support for students and intervene in situations where warning signs are showing a student in crisis. Finally, the planning and security strategies present a last opportunity for intervention and ensure that a school is prepared to quickly respond to and neutralize any threat. □

For more on preventing school shootings, along with extensive endnotes, see go.aft.org/9uh.



Footnote 11

(n.d.). *The Children of Philadelphia Have Been Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis*. Senator Hughes. Retrieved September 10, 2023, from <https://www.senatorhughes.com/the-children-of-philadelphia-have-been-attending-toxic-schools-for-years-this-is-a-national-crisis/>



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<https://www.senatorhughes.com/the-children-of-philadelphia-have-been-attending-toxic-schools-for-years-this-is-a-national-crisis/>

Attending Toxic Schools for Years. This Is a National Crisis

The children of Philadelphia are in dire need of our help. They are at the mercy of a man-made, ticking time bomb that is nearly inescapable. I'm talking about toxic schools. Conditions in Philadelphia schools have **needed a remedy for many years**. Lead, asbestos, mold and other toxins are far too common in our aging school infrastructure, but folks have been vigilantly fighting for justice, proposing the necessary resources and means to make a difference.

One such school building, Cassidy Elementary, remains at the center of the conversation about toxic schools, largely due to the efforts of a heroic student, **Chelsea Mungo**.

Following my visit to Cassidy with other advocates in 2016, Chelsea and nearly three dozen of her schoolmates wrote various legislators, asking for change in their school. A fourth-grade student at the time, Chelsea wrote that going to school felt like going to prison. She also questioned why her skin color affected her ability to receive a quality education in a clean, safe facility.

The fight for environmental justice regained national attention a few years ago with the tragedy of the water in Flint, Mich. We know the story of Flint well. The fact that it remains unresolved and that Flint residents are still drinking bottled water is criminal and a national embarrassment.

As **W. Kamau Bell** said in the most recent episode of the **United Shades of America** on CNN: “This isn’t just a Philadelphia problem, it’s an America problem.”

This is a national crisis. Public school buildings in black, brown and poor communities are filled with lead paint, which was outlawed in 1978 because of its poisonous content. The American Society of Civil Engineers’ Infrastructure Report Card gives the nation’s 100,000 public school buildings a D-plus grade for their conditions.

Our children are overwhelmed by these toxic school buildings that state law mandates they attend. I say mandate because most states have a minimum requirement of the number of days children are to attend school. In Pennsylvania, it’s 180 days. Therefore, our students are required to attend school in toxic buildings, usually filled with lead, asbestos, or mold, and which are often rodent infested.

Think about the cruelty of that. The absurdity of that. The immorality of that.

After a year of raising hell with the spirit of Chelsea’s letter in hand, **I announced \$15.7 million in funding for an immediate cleanup and remediation in city schools**, alongside Gov. Tom Wolf and Mayor Jim Kenney. That money paid for 59 projects at city schools and improved conditions for about 29,000 students. Cassidy, which has been **referred to as the district’s worst building, will be demolished** and a new building is set to open in 2021.

These victories have made a difference, but we’re not stopping there. Philadelphia schools still need more than \$4.5 billion in structural repairs to improve the conditions for every single student mandated to attend toxic schools.

Philadelphia is a city with **a lead problem worse than the infamous issues in Flint**, so it is important we address lead and other toxic conditions in our schools and communities immediately. I have been working with the **Fund Our Facilities Coalition** to address the issues in Philadelphia schools. We welcome anyone who wants to participate and advocate on behalf of our children.

As I said when Chelsea stepped on the floor of the Pennsylvania Senate in June 2017: “We will not let them down.”