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WHAT KIDS AND COMMUNITIES NEED

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Reclaiming Our Future

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

WHY IS THERE such a drastic teacher shortage right now? I get that question a lot. My answer is, Why *wouldn't* there be?

Teaching has *always* been a tough job: inadequate respect, pay, and conditions—and educators always doing more with less. *But then everything got much, much tougher* because of COVID-19. And also because of the relentless, politicized war being waged on teachers and on public education. It's the perfect storm.

The members of this union defiantly choose hope.

Look at the fear—the chill—many of you face at work, especially in states like Florida and Texas. If a student asks you about the motives of the shooter at Tops supermarket in Buffalo, you think twice about how to answer. If a student confides that they might be gay, you fear that the safe and welcoming environment you've created will be misconstrued as “indoctrinating” them. And in New Hampshire or

Virginia, any response could get a bounty on your head or a report to the tip line.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis claims that elementary school faculty are “instructed to tell” kids to change the gender they were assigned at birth. Donald Trump said that we must “liberate” children “from the captivity of these Marxist teachers.”

Just know the AFT has your back. We will defend anyone who is simply trying to teach and act in the best interests of children. But let's be very clear. These attacks are intentional. They are part of a coordinated campaign to destabilize and privatize public education. In 1955—the year after the *Brown v. Board* decision—economist Milton Friedman began advocating for “educational freedom,” allowing white families to avoid integration by using vouchers for private schools. In the ensuing decades, high-stakes standardized tests were weaponized against public schools, and “reform” programs imposed top-down accountability without concern for kids' needs.

Betsy DeVos and other extremists have continued the campaign, using harmless-sounding terms like “school choice” and “parental rights” to thinly veil their goal: to destroy public education and replace it with an unregulated voucher system that would increase economic and racial segregation. Right-wing activist Christopher Rufo says openly that, to achieve this

aim, they must be “ruthless and brutal” and “operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.” As Stand for Children CEO Jonah Edelman and I described in our April 2022 *TIME* op-ed, politicians following Rufo's playbook are banning books, dehumanizing LGBTQIA+ students, and demanding teachers remain neutral on—or worse, teach both sides of—Nazism, slavery, lynching, and other historical atrocities.

The extremists understand that public schools unify Americans. They also see, as polling consistently shows, that Americans value educators and want to invest in their public schools. So to achieve their political goals, they sow distrust, undermine educators and public schools, and try to drive a wedge between teachers and parents.

It's brutal to be in the crosshairs of these attacks, particularly on top of everything else, like wondering if you will ever be able to pay back your student loans or have a small enough class size to meet students' needs. No wonder about one-third of teachers said they were likely to leave their job by the end of the 2021–22 school year (according to a RAND Corporation survey). No wonder teacher preparation enrollment is dropping, or that the AFT's own polling shows that 75 percent of our teacher members would not recommend teaching to young people today.

Cause for Hope: Parents and the Public Are with Us

Our members are the antidote to this. They make a difference in the lives of children, families, and communities. I saw that big time at this summer's AFT convention. 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. And families are with us.



- **American parents support their public schools.** In a recent NPR/Ipsos poll, 88 percent of parents said they think teachers are doing the best they can. In a January 2022 national survey by Hart Research Associates and Lake Research Partners, 78 percent of parents expressed satisfaction with their children’s schools’ handling of the pandemic. And in a May 2022 poll of likely voters in battleground states by Hart, voters showed that they get the challenges educators face. They identified the top three problems facing schools as politicization of education, shortages of teachers and staff, and a lack of support and respect for teachers.
- **Americans share educators’ priorities.** In that May Hart poll, participants also identified the most important goals schools should focus on. As you see in the chart above, they want schools’ core mission to be developing fundamental academic and life skills. That is what our “What Kids and Communities Need” campaign is about—investing in the essential knowledge and skills students need; focusing on reading; creating more community schools and career and technical education programs (which you can read about on page 6); partnering with parents; and fighting for the climate, culture, conditions, and compensation required for educators to do and stay in their jobs (learn more about how we’re addressing the educator shortage on page 3).

A Time to Act

As author Grace Paley said, “The only recognizable feature of hope is action.” We must act—to protect our public schools and to defend our democracy and our freedoms. We have to organize, mobilize, and get out the vote. And organizing includes growing. On June 18, the American Association of University Professors voted to affiliate with the AFT, bringing together more than 300,000 higher education faculty to create the largest such alliance in the country. Welcome to the AFT family!

This is a critical time to join forces because everything is at risk: our freedoms, our democracy, our schools, our basic economic safety net. Anti-democ-



racy forces worked overtime before the 2020 election to limit voting rights. Then, after Americans voted in record numbers, Trump and his allies went to shocking lengths to prevent the peaceful transfer of power. Our democracy held, but it is in danger (as the articles on pages 28 and 32 explain).

And so is our economic safety net. Look at the plan released by Senator Rick Scott, chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, to sunset every federal law every five years. What would that mean for Medicare and Social Security? Look at the decisions handed down by the extremist majority on the Supreme Court in the last few months. They ignored long-standing legal precedents and eviscerated the separation of church and state, denied the rights of states to protect children and families from gun violence, limited the EPA’s ability to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, and overturned *Roe v. Wade* (which you can read about on page 42).

We must vote in November as if our lives depend upon it—because they do. If we get out the vote, we will win. Look at all we have accomplished under President Biden—the most pro-working family, pro-labor president in our history—with Democrats in control of Congress, and imagine how much more we could do by retaining the House and gaining a couple more senators.

- The American Rescue Plan, a once-in-a-generation investment that enabled Americans to pull through the pandemic together and ensured that schools had the resources to safely reopen.
- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which is a long-term investment in our infrastructure, climate,



and competitiveness that creates good union jobs.

- The CHIPS and Science Act, a transformational bill to strengthen the country’s technology infrastructure, increase national security, and promote vital research programs while investing in workforce development, revitalizing rural communities, creating high-paying union jobs, and expanding access to STEM education.
- The Inflation Reduction Act, which will slash prices for workers and families—including drug, healthcare, and energy costs—and, as Senator Chuck Schumer said, “kick-start the era of affordable clean energy in America.”

On top of these wins, the US Department of Education under Biden has made the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program a priority (see the back cover for details). And, while not enough, federal commonsense gun safety legislation passed—the first in three decades.

So as Senator Elizabeth Warren urged us to do when she spoke at our convention, let’s stay in the fight. Let’s choose hope. That’s how we’ll reclaim our future. □



WHAT KIDS AND COMMUNITIES NEED

We're getting back to the basics—advocating for the conditions teachers need to do their jobs and focusing on what matters most for student success—and looking ahead to strengthen our democracy.

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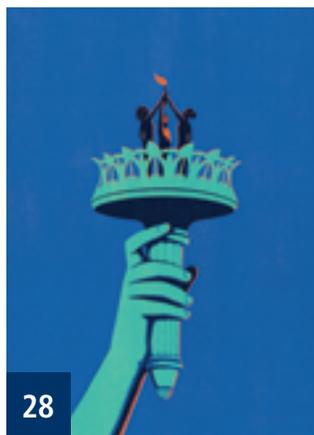
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aft.org/ae/fall2022/sml

Union Highlights: Defending Our Priorities

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OUR MISSION

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

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Climate, Culture, Conditions, and Compensation

How to Address the Staffing Crisis and Meet Kids' Needs

Educating the next generation has always been one of America's highest priorities. At the same time, educators have never been treated in a way that matched the importance of education. Underpaid, under-respected, often with challenging conditions. Yet those who become educators and stay in education do so because of a burning desire to make a difference in the lives of children. That is what sustains the thousands of AFT teachers and school staff I meet and talk with each year.

Unfortunately, the pandemic, combined with the political culture wars, has made the last two years the toughest in modern times for educators. And then, on top of all of that, the unthinkable happened again, when gun violence took the lives of 19 students and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas. These crises are piling on top of the tough conditions that teachers and school staff have been struggling with for years. For a long time, teachers and school staff have lacked the climate, culture, conditions, and compensation to do their jobs.

Every child deserves to have qualified, caring teachers and staff—people who are excited to work with them every day and dedicated to giving them a rich, joyful education. You can't have a strong democracy and a strong economy without an engaged, informed, well-educated citizenship. Public school staff and educators are literally the builders of democracy.

Plus, our students really need their teachers and school staff around them right now. They need that stability. Children and their families are struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic caused untold grief, trauma, and economic hardship to many Americans. At a time when teachers and school staff are so vital in helping our children and communities recover and heal, untenable conditions are driving educators away.

That is why the AFT brought together one of the most important task forces we have ever convened in our history: the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. We need to listen to the people who work in schools every day, the people who are closest to the issues that are driving teacher and school staff shortages. They can guide us to solutions.

Our task force brought together 25 leaders from AFT state and local unions across the country. They worked intensively with leading researchers in the field; they surveyed our membership and sought frontline input from many of AFT's 1.7 million members.

What teachers and school staff are saying is that if conditions change, they will stay. That's because every day, they see it as their mission to come to work and nurture, love, teach, and protect our kids.



So, the AFT task force thought big and bold. It envisioned our schools to be student-centered and educator-led where talented, dedicated people want to come and stay in education. They confronted, rather than complained about, the challenges facing our schools—challenges that have gone unresolved for so long and have negatively impacted teaching and learning, particularly for communities of color and communities that have been long shortchanged. The recommendations proposed here understand the need to rewrite the many years of poor policy and decision-making that have led to this point and to reflect the realities being faced by students, teachers, and staff each day. Only then will our nation have schools where teachers want to teach, students want to learn, and parents want to send their children.

—AFT President Randi Weingarten

By the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses, guidance counselors, teachers, support staff, and bus drivers were facing disrespect and de-professionalization, stress and lack of support, low pay relative to other professions, and daunting workloads. Many educators are leaving long before they had planned, and the number of people entering the profession has plummeted. These shortages and the conditions con-



This article provides excerpts of *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? What America Must Do to Attract and Retain the Educators and School Staff Our Students Need* by the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. For the full report—which contains dozens of bold yet practical actions that federal, state, and local governments; school districts; and unions should take to create student-centered, educator-led schools—see go.aft.org/rfq.

PHOTOS: ALLISON SHELLEY FOR EDUIMAGES

tributing to them imperil the future of public education, the quality of the education our children receive, and our democracy itself. The AFT is not just studying the problem; we have laid forth in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?* specific remedies necessary to address this crisis.

The educator shortage is a challenge in both recruitment and retention. Students see the struggles of educators, hear all the negative attacks, and learn about the lack of political and financial support teachers and schools receive. Students also see educators choose other professions where they know they might get more respect, higher pay, better working conditions, and increased opportunities for career growth.

Those same factors cause teachers and other school staff to find other careers. Losing so much expertise has an enormous negative impact on students' education and equity of learning opportunity. The financial consequences are also steep—more than \$2 billion annually.



A majority of states report teacher shortages in math, science, career and technical education, special education, and bilingual education. Yet another area of shortage is in the diversity of educators. The teaching workforce is overwhelmingly white and growing less representative of the students they teach, a majority of whom are now students of color. We know that all students benefit from a diverse workforce. The opportunity to learn from different perspectives is valuable to all, and in particular, students of color benefit from having teachers with shared backgrounds and cultures. However, we do not do enough to attract and retain a diverse workforce of teachers and educators.

This is a crisis, and we cannot continue to let policymakers ignore it. Developing creative ways to recruit the best candidates, and then keeping these teachers and other personnel in our schools, must be a priority for our union, for superintendents and school boards, and for policymakers at all levels.

We need to reignite the passion that many have for entering the education profession, not extinguish it. We must change how teachers and other school professionals are treated and supported. Schools need to be places where adults and children alike can thrive and grow, where there are relationships built on trust and respect, and where partnerships exist among students, educators, families, and communities. Teachers and support staff need to be compensated adequately for the work they do and on par with other similarly educated professionals. Working conditions must be improved to make schools safe and welcoming places for

everyone, where students and educators alike can feel successful. Teachers need career pathways that allow them to grow within their profession without having to leave the classroom. Paraprofessionals need the opportunity to develop their careers through pathways into teaching. Educators need opportunities to connect with parents and families to build relationships to support each other for the benefit of all children.

Vision for a New Era of Schooling

Schools are the centers of neighborhoods and communities, and it is detrimental to our students and staff when top-down decisions on schools are made without consideration of or by the people in the schools. In the last century, people who work in schools have changed, those who are educated in schools have changed, and the desired outcomes of schooling have changed. Yet, we have done very little to change the structure of schools on a wide scale. School structures in all US schools must move from outdated factory models and become modern and professional organizations. Schools, in partnership with all stakeholders, must be the learning and cultural centers of their communities.

Student-Centered Schooling

Schools first and foremost are for student learning, and we must look at how to restructure schools and the school day in a way that focuses on students rather than on accountability, money, or meeting arbitrary standards set by people who have never worked with children. Schools need to be places where all students can go to learn, grow, and be respected.

Teachers must be able to teach students honest history so that all students feel valued and schools are places of acceptance and tolerance. Teachers should be able to assess their students in a more holistic way, such as through project-based learning, rather than through standardized tests. Counselors, nurses, social workers, and other support staff need to be included in teams that work on interventions or other aspects of student learning. All school staff need supports and trust to develop positive relationships with students and families.



Educational equity is a challenge in a locally funded schooling system. Some students need more or different supports to overcome the additional challenges they face in their lives, and reforms must shift the distribution of resources and educators to ensure that all school systems are rooted in meeting the needs of all students.

Educator-Led Schooling

We cannot put a bandage on the teacher and school staff shortage by cutting corners and lowering the bar for entry. We must simultaneously raise entry standards, improve the way we treat workers, and improve recruitment and retention issues. To do this, we must give educators a larger voice in their work and allow them to have oversight of their profession just like lawyers and doctors. Research indicates that when teachers have more control over their social and instructional roles, there is less turnover. And less teacher turnover is good for students.

Educators are dissatisfied with poor working and learning conditions, but also with the de-professionalization that has stripped them of their freedom to teach. Teachers are not given the time or the trust to do what they need to do for their students. The outdated obsession with standardized testing created a broken system where teachers are overwhelmed with test preparation and collecting and reporting on data that do not help their students.

All children deserve to have people in their schools who are well-trained, well-supported, and excited to work with them every day. We need an overhaul in all aspects of the profession to ensure people want to enter and *stay* in school careers. The future of public education depends on it; the future of our democracy depends on it.

The charge of the task force was simple, but implementation of the recommendations will be far from easy. *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?* represents a road map of solutions and actions stakeholders must take to reverse the trajectory of working and learning in America's schools. It is a comprehensive approach to ensuring all schools are places where teachers want to teach, students want to learn, and parents want to send their children.

The challenges and recommendations identified in this report reflect the experience and expertise of the task force, made up of AFT state and local leaders representing more than 500,000 members; AFT members directly consulted through listening sessions in locals across the country and a nationally representative survey; and top education researchers who provided data and analysis. The task force debated numerous recommendations and possible steps needed to address the problems and assigned implementation strategies to all levels of government and to unions themselves.

This report stands as recognition that teacher and school staff shortages have been caused by a long-term disinvestment in schools, and there is not one simple solution to restructuring the school system to reflect the needs of its workers and learners. It stands as an acknowledgment that all students, and all educators and staff, have unique needs. As we move into the new school year, and throughout the next few years, the AFT will continue to use this report and its action steps to proactively improve the working and learning conditions for everyone in our schools. □

Recommendations

From creating career pathways and focusing on well-being to increasing wages and lowering class sizes, Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? offers more than 20 ambitious yet doable recommendations that will:

- Revitalize the educator and school staff pipeline
- Restructure schools to create positive working and learning conditions for all
- Provide sustainable and commensurate compensation and benefits
- Utilize the collective voice and strength of our union to impact change at all levels

To catalyze action, the report follows each group of recommendations with specific implementation strategies for federal, state, and local governments; school boards; and unions. While almost all of the strategies need to be acted on in concert—such as reducing standardized testing, entering education professions debt free, and providing enough time for planning—we believe educators should take leading roles and so we highlight a handful of the key actions for unions.

—EDITORS

A Sample of the Recommendations for Unions

Work collaboratively with all stakeholders

Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels—and with leaders and members—to advocate for best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working; stakeholders should use creative ways to address obstacles.

Negotiate mentoring programs

Negotiate with districts to establish effective mentoring programs. This includes a clearly defined peer mentor/coach selection and review process, training for peer mentors/coaches, timelines and structures for the mentoring process, and oversight of intervention programs.

Advocate for community schools and wellness programs

Leverage their power to advocate for and ensure the formation and implementation of wellness programs, site-based response teams, and community schools, and ensure that these strategies meet the needs of all education stakeholders and are carried out with fidelity.

Convene a paperwork reduction committee

Convene a paperwork reduction committee to catalog the amount of data and reports that the union's members are required to submit. This catalog will help unions advocate for reducing the amount of paperwork members are required to complete.

Negotiate for career pathways

These pathways should include appropriate paid time off and financial support to allow existing staff to advance their careers (for example, education-related sabbaticals/partnership programs with local colleges in which the district pays tuition costs, etc.).

Continue collective bargaining and expand the issues we support

Leverage the power of collective bargaining to ensure the prosperity of their members, the success of their students as well as the collective good of the community. Modern collective bargaining is no longer only about bread-and-butter issues, but places the needs of students and the community at the center of its work.

PEORIA'S CTE RENAISSANCE

By Michael Brix

I have been a skilled trades worker for almost half of my life, but I never thought about teaching my craft to students. Then in May 2014, an opportunity to use my experience to help change students' lives practically landed in my lap. I haven't looked back since.

That spring, I was working at a Lowe's store in Peoria, Illinois, as a millwork salesperson when a colleague asked if I had ever thought about teaching a high school construction class. The principal of the local career tech center had left his card along with news that he was looking for someone with building and construction experience who could give students the kind of real-world, hands-on instruction they could not get by simply learning from a textbook.

I had plenty of experience. For 25 years I worked with Andersen Windows, first as part of a family-owned distributorship and then through my own corporation. I later branched out into building more generally at a local lumber yard before coming to Lowe's. But I had never taught before. I realized this was an opportunity to be the resource for students that I never had. I graduated from a rural high school in Illinois, and while most of my friends went to college, I knew that wasn't my path. But I had no counselor or teacher helping me find a career after high school or telling me about the many opportunities for students who want to start a career and make a great living.

Days after that principal left his card, I met with him and got a tour of Woodruff Career and Technical Center. Although the school had been open since 1937 as Woodruff High School, one of four Peoria high schools, it was closed in 2010 because of low enrollment and a lack of funding. A year later, it reopened with a new name as the hub for career and technical education (CTE) programs provided by the Peoria Public Schools (PPS) system for high school juniors and seniors. I saw the classrooms where students would learn skills for barbering, culinary arts, nursing, construction, and more. I listened as the principal explained that the goal of every CTE course is to expose students to careers that they might not know about otherwise so they can find something they're passionate about—and then give them the essential skills they need to succeed.

I loved it. I accepted the position right away and spent the summer getting my



A longtime construction industry professional and business owner, Michael Brix transitioned to career and technical education (CTE) in 2014. Since becoming a construction trades instructor at Woodruff Career and Technical Center in Peoria, Illinois, he has been central to Peoria's CTE renaissance. Currently, he teaches renewable energy and construction-focused work-based learning.

In 2015, the Peoria Federation of Teachers and the Greater Peoria Works campaign were awarded an AFT Innovation Fund grant supporting the Promising Pathways initiative to modernize CTE programs. The grant, which was augmented by funds from the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT), was part of the AFT's longstanding advocacy for greater national attention to CTE to engage more students with real-world training

and academic content that expand their career opportunities and reduce educational inequities.

The AFT/IFT funds were used to build out the infrastructure for a regional career pathways system and enhance partnerships between Peoria Public Schools (PPS), community employers, and the local community college to increase career opportunities for students. PPS also added career pathways coordinators to help employers provide robust mentoring and support for CTE students. In three years, Peoria's CTE programs saw significant enrollment growth and increased work-based learning and internship opportunities. The funding also helped PPS implement a career planning system that created more than a dozen new CTE programs and increased student completion of industry-recognized credentials in automotive, health, and information technology fields, among others.* Building on the strength of this work, the IFT and other unions successfully fought for state legislation in 2021 creating green energy jobs and solar-in-schools funding, with extensive CTE connections.

Here, Brix describes becoming a CTE instructor, growing the program through collaboration and relationship building, and some exciting opportunities ahead.

—EDITORS

Michael Brix is a career and technical education teacher with the Peoria Public Schools and a union representative with the Peoria Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 780). After completing high school, he attended culinary school and worked as a chef. Transitioning to construction, he focused on windows and doors and then expanded into home building and remodeling. Now, he brings this wealth of career experience to his third profession as an educator. He is an Occupational Safety and Health Administration-authorized trainer and has earned the associate credential from the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners.

*For more on the expansion of CTE in Peoria through the AFT Innovation Fund grant, visit go.aft.org/9aq.

provisional credentials to teach. And in late August 2014, I walked through Woodruff's doors to begin the fall semester as a first-year construction teacher.

I had no idea what I was doing.

The curriculum was one construction book and my industry knowledge. I quickly found that it's one thing to know the best ways to frame a wall or assemble and install a ceiling fan, but it's another thing to show a group of 16-year-olds how to do it. And while I had help learning administrative tasks like taking attendance and entering grades, I had no mentor or colleagues to show me how to manage a classroom or get students engaged in learning. There were probably a couple of years that I wasn't a very good teacher because I just did not know how to be one. Luckily, a few of my students realized that I was brand new and were very supportive of me as I found my footing. And at home, my wife sacrificed countless evenings (and still does) to help me by proofreading my communications with students, families, and employers; setting up field trips; and supporting all the other work of teaching that continues long after the school day ends.

I discovered that a lot of teaching is about establishing a foundation of trust and building good relationships. My students became more engaged and involved as I spent time getting to know them. They learned to trust that I know the field and that I'm invested in doing all I can to help them get good jobs.

Expanding CTE in the Peoria Region

Like regions around the globe,¹ Illinois faces a critical shortage of skilled workers in fields such as advanced manufacturing and industrial maintenance and technology. These jobs are vital for a community's economic competitiveness—and especially so in our region, where skilled worker shortages were forcing employers to relocate.² Through hands-on, project-based CTE programs and pathways, students can acquire the 21st-century skills needed to compete in the workforce and support themselves and their families after graduating from high school. Along the way, they can also earn important credentials or licenses to advance in their careers or to further their education.

Equipping students with employment skills that they can turn into a career with or without college study gives them choices. In Woodruff's cosmetology program, for example, students learn advanced STEM

curriculum and molecular chemistry through the lens of cosmetology topics. They can sit for their state board licensure when they graduate high school, which allows them to work in a salon or start their own business—or to make money while going to college. Students in the nursing program frequently go this route. Most of them go on to nursing school, but when they enroll, they are already licensed and working as certified nursing assistants, which helps them pay for their education.

If students choose to go directly into the workforce, there is plenty of work available in our region. Right now, the union trades in Peoria are booming. Our bridges are in need of repair, so construction workers are in high demand, and Caterpillar (a major manufacturer of construction and mining equipment) is a key regional employer. In addition, it is very easy to become a union carpenter after graduation—and the job has an outstanding pay scale. The three large hospitals and cancer research center in our area all need healthcare workers and maintenance workers, and multimillion-dollar buildings for research and healthcare are continuing to be built. Our students can make a great living here.

Woodruff students have two primary CTE avenues to develop skills they can use in the workforce: project-based learning and work-based learning programs. My first years in the CTE program were spent teaching a project-based construction class, which is geared toward students who want to learn to build but are not necessarily interested in an industry career. After learning basic power tool safety and how to read a tape measure, juniors work on progressively complex building projects: pencil sharpeners, step stools, sawhorses, and benches. The next year, they learn to build a playhouse or a deck, or work on other basic construction projects.

For students who are interested in becoming a carpenter, electrician, or plumber after high school, senior year is spent in a work-based learning program. In the first semester, they are in the classroom learning about the industry, the trades in Illinois, and the type of work available. In the second semester, students no longer come to class; they are sent to local job sites as interns to learn more about the work and see if the job is a good fit. In the best cases, after graduation the students continue working for the employer they interned with.

Focusing on Peoria Public School Students

When I started teaching, work-based learning classes were provided through Peoria Educational Region for Employment and Career Training (PERFECT), which oversees CTE programs for many schools in the greater Peoria area. Although three of these classes were held at Woodruff, enrollment was open to students from all over the region, including several small, rural districts. PPS wanted to be involved in work-based learning, so I was contracted out as a PERFECT teacher, based at Woodruff, to teach work-based construction. Only four of my 20 students were enrolled in PPS; the majority drove from five rural high schools to attend. Many rural schools had no construction class, for lack of funding or student interest—Woodruff was the only option if these students wanted to become trade workers.

CTE gives students **SKILLS** to compete in the workforce and support themselves after high school.

PERFECT has done incredible work in our region to share resources across districts and connect students with quality CTE programming and employment skills. But at the end-of-year dinner following my second year of teaching through PERFECT, my superintendent pulled me aside. She pointed out that despite being one of the largest districts, PPS was significantly underrepresented in the proportion of students taking work-based learning classes and gaining employment after graduation. She wanted me to find a way to change that.

I spent the next months doing outreach for work-based learning. I traveled between Peoria's three high schools seeking students with any interest in the construction industry and explaining what the class was about and how we could help them get jobs right after high school. I also met with all the counselors to explain the program. Our counselors are responsible for getting students enrolled in the class, and I was surprised to find that most had no idea that work-based construc-

tion was an option for their students. These conversations paid off as we began to add more PPS students to the class. Based on word-of-mouth advertising and counselor recommendations, PPS enrollment grew from 4 students to 50, and our total school enrollment grew as well.

Equipping students with skills that they can turn into a **CAREER** with or without college gives them choices.

By 2016, and due to grants provided by the AFT and the state, our district was able to offer work-based learning to Peoria students directly as part of our career pathways system, and I left PERFECT to go back to teaching just PPS students. The funding also allowed PPS to expand the program to better accommodate our students' needs. We brought on career pathways coordinators to help prepare students with general workplace skills and to develop relationships with area employers and create more job opportunities. We also brought on a grant writer to further expand our CTE pathways and program offerings.

The district's work-based construction program was very similar to the class I taught under PERFECT. Because PERFECT had to coordinate numerous work sites and communication for students throughout the region, it already had an established curriculum and processes for participating in work-based learning. One notable change we made was restricting enrollment to high school seniors. PERFECT's class had also been available for juniors, and it was a great experience for them—perhaps a little *too* great. Several students did so well in their second semester internship experiences that their employers mistook them for seniors and offered them full-time jobs at the end of the year. We decided that offering work-based learning classes only to seniors would reduce confusion for our employers and, more importantly, eliminate potential barriers to completing high school for our students.

Because most of our work-based learning students do not want to go on to college

after high school, we also redesigned the internship experience for seniors to ensure they have a clear pathway to employment and do not miss out on the certifications or credentials that could help them advance in their careers. After students complete coursework covering key safety information and building skills in the first semester of senior year, our career pathways coordinator places them in internships with area employers. From February until graduation in May, I visit my students in their real-world “classrooms” and see the great things they are learning and doing.

Our interns receive a training wage in addition to academic credit. This “learn and earn” opportunity helps us partner with more employers to offer training and mentoring and increases access for students who would not otherwise participate because they need part-time employment to help support themselves and/or their families.³ And after graduation, most become full-time employees at their internship sites or make connections that lead to a job elsewhere. Many students also become apprentices and receive more formal training through their employer or Illinois Central College (ICC), which is our local community college, to master their trade.

With internships, students can assess their fitness for a certain field based on a true understanding of the nature of the work. During and after their three-month field experience, we ask students to reflect: “Is the work what you thought it would be? What misconceptions did you have about this job?” Some students learn that they made a mistake or that they don't enjoy the work like they thought they would. And that's not a bad thing. We would rather know early on that it is not working out so we can guide students to jobs they truly enjoy. When they find that right fit and an internship leads to a full-time job—which is the case for 90 percent of our construction work-based learning students—we all celebrate. At year's end, in addition to our formal dinner, we host a signing day for all the students who secured jobs to recognize their hard work and give special thanks to their employers. It's a wonderful way to honor both our students who are entering the workforce and our partnering employers who are helping them start rewarding careers.

An overwhelming majority of students are still working with our employers long after their graduation. I credit this to the

great work we do to match students to the right location and employer based on their interests and to our relationships with the employers that provide our students with diverse job opportunities. Because I've been in the industry so long and teaching CTE for several years now, I've either worked with our local employers for years or I've gotten to know them through our community outreach. I usually know the person supervising the job site or meeting with my students, so I know their expectations and quirks and can prepare my students long beforehand.

Our success in matching students to paid internships and connecting them to great careers after graduation—not only in construction but across all CTE programs at Woodruff—has been one of the greatest advertisements for our career pathways system. Every year through 2019, we experienced incredible growth; total enrollment was up to 500 students, more students than ever were participating in internships, and we nearly doubled the number of credentials and certifications students were earning by graduation.⁴

And then the pandemic hit.

Like most schools across the country, COVID-19 affected our student enrollment. With schools closed to in-person learning, we could no longer travel to area high schools to market our programs. Our total enrollment dropped to 350. In August 2020, Woodruff reopened to a form of in-person instruction. We teachers agreed that we could not continue to deliver online the quality instruction that we were used to providing our students. We had done our best for as long as we could, but there is no substitute for hands-on learning.

But even being back in person, our student learning activities were still constrained by the pandemic. From an extended winter break and low staffing because of the omicron wave to not having access to all of our typical job sites to place students, we struggled. Sometimes we had to combine classes because teachers were ill and we couldn't get substitutes, and other times we couldn't fill classes because of student illness.

Now that our students are back in the classroom and we hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, we are working to regrow our programs and double our enrollment this school year. We are already seeing growth as we continually focus on creating new career pathways informed by the labor

market and students' interests, and we are collaborating with our career coordinators to find new employers and work-based learning opportunities.

New Career Pathway: Renewable Energy

For the past few years, I have been part of developing an exciting new career opportunity in renewable energy, which is a growing field that really interests our students. We first had the idea in 2019 when environmental groups won a lawsuit to shut down our local coal-fired power plant because of excessive and illegal pollution. As part of the settlement, the plant owners agreed to close operations in 2022 and provide \$8 million to the greater Peoria region for projects such as energy efficient building improvements, job training, and asthma and lung health education programs.⁵

My principal and I attended community meetings where we learned that the funds would be dispersed through grants to fund clean energy projects that included solar panels. We considered how solar panels could benefit Woodruff—they would help offset the costs of operating the building, and we could also make some much-needed improvements like adding air conditioning. But we saw our students as the biggest beneficiaries of the project, as they could have a front row seat to learn how solar energy works.

From there, the idea of a two-year renewable energy training program grew, and we discovered there was a huge interest from our students and community. We applied for a grant, and in summer 2021 we were awarded \$1.5 million to install solar panels at Woodruff and start a renewable energy program so our students can explore this career field.

Our programs are growing with new career pathways informed by the **LABOR MARKET** and students' interests.

I was asked to leave one of my work-based construction classes to teach renewable energy. There was just one problem: I knew little about renewable energy. After some research, I found an online program and began taking courses to learn everything I could about solar, wind, and electric energy and develop our program curriculum.

At the same time, we were recruiting students for the first class to be held in fall 2021, coinciding with the installation of the solar panels so that we could use them as an

A NEW VISION FOR CTE

We have a lot of work to do in America to prosper in the 21st century. Reengineering our economy to be competitive and fight climate change while reinvesting in rural areas. Learning the lessons of COVID-19 by making our economy and our healthcare system more resilient. Developing tens of millions of new skilled workers of every kind and making sure every craft and profession welcomes all of us.

Preparing students for full lives—enriched by meaningful, rewarding work and by knowledge itself—is the shared goal of educators, public schools, and unions. Part of realizing that goal is making college affordable for all, and an equal part requires resetting and realigning CTE to lead to greater opportunities for all students.

Imagine, for a moment, if students in high school were earning industry credentials that today's employers need, so that high school students could launch careers with valuable skills. Imagine an economy with recognized industry credentials in everything from tech to hospitality to farming. Imagine if, as a delegation of AFT local and state leaders and I saw during a recent study trip to Germany, high school students could explore the world of work through paid internships and apprenticeships that connect them to employers in their communities and open doors to future education and rewarding careers.

We can make this new vision—in which all high school students have access to CTE programs that provide industry certifications, internships, and apprenticeships—a reality by coordinating workforce and economic development with our legacy educational aid programs. The key is aligning high school, public technical and community college, and business, with a focus on what the public institutions can do to prepare young adults and career changers for the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

The American Federation of Teachers has done some of this work already, using our Innovation Fund to help create the Peoria programs that Michael Brix describes and to support the transformation of Westinghouse High School in Pittsburgh. The AFT has also worked with IBM on its P-TECH model. And locals such as the United Federation of Teachers in New York City have been doing this work for decades. The issue now is scale. And we can only achieve that scale through labor, business, and government working together.

Today, we can see everywhere the challenges we face as a nation and the scale of the work we need to do. We have young people desperate to take action on issues ranging from climate change to broad-based economic prosperity in which no one gets left behind. But they need the tools. To fight climate change, we need skilled



AFT President Randi Weingarten and a delegation of AFT leaders tour a German vocational education and training program focused on automotive technology.

construction, tech, utility, transportation, and manufacturing workers. For broad-based prosperity, we need to break down the barriers that keep young people of color from getting the skills and credentials we all need to succeed. We must ensure rural America is not abandoned. We need to rebuild neighborhoods and communities. Bringing those skills to young people is what the American Federation of Teachers is about, and it is what will determine our nation's future.

—AFT President Randi Weingarten



Investing in our students pays dividends in the **SUCCESS** of our community for years to come.

instructional tool. A class size of 18 is pretty good for CTE, but we were able to enroll 22 students with little advertising. And in their first semester, students watched as 545 solar panels were installed on the roof of Woodruff's two gymnasiums. They were able to speak to electricians and follow the entire process to learn proper placement of panels, panel frames, and wiring. We also started to learn about renewable energy, basic skills in electrical technology and mechanical systems, and sustainable environmental practices with an emphasis on global issues. The panels were turned on over our winter break, and by the end of the 2021–22 school year, the system produced about 37 percent of the power needed to operate our school—which informed the next semester's curriculum.

As we were initially developing the program, we thought the greatest workforce need would be for solar installers, but we quickly learned that installation is just a small portion of the work in this field. The bigger part is assessing electrical usage and determining how it can be lowered, which guides solar installation. So in the beginning of the second semester, students learned how to recognize and measure energy usage patterns, how to monitor energy production, and how to assess a building's electrical use. Then we transitioned to focusing on electric cars, particularly their batteries, and the use of renewable energy (instead of gasoline) for vehicles. Since 2017, our region

has been home to Rivian, an electric vehicle plant that is rapidly expanding and has an order to build 100,000 Amazon delivery vehicles.⁶ We're aiming to prepare our students for jobs there. We also devoted time to learning about wind turbines because central Illinois is home to several wind turbine farms (and solar fields) that are now supplying electricity previously produced by the coal plant.

In our first year, we were still operating under some pandemic constraints, which made work-based learning—and our original curriculum design—very challenging. We had to make several adjustments to students' learning experiences because we were not able to offer field trips to local employers or introduce students to renewable energy through wind turbines and electric vehicles in a hands-on way. Even with these challenges, our students have been excited to learn about the possibilities of renewable energy.

As we continue to move into a post-pandemic normal through COVID-19 mitigation practices, we believe year two of the program will bring even more meaningful opportunities for students in this fast-growing field. By the time they graduate high school, students will receive certifications in first aid, CPR, and OSHA 30 (a 30-hour course on construction safety by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration), and they will be eligible for entry-level positions in renewable energy systems installation, solar energy analysis, solar design, solar power plant construction, project estimating or engineering, and environmental planning.

Shaping Peoria's Future

It has been seven years since the day I nervously welcomed students to my first construction class. Much about our program—and the world—has changed since then. What has not changed is my focus on building relationships in my teaching. I keep in touch with my students and get updates on their lives and career moves for years after they leave my classroom.

I have dozens of stories of students who finished the program and went on to be loyal employees, become leaders in their field, or even start their own businesses. One story is of Brian Monckton, a bright and artistic student who was struggling in school because of medical issues that made regular class attendance difficult. His mother encour-

aged him to try CTE, and he enrolled in my project-based construction class. I spent time talking and connecting with him, and because I understood his need for flexibility, I worked with him to get his classroom learning in when his health allowed it.

During our time together, Brian learned how to measure and cut wood, and he also took the lead on a project to build beautiful benches for a local homeowners association. Because he was a musician at heart, he moved to Arizona after graduation and enrolled in a trade school to continue working with wood—building guitars. Today, Brian builds custom guitars full time, and he is very successful. CTE helped him develop the skills to turn his passion into a career that he loves.

One of my favorite stories is of a student named Kianna Pittman, who enrolled in my class because she heard it was “fun.” On one of our field trips, we toured an aluminum foundry, which makes parts for things like industrial equipment and recreational vehicles. It's a growing industry, but it's not many students' first choice for a career. The work is very challenging; it involves heating blocks of aluminum in a large pot at a couple hundred degrees, side by side with 150 to 175 other employees—predominantly male—in a large, hot, smelly open space. But Kianna saw all this and said, “This is where I want to be.”

At 17 years old, Kianna was one year shy of the minimum age requirement to work in the foundry. But she was so determined that she told the company, Alcast, that she would wait and work nights at a local restaurant until her birthday. Kianna was living with her grandmother and had no car; Alcast was concerned about her riding public transportation late at night and about the added stress of completing homework after her shift. So the human resources department rewrote its policies to offer her an office job until she turned 18 and could work on the foundry floor.

I visited Kianna at the foundry about two years ago, and she drove me around the grounds and showed me all she was doing as a maintenance mechanic. I understood little of it, but it was clear that she knows and truly enjoys this work. Alcast has continued to invest in her—including providing her transportation to work and paying for her to complete her associate degree—and she has become an incredibly valued employee. It's wonder-

ful to see Kianna's career taking off and to see her giving back to our school community by sharing her experiences with and encouraging those students coming after her. Not only does she oversee and train the students we send to Alcast for internships, but in May 2022 she was also the guest speaker at our year-end dinner for work-based learning students and their families and employers. She is making us all proud.

Peoria has been called a model for CTE, and I believe it is because of success stories like Brian's and Kianna's. All of us—from the classroom teachers and career coaches to the employers and education and funding partners—truly care about these students. And we know that an investment in them pays dividends in the well-being and success of our community for years to come.

As we continue to develop our renewable energy program and other career pathways for Peoria students, the future is bright—and we need look no further than our graduates to understand why. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/brix.

WHAT CTE MEANS TO ME

BY KIANNA PITTMAN

I was introduced to career and technical education (CTE) when I was a high school senior questioning what I wanted to do with my life after graduation. I wasn't sure college was an option, but I'd spent most of my junior and senior years looking for jobs with no success. It seemed nothing was turning out right for me.

Then I met Ms. Chapman, the career coordinator at Woodruff Career and Technical Center. She came to my school to talk about the CTE programs available to students. Ms. Chapman told me that with CTE classes, and specifically classes in the construction trades, I could get a paying job while still in school. I'd always wanted a career in construction trades; I just didn't know how to get my foot in the door.

I enrolled in Mr. Brix's work-based construction course. To be honest, the initial classwork—spending most of our days on computers getting our OSHA 30 certification—was not my favorite. But we needed to be ready for whatever job we might want to have. We received our forklift and CPR certifications and completed other training, and then things got exciting as we started taking field trips to potential job sites.

One day we visited Alcast Company, which manufactures aluminum castings. The plant's five buildings include a computer numerical control machine shop and a foundry, where metal is melted into giant hot pools and molded into castings for parts supplied to customers like Caterpillar and Amazon. There's also a core building,

where workers make the sand cores that fit inside the metal molds, and a finishing building, where the parts are sanded or grinded down until they're perfect and ready for shipping. And then there's the maintenance department, with technicians who are trained to maintain and repair all the plant's machines. Everything I saw was so cool. I knew immediately that I needed to work there.

It was not the obvious career choice. The work is hard, the foundry is hot, and I was the only woman in all of the buildings I'd toured. I'd been one of few girls in the construction course as well, which was difficult at times. But at Alcast, I didn't see an obstacle; I saw an opportunity. Women can do this work too. Someone just needed to open the door and make a way for others. I wanted to be that person.

Mr. Brix helped me get an internship so I could see if Alcast was truly a good fit. I was only able to finish half of the internship before everything closed because of the pandemic. But Alcast reached out to me; they were still open, and if I was interested in working, they had a position for me. Of course I was interested! I did general office work until I turned 18, then transitioned to maintenance. The work is complicated and challenging, and there's no room for error. But I never lacked help. My boss and coworkers were always there to answer my questions, and even though I was no longer in school, Mr. Brix was also there for me, willing to help however I needed.

It's been two years now, and I love what I do. No two days are the same, the work is constant, and every day I challenge myself to learn and grow. I've accomplished my goal of opening the door for other women here, and I take time to greet the women now working throughout the plant. There are only a handful of us, but we support each other. And Alcast is paying for me to go to school for my associate degree in industrial



CTE gives you the skills to create a great **FUTURE** for yourself.

applied sciences. My days are long and busy; between classes and work, I regularly put in 11- to 14-hour days. But I'm not afraid of hard work, and I know what an amazing opportunity I've been given.

That's why I didn't hesitate when Mr. Brix asked me to speak at Woodruff's year-end dinner. Because of him, I've met so many wonderful people and made great connections, and I'm thriving in my job. I want to make that kind of difference in other students' lives. So I told the graduating students the same thing I tell those who come to tour or intern at Alcast: CTE shows you what's possible and gives you the skills to create a great future for yourself—you just have to be willing to put in the work.

I don't know what's next for me. I could pursue more education with an engineering degree or spend 20 years just learning how to do this job the best I can. I do know that I'm grateful Ms. Chapman and Mr. Brix found me. College may not be for everyone, but a career is. And getting an early start on a career through CTE changed my life. □

Kianna Pittman is a former student of Woodruff Career and Technical Center and a graduate of Manual High School in Peoria, Illinois. After a Woodruff internship with a leading local manufacturing plant in the spring of 2020, Kianna accepted full-time employment at the plant. She is currently completing an associate degree in industrial applied sciences.

Bonding Through Music

All Teachers Can Use Music to Help Students Express Emotions and to Add Joy to the Classroom



By Patricia Shehan Campbell

Mr. Waugh is a powerhouse in his classroom. In his particular way of welcoming his 5th-grade students, he sets the tone for his genuine interest in their well-being through routines characterized by movement that is rhythmic to watch (and sometimes to listen to as well). Mr. Waugh can groove, and he does so daily with his students.

He scans the line of students that forms outside his classroom door..., awaiting their chance at a hand-clapping routine that each one has devised with him individually, an imprint of who they are and what their interactive relationship is with him. They feel the connection with their teacher, who looks them squarely in the eye as the student's own personal signature handshake takes off. Sometimes their movement is full-bodied, and head, shoulders, knees, toes, and torso are in rhythmic motion together, and the routine is a shared musical ritual.

Mr. Waugh describes the necessity of the greeting ritual for his students, noting that "the gestures we make are beyond a simple 'hello.' We've figured our 'welcome' out together, and this is a daily routine. There's an unspoken tribute to the groove of a hip-hop

maneuver that makes 'the connect' for us and ensures that we are in this learning venture together." With student investment in a lively ritual that is inherently musical, Mr. Waugh then can deliver students to the learning they will do in his classroom. He builds trust and gives joy to his students from the outset, and they radiate a kind of controlled energy that follows them into the classroom and into their focus on the academic work they will accomplish.¹

Music is an invaluable facet of everyday human life. Whether we are the music makers or someone else is "musicking" for us (in person or through our earbuds), we are drawn to it, touched by it, engaged in it, and often captivated by it. Adults and children alike spend a considerable chunk of their waking hours listening to music and responding in movement, gesture, and groove. We sing, chant, rap, hum, and whistle, and we play music on a grand variety of instruments—and on noninstrument objects with sound-making potential, like buckets, cans, and tabletops.

Teachers like Mr. Waugh employ these musical experiences in meaningful ways to build relationships, allow self-expression, and infuse joy into the school day. In this article, I offer several practical strategies and suggestions for all teachers—not just music specialists—to incorporate music into their daily routines.* From listening

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*A wide variety of songs and artists are suggested throughout this article, and some may not be appropriate for young children. Teachers are advised to review all lyrics before selecting songs for their classrooms.

Teachers of all subjects can educate children in and through music.

nooks, which may be all the more important as students recover from the pandemic, to transitions with a groove, all educators will see valuable ways to harness the power of music to enrich their classrooms.²

Music has always turned my head and tugged at my heartstrings. And I've been fortunate to enjoy it in many settings and circumstances: the Irish traditional fiddles in the village of Miltown Malbay, the Bulgarian *gaida* (bagpipe) players in Plovdiv, the mariachi music in Guadalajara, the percussion-heavy rumba in a crowded basement dance club in Havana, the *taarab* concerts of oud and violin in Zanzibar, and the mastery of Burmese slide guitarist U Tin in his home studio in Yangon.

Closer to home, I've been decidedly moved by the Cleveland Orchestra's rendering of Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9" (3rd movement) as a middle schooler, and by the heart-wrenching St. Louis blues of Henry Townsend during my early-career teaching. In graduate school, I was drawn to the high lonesome bluegrass sounds of Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys in Beanblossom, Indiana, and later to the *son jarocho* ("Veracruz sound") at the monthly fandango gatherings of Seattle's Mexican American community (one of many diverse communities in this West Coast multicultural metropolis where I'm now a university professor).

These rich global and hometown experiences have convinced me of one thing: music is at the heart of our humanity. Music is a vehicle for expressing ourselves, for knowing others, and for growing relationships. Music is very present for each of us regardless of race, gender, circumstance, or social status. Across the lifespan it ebbs and flows, nonthreatening and all-embracing, crossing cultures even as it empowers cultural identity. Music knows no bounds.

Music Is a Birthright

Music is a birthright, and many children are enthralled by music. From birth, they absorb and sustain the music they pick up from others,³ and they creatively express themselves in new and necessary ways through the music they make.⁴ Some children study an instrument in weekly lessons or participate in a school ensemble, while other children take solace or strength from music all on their own, without any formal training. Several years ago, I studied children's musical interests and inclinations and was enlightened by their insights.⁵

- Nathan, 7 years old, shared with me that "Every morning, when I wake up, I have songs in my head." I wondered: Was music so wholly integrated within his life that he could be asleep with, and awakening to, these songs?
- Carrie, at 6 years of age, told me that "Some music helps the stories along," and then offered a sophisticated analysis of music's functions in her favorite movies and how she, too, could imagine music for the storybooks she was learning to read. Was her imagination ready and waiting to be tapped for the songs she would summon?

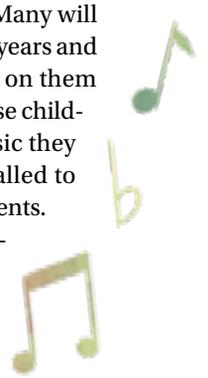
- Lateesha, 10 years old, announced that "Music gets me going and gives me strength." Did she find music's force, flow, and energy so full that it could give her stamina, stimulation, and support?
- Twelve-year-old Jonathan underscored music's energizing capacity, pointing out that "Nobody should have to sit still when there's music. It moves and it makes you move." Was this his personal complaint that the rules of appropriate classroom behavior were conflicting with his own natural compulsion to dance to the music?
- Darryl, age 5, remarked, "I love the feeling of music," and then went on to differentiate between the sounds of a flute's high, thin, and floating quality and a bass guitar's deep, thick, and throbbing effect. Did his acute attention to music's sonic features surpass a mere auditory sensation to become for him a thoroughgoing physical experience?
- Andrea, at 9 years of age, explained music as "something that is sometimes happy, sometimes sad, and probably in between, too." She added, "All the time, it's there, and I need it." Was her definition an expression of the delight that many children feel about music in their lives?

All Teachers as Music Ambassadors

As sure as music is humanly organized sound, so is there also a common musical humanity that we share. It then follows that all teachers have innate musical and artistic qualities, at times in full bloom and at other times hidden and untapped—but waiting to be revealed. All teachers can draw from the music in their lives, families, and communities and find ways to share music with their students. While their attitudes toward music and what it can do for children are more important than their music-making skills, all teachers are more musically skilled than they might believe themselves to be! They need no extraordinary performance skills to lead musical activities, to encourage children's musical involvement, or to incorporate music in significant ways in their classrooms.

Because they were once children, teachers may recall how music enveloped them in their early years and enticed them to engage as listeners, singers, players, and dancers. Many will remember music's meaningful role in their developing years and feel the hold of particular musical moments or songs on them even today. But even teachers who feel distant from these childhood musical experiences still have access to the music they once encountered. It lives within them and can be called to action and put to good use in the teaching of their students.

Teachers of all subjects—language arts, social studies, math, and the sciences—are vital for educating children in and through music. Further, they have advantages that music specialist teachers do not. They typically see their children daily, or at least more



Music helps children think creatively and transition between tasks.



regularly than do music specialist teachers. They know the children well and are keenly aware of their needs, interests, and abilities. They are able to determine key times and places for inserting music into the classroom to give children expressive opportunities, enhance their learning, and even “make their day.” They are acutely aware of energy shifts in the classroom when children could best benefit from a music break that will revive them, settle them, or give them focus. Moreover, teachers are capable of creating an environment in which children can share their own music, discover culturally unfamiliar music, and make music without criticism.



Music for Relieving Stress and Forming Bonds

Music allows children to release emotions that are not always easily expressed through the words they know. Listening, singing, playing, and dancing to music can lift or soothe the spirit, bring peace after moments of emotional turmoil, and reduce stress and anxiety—which can make children’s learning more efficient. Music also helps increase empathy; in making music together, children learn to regulate emotions and become more aware of other people’s feelings. And the sharing and exchange of songs and musical experiences that are meaningful to children and their families can help build classroom community.⁶

Listening Centers: In the busyness of a school day, a solitary retreat into music may be the answer for children who need time away from the overwhelming regimen of academic study. Imagine a listening nook in the corner of a classroom where a child might go to listen to recorded music and view music videos. Taking time for listening can be richly rewarding, as it helps reduce tensions and worries and offers relaxation and peace. A small space with nothing more than a table, a chair, a computer, and headphones can provide solace and a safe haven for children.⁷ Such a center might also feature activity sheets with questions to guide a search on the musical

life of Beethoven or Beyoncé, Mozart or Midori, Ravi Shankar or his daughter Norah Jones. For some children, a listening center can be perfect for the pursuit of independent listening, a necessary refuge from the hustle and bustle of the classroom.

Mood Regulation: When the days sometimes seem long and lacking color or energy, music can regulate moods, enlivening children who appear lethargic, distracted, or crabby.⁸ When rousing activities leave children overstimulated and overexcited, music can create calm to help them wind down. Listening selections such as Saint-Saëns’s “The Swan” (from *The Carnival of the Animals*), Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” (2nd movement), and Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” can help children relax from stressful academic challenges, release emotional energy in safe ways, and center their thinking.

Music for the Joy of It

Well-chosen music makes classroom experiences more vibrant, from the time children first gather for learning to the end of a class or a school day. Music helps children focus their attention, think creatively and expressively, retain information, and make transitions from one task, concept, or subject to the next. Music cues activities and behaviors as it enriches individual learning in classroom music centers, makes holiday celebrations more communal and genuine, and enhances schoolwide assemblies. It can add magic and motivation to transform a plain, dull, and uninspiring classroom to one in which children love learning with and from each other.

Openers: Music starts the day or class on a positive note and helps children feel that they are sharing in a gratifying experience as part of a group that works together to make something beautiful. Teachers have long used music to provide the grand opening to an experience to which all children can contribute. Songs to sing together with or without recordings include classics like “Lean on Me,” “Here Comes the Sun,” “Celebration,” and “Oye Cómo Va.” Children may instead want to create an opening routine of their own that can be sung, rhythmically chanted or rapped, and designed as a dance routine or a set of gestures. With a good sound system, teachers can stir up students to follow the leader (the teacher or another student) in showing the beat of a music selection through movement—clapping, snapping, stamping, hopping, blinking eyelids, nodding heads, lifting shoulders, or tapping heads, shoulders, knees, and toes.

Another type of opening might consist of students walking in place or around the room to the sound of a steady rhythm on a hand drum. The activity can start with rhythms at a moderate tempo played at a medium dynamic level and then shift to slower or faster tempos or softer or louder rhythms that are reflected in movement, all the way to a stillness or “freeze” when the music stops. Or teachers could feature recordings of gentle music to set a calm tone in the classroom (for example, “Plum Blossom Melodies”

All of Us Have Musical Gifts

And All of Us Deserve to Have Those Gifts Nurtured

There is a long-standing debate as to the distribution of musicality across the population. Some maintain that only a select few have been granted the musical gift, and the rest are passive consumers of music. But in fact, the notion of selective musical talent has been highly exaggerated, and neuroscientists have debunked it as a widespread myth with little basis in reality. Of course, some people are born with a physiology necessary for a pleasant-sounding voice, and there could be a natural propensity for the motor coordination that contributes to playing a guitar, a violin, or a flute—but deliberate practice is still important.¹ And while it's long been noted that perfect pitch tends to appear in families, which indicates the possibility of a genetic component—evidence is now growing that perfect pitch can be learned.² In all, music is not an inherited trait so much as a practiced behavior; there is little evidence that expert musicians are uniquely hardwired at birth. Rather, musicians and nonmusicians emerge from the womb with similar brain structures and learning potentials.³ Of course, this doesn't

mean that all children will want to become musicians—but it is heartening to know how much potential we all have.

Because of both that potential and the joys of music, all children deserve opportunities to become musically expressive singers and players and thoughtful, analytical listeners. Music merits a central place in education for improving cognitive development, school attendance, and motivation for all children—and particularly for students growing up in under-resourced neighborhoods.⁴ Music also plays a key role in providing a safe place for venting emotions, developing empathy, and stimulating the creative imagination.⁵

In far too many schools, students do not have access to either music classes or extracurriculars such as band or choir. But the study of music and opportunities for musical enrichment should not be an exclusive privilege for a select few.⁶ While children benefit from systematic musical education by music specialist teachers who know well their instruments, ensembles, and graded repertoire,⁷ music can also be



comfortably integrated all through the day by all teachers, for all students to enjoy deeply. The more children sing, dance, play, and listen to music, the closer they will come to living out their full musical capacity. Because music plays many roles for students, a school curriculum inclusive of music becomes more than another constituent of a liberal education. Music shapes identity and bridges cultures; the songs children sing, the pieces they play, and the dances to which they move in stylistic rhythms, positions, and formations engage them in holistic ways of understanding themselves and the world at large.⁸

—P. S. C.

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell.

played on a Chinese guqin), then turn to more vigorous music (such as the Drummers of Burundi's energetic performances featuring an *Inkiranya* drum) to set an upbeat tone for an upcoming study plan. Just a few minutes of a musical opener can do wonders in bringing children together into the community of the classroom.

Closers: Just as music makes an excellent launch to the business of learning, it also functions well in closing a class session or school day. Farewell songs can neatly wrap up schoolwork, drawing children out of their academic focus, calling them together, and sending them on their way with good cheer and contentment. Notable closing songs sung to recordings, to a guitar's strumming of a few chords, or even a cappella (with voices only) include The Sound of Music's "So Long, Farewell," the cowboy signature song "Happy Trails," "Jamaica Farewell," Woody Guthrie's "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," and the Swahili-language song "Kwaheri" ("Goodbye").

Soothing music can work well at the end of a test or particularly stressful time; children can be treated to a few minutes or more of a Mozart string quartet, a Javanese *gamelan* (percussion orchestra) work, a gentle Brazilian bossa nova, a traditional Irish *air* (open-ended melody), a South Asian Indian *thumri* or *dadra* (light-classical song forms), or a slow ballad from the likes of folk singers Iris DeMent, Odetta, Lydia Mendoza, or Elizabeth Cotten. While children listen, they can rest, talk quietly, finish an assignment, or start homework.

If the goal of a closing activity is to develop communal energy, a children's singing game can be effective; the wide assortment of musical choices includes "Bobo Ski Waten Taten," "Down Down

Baby," "Sarasponda," "Here We Go Zudio," and "Alley Alley-O." Another high-energy closing is a rhythmic follow-the-leader game: using body percussion, a few drums, or boxes and pencils, the teacher or a student leader can play four-beat or eight-beat rhythms that are echoed by the whole class.

Signals and Breaks: Music can call children's attention to an announcement or signal a transition from one task to another. Teachers have learned to save their voices from overuse by using music to come to attention or as a reminder to children to quiet down. One signal popular with teachers is to clap a short rhythmic pattern as a call to which children immediately respond in imitation. Some teachers use the single chime of a small brass bell to remind chattering children to listen or focus on an already assigned activity. Some teachers cleverly turn a rhythm into a mix of clapping, snapping, and chest-slapping in which children join as the group cycles through several revolutions of a body percussion routine. Still other teachers have access to instruments as signals for lunchtime (the sharp ring of a triangle) or the end of quiet working time (a repeating chord on keyboard or tone bars).

Breaks between subjects or assignments are a necessary relief to a period of intensive focus, and these breaks can be musical mood modulators. Teachers may give children 30 seconds to shift their books and seats, during which time a musical excerpt plays. At music's end, students need to be back at their seats or they may need to "freeze" in their positions, after which they are placed "at ease" as they start a new topic. Musical breaks can also consist



Sharing musical experiences can help build classroom community.

of singing, humming, or playing on available instruments folk songs like “Frère Jacques,” “Kookaburra,” “A La Rueda, Rueda,” or “Shake Sugaree.”

Music to Enliven Standard Subjects

Live and recorded music permeate life, and they also slide smoothly into the nooks and crannies of language arts, social studies, math, and science, potentially making learning more compelling and enduring. In my experience, music integration is beneficial in developing students’ logic and literacy,⁹ numeracy, and knowledge of history and culture. Musical experiences can make student learning in all subjects more colorful, lively, and fun, and they are easily fashioned and facilitated by teachers.



Music, Language Arts, and Social Studies: Speech and song are closely related, such that music shares communicative and expressive functions and features with language arts. They both concern rhythm, pitch, and accent; they both convey direct and implied meanings; and they both affect the emotions. Literature can come alive through the infusion of music into stories, and students can be encouraged to create their own soundscapes to accompany the reading aloud of stories such as Eric Carle’s *The Very Quiet Cricket*, Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, and Marcus Pfister’s *The Rainbow Fish*. Storybooks based on folk songs can be sung and rhythmically chanted, such as Peter Spier’s *The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night* and Jeanette Winter’s *Follow the Drinking Gourd*.

Sometimes, silent reading can be complemented by soft, tranquil music wafting through the room, such as Bach’s “Air on the G String” or “The Midnight Blues” by the Wynton Marsalis Quintet.

Music may also serve well to motivate creative, descriptive, and expository writing projects. There are endless possibilities for inspiration, from Mozart’s “Symphony No. 40 in G Minor” or Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor” to Duke Ellington’s “Take

the ‘A’ Train,” Mariachi Los Camperos’s “La Malagueña,” and Rahim Alhaj’s “Letter 7. Fly Home—Fatima.” Teachers may suggest scenarios or characterizations but then leave it to children to write descriptive words, sentences, or paragraphs against the backdrop of the music.

Poetry and music combine in songs, and as literary forms, songs convey inspiration, celebration, history, myth, and cultural comment—building a bridge to social studies. Songs like “It’s Raining, It’s Pouring” and “Frog Went A-Courtin’” help children discover rhyming words and engage their imaginations, while “Wade in the Water”^{*} and “John Henry” are poetic and integrate historical information. And the poetry of hip hop like Blackalicious’s “First in Flight” can empower and uplift students and help them explore issues impacting their communities.

Going deeper into social studies, children can develop meaningful insights into the study of history, culture, relationships, and social responsibilities through experiences that take them over time and across worlds in songs and instrumental music. Social and historical values come to life through music, as children learn the feelings that come through musical expression in ways that words alone cannot do. Teachers may introduce students to 14th-century England through a modern-English excerpt of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* combined with the popular Middle English song “Sumer is icumen in”—which is well within children’s capacity to sing (or even to play on improvised instruments). Songs such as “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail, Columbia” reveal some of the patriotic spirit of an emergent American identity near the time of Revolutionary War and are well worth singing or listening to. “America the Beautiful”[†] and “This Land Is Your Land”[‡] can be enlightening when analyzed from multiple perspectives—particularly the perspectives of Black and Indigenous peoples—to deepen students’ historical knowledge and cultural appreciation. In studying the struggles of enslaved African Americans and recognizing the complexities of equity, justice, and universal human rights, songs like “Oh Freedom” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (both historic and contemporary recordings) are valuable to listen to and sing along with.

Two resources that are particularly useful for cultivating students’ respect and appreciation of other communities across the world, and that can be used as prospects for all-class or individual experiences, are the Smithsonian Folkways Record-

^{*}The meaning of “Wade in the Water” is not readily apparent from the lyrics. This website on the Underground Railroad is helpful for providing context for students: go.aft.org/360.

[†]For an illuminating analysis of this song, see “America the Beautiful a Call to Struggle” at go.aft.org/frg. And consider asking students to compare the original version of the song with this version by Ray Charles: go.aft.org/pyt.

[‡]For a discussion of this song that includes some Native Americans’ perspectives, see “The Blind Spot in the Great American Protest Song” at go.aft.org/i0z, which includes revised lyrics performed by Pete Seeger and an instrumental version by youth immigrant musicians. For an Ojibwe version recorded by Anishinaabe singer Keith Secola, see go.aft.org/f11.

Musical experiences can make learning more colorful, lively, and fun.

ings (folkways.si.edu/learn) and the “Star-Songs and Constellations” curriculum at the Global Jukebox (theglobaljukebox.org/?starsandconstellations). Here, teachers can find ready-made lessons, embedded audio and video recordings, and slide sets that can be used in the classroom or as listening assignments for students to learn about people, cultures, and music of American and global cultures. From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and nearly everywhere in between, these rich resources help students develop cultural understanding of the common and distinctive features of the human condition across time and place.

Music, Math, and Science: Not so far removed as it may seem, there are overlaps between music and mathematics, and in knowing the science of musical sound. To begin with, there are the fundamental natural considerations of music’s acoustical properties: pitch as vibration frequency, timbre as wave complexity, dynamics as decibels and intensity levels. There are musical patterns to decipher, logical structures of music to discover, and experiments with the science of sound that can appeal to and support learning.

At the fundamental level of numeracy, there are counting songs in every language and culture, such as “Vamos a Contar” (Spanish), “Moja, Mbili, Tatu” (Swahili), “Yi Er San” (Mandarin), and “Un Éléphant Qui Se Balançait” (French). At a more sophisticated level, children can be drawn to mathematical cycles and sequences through participation in West African percussion patterns. They can experience the thoughtful arrangement of musical elements through body claps, pats, snaps, and stamps, and through the transfer of these patterns to drums, shakers, woodblocks, and bells. They can create, combine, and play eight-beat patterns of various long and short durations and become immersed in the mathematical complexities of rhythms and polyrhythms. An understanding of fractions can be illustrated as children discover the subdivisions of whole-note rhythms into halves, quarters, eighths, and so forth.

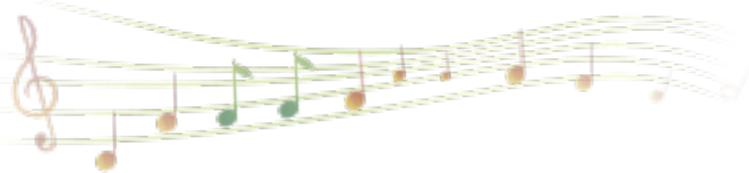
Scientists since the Greek philosopher Pythagoras have been fascinated with the challenge of measuring sound. Pythagoras developed a complex mathematical system for describing the relationship between the length of a vibrating object, such as a string, and its subdivision into various pitches. For instance, a string pressed at its midpoint, when plucked, vibrates twice as fast as the full-length string, creating a pitch one octave higher than the whole string’s frequency. Experiments to determine the physical properties of sound and explore resonance or pitch all build on Pythagoras’s work and are intriguing to children. Concrete materials such as string, comb-kazoos, and balloons that can be inflated and then slowly deflated with a squeaky squeeze can demonstrate sound properties. Children can further investigate resonance with rubber band box sounds or uncover the nature of pitch by creating a monochord using a two-by-four, eyebolts, and nylon string. Through experiential activity, teachers can share

Pythagoras’s drive to grasp relationships between music, math, and science for exploring the universe.¹⁰

Never let it be said that music belongs only to the prodigies. Music lives in all of us: in our voices, our bodies, and the various human inventions—musical instruments—that function as extensions of our artistic, social-emotional, personal, and communal expression. As we have the capacity to receive music, respond to music, perform music, and create music, we share music as a characteristic of our humanity. Music brings smiles and tears, energy and stillness, agitation and peace, joy and wonder. It need not be compartmentalized in schools, nor should it be perceived as inaccessible and unattainable, relegated only to the artist-musician.

Undeniably, music in the hands of music-specialist teachers should be continued in schools; they who are musically educated in the pedagogy of vocal-choral music and the instruments of bands and orchestras can contribute to the musical skills and knowledge of their students in specialized ways. There is evidence, too, that music curricula led by music-specialist teachers are becoming more diversified, increasingly featuring courses in guitar, keyboard, and songwriting, and ensembles like mariachi, steel band, and West African drumming. Bravo for them! Although the struggle continues to ensure that music can operate as its own subject for study in every school and has a strong and continuing presence in the curriculum, the reality is that music is owned by everyone, and everyone has license to use it in varied ways. Teachers of all subjects will continue to prove themselves thoroughly capable of weaving music into the daily doings of their classrooms, using music to animate their students’ lives, lighten and brighten their learning, and acknowledge the myriad ways music makes life worth living. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell.



Online Special: Music to Our Ears

For links to all but the most readily available musical suggestions in this article, see the online version at aft.org/ae/fall2022/campbell. Links to free videos are embedded throughout the text.

Voting for Our Values

Why Elections Matter in Education



COURTESY OF NICOLE CAPSELLO



COURTESY OF REBECCA KOLINS GIVAN

Our country is facing unprecedented challenges as we enter another election season: an ongoing pandemic that has sent mental health needs skyrocketing, conflict abroad and corporate greed that have led to painful inflation, trauma at home as gun violence claims more innocent lives, and increased efforts to bring culture wars into the classroom and strip public schools of needed resources.

In this conversation between four experienced educators and union leaders, we learn how elections impact all who work in public education and what issues are personally motivating them to head to the ballot box.

Nicole Capsello is a special education teacher, president of the Syracuse Teachers Association (NY), and at large director of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) Election Districts 7 & 8. Rebecca Kolins Givan is an associate professor of labor studies and employment relations at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and president of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT. Terrence Martin Sr., a former second grade teacher, is a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers and president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers. Andrew Spar, a former music teacher, is a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers and president of the Florida Education Association, the state's largest association of professional employees.

—EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us about your membership and the challenges they're facing.

REBECCA: Our chapter of Rutgers AAUP-AFT represents full-time faculty, graduate workers, and counselors. We work closely with our sibling chapter that represents adjunct faculty and in coalition with unions across the university that represent all kinds of other higher education workers. Together we fight for a more equitable, sustainable, and accessible Rutgers—one that is a better place to study and work and that truly serves the higher education needs of New Jersey.

Like many others in higher education, we continue to face austerity budgets that are a result of the long-term trend of dis-

vestment in public education. In the name of austerity, our administrators have made strategic choices that don't necessarily serve the university mission, such as threatening layoffs—especially of adjunct faculty—while spending millions on athletic priorities or administrative hiring at the highest levels. Meanwhile, tuition has gone up, which means student debt burdens have gone up significantly, and our students are increasingly worried about economic security. All of this is concerning to our members.

ANDREW: Here in the great state of Florida, the Florida Education Association represents nearly 150,000 teachers and school support staff, as well as higher education, student, and retired members, from Key West to Pensacola and everywhere in between. One of our top challenges is also state disinvestment in public education—in particular, our experienced educators. Florida ranks 48th in the nation in average teacher salary and 45th in funding for public K-12 schools. Our governor, Ron DeSantis, has invested in salaries for beginning teachers, but he did this by taking resources from experienced teachers. Today, experienced teachers are making less in real dollars than their counterparts did 10 or 15 years ago. So in addition to low pay, our members are facing lack of morale, steep increases in the cost of living, and a massive teacher and staff shortage—not to mention a catastrophic lack of unemployment insurance because state systems couldn't support unemployed workers during the pandemic.

Instead of supporting our teachers, the governor has worked to pit them against each other. And rather than making long-term investments in public education, he has continued draining and underfunding our public schools, shortchanging our students, and showing a lack of regard for those who work in our schools every day to ensure that students get what they deserve and need.

TERRENCE: Our members are also feeling the results of years of austerity and disinvestment in public education by our elected officials.

I represent the 4,500 educators who belong to the Detroit Federation of Teachers in Michigan's largest school district—including academic interventionists, attendance agents, and long-term substitute teachers—and who are all committed to providing Detroit's students and their families with safe, thriving, and welcoming public schools.



COURTESY OF AFT MICHIGAN

COURTESY OF THE FLORIDA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

But nearly a decade after Detroit declared bankruptcy, our schools are still seeing the impacts of the drastic cuts to public education during that time—pay freezes, layoffs, and school closures—that devastated our communities. The damage was compounded by the years that the state had already been draining public school resources in the push to expand charter schools, particularly in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, causing severe problems for our district. Over the years, we've been in a multitude of fights about the ways these schools have been allowed to proliferate in our neighborhoods with few of the accountability measures required of traditional public schools, costing our students their schools and our educators their livelihoods. This has all been at the hands of legislators who know nothing about education and enact charter laws to compete rather than collaborate with existing public schools.

NICOLE: The Syracuse Teachers Association represents a broad array of educators and school-related professionals: food service workers, teaching assistants, school nurses, teachers, and more. We are among the 1,200 locals—with 600,000 total members—that are part of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). My local is an umbrella organization with four units, so I represent members on all income levels. A huge issue they have in common is the cost and availability of healthcare. We have a decent insurance plan in Syracuse because of our last contract, but the cost is still a concern. One insurance option has a deductible so high that we don't offer it to our food service workers—it could never be cost effective for them. This problem extends beyond Syracuse; across the state, districts are passing more healthcare costs onto educators and school staff.

And although there's a mental health epidemic in this country, mental health treatment is considered an out-of-pocket or out-of-network cost rather than a key part of our healthcare options. Our students also desperately need access to mental health programs—many local treatment clinics and programs have been shuttered for

years and have yet to be restored. We need to fight for well-staffed and well-resourced mental health programs so we can better care for our students and members. And we need legislation at the federal level to ensure that comprehensive healthcare is affordable and accessible for everyone.

EDITORS: Why are elections so important, both generally and for public education?

TERRENCE: Many educators don't fully realize how much elections can impact our ability to meet our students' needs. I had no idea when I first started teaching that what happens in our classrooms is connected to what happens in the state capital. But it's not a coincidence that for most of my teaching career, Michigan's House, Senate, and governor's offices were occupied by conservative leaders who did not value public education, and for most of my career, there's been a struggle to get the funding and resources our schools need.

I've always believed that everyone deserves access to a union and to fairness and equity in their work. In Detroit, we have organized a couple of charter schools, and many of our charter school members are running into the same funding issues because our elected officials talk a good game, but by their actions they don't value charter schools any more than neighborhood public schools. Our charter siblings work a longer school day and longer school year, and very few of them have contact with their school board members, who in some instances don't live in Michigan and don't know the needs of the community, the students, or educators. We need to change this. It's not acceptable when educators, the experts in this profession and those who understand our community best, have no say in what happens during the school day.

The good news for the Detroit Public Schools Community District is that we now have a school board that is elected, rather than appointed, so it is responsible to the community. We need to elect folks to the board—and to positions at higher state and federal levels—who understand and appreciate what we do every day in our classrooms and trust that we know the needs of the students we serve.

REBECCA: Elections are important because threats to our democracy are real. Threats to public education are real, and there's a clear difference in how much is invested in public education depending on who's in power. Participating in and defending our democracy is our only opportunity to fight for and win specific resources to meet the needs of our students and those who serve them.

We need to make education affordable and accessible. We need to fight for student debt cancellation and for free college—New Mexico has just led the way on this, and we hope New Jersey can follow. We need to put a stop to the exploitation of underpaid adjunct faculty and ensure adjuncts have full-time, tenure-eligible positions. We need to ensure that everyone working in higher education—from faculty and support staff to groundskeepers, service employees, and students on work-study—are all paid a living wage. We need all workers to have access to a union through which to rebuild a secure workforce in higher education. These are our priorities, and these changes won't happen unless we prioritize elections.

ANDREW: As a union, we need to make sure we're connecting what's going on in our members' lives to the decisions being driven by school boards, policymakers, and legislators. Too often, the real-



COURTESY OF THE FLORIDA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

ity is that these decisions are not addressing students' or educators' needs. Elections allow us to influence these decisions so that we don't end up with policies that make it more difficult to do our jobs well.

I know some of our members would rather just focus on their students and not on what happens with our elections. But to effectively help our students, we need good policies—and to have good policies, we must elect people who understand our work and its importance.

Public education must be a nonpartisan issue. Regardless of political preference, our members and the families in our communities overwhelmingly believe we should invest more in strong public schools for every child. Our job is to ensure that our leaders will support public schools—including their students and their employees—and that doesn't happen if we don't get involved in our elections.

NICOLE: The stakes for our students and our profession are too high for us not to get involved. Now more than ever, children need safe and welcoming environments, access to affordable mental healthcare, and a solution for food insecurities. We've been fighting for increased funding statewide for community schools* so that we can meet those needs in a greater way, but this requires the support of local and state leaders who are friendly to public education.

Getting that support will not happen by accident. Fortunately, NYSUT's member density allows us to use our resources to train people for local, state, and federal leadership. This training program essentially teaches Politics 101: how to run for office and what it's like to be part of a political campaign.

Several of my members went through the program and now serve as school board members in their districts. Our district's state senator, John Mannion, is a former educator who also went through the program and won his seat. Educators all over the state who share our priorities now hold office, shaping policy decisions and advocating for our students.

This year, we have a congressional seat opening that Democrats have not held in over 20 years. This is a huge opportunity to elect someone who is going to prioritize public education and human rights for all. State Senator Mannion is also up for reelection. He has been an incredible advocate for students with special needs—which is close to my heart because I'm a special education teacher by trade. We need to ensure he is reelected so he can continue his work on behalf of our students as chair of the Senate special needs committee.

EDITORS: What opportunities are created when we elect people who share our priorities?

*To learn about community schools, see "Building Community with Community Schools" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin.

ANDREW: If we had the right people in office locally, at the state level, and in the US Congress, we could make real headway on key education issues. We could improve on the promise of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and expand the vital services that students with special needs are currently not getting because of funding limitations. We could deal with the student debt that saddles so many of our members and open more pathways to teaching for our education support staff. And we could increase support for our teachers, reverse some of the overregulation of our schools, and make sure that public schools—where 90 percent of Florida's students attend—have the funding and resources they need.

Florida's public colleges and universities are heralded as some of the best in the nation, but we are close to the bottom in pay for K-12 teachers and support staff, and too many lawmakers are continually working to bring down our education systems instead of supporting us in the work that we do. Getting the right people in office would mean more investment in our schools, our students, and our future—which ultimately builds our economy and helps our communities thrive.

REBECCA: I agree. Electing people who share our priorities means we have greater opportunity to invest in public education and in our communities. We've seen this at the national level since 2021, with the passing of the American Rescue Plan and then the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. But state and local elected officials are overseeing the funds available through these laws, so we need to fight to make sure that the funding is used to benefit our students.

When people who don't share our priorities have been in office, we have seen increased efforts by some governors and legislatures to strip resources from our students and sow division among educators, families, and communities. We have seen vicious attacks on education and threats to academic freedom on multiple fronts.

One of the more concerning threats for us in higher education is the increasing intervention in tenure decisions coming from elected leaders and boards that are appointed by politicians rather than elected by the people. Probably the highest profile case was the tenure denial of Nikole Hannah-Jones at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But what we're seeing is that these politicized boards—frequently comprising wealthy businesspeople and allies of governors with no education expertise—are overriding the well-developed and structured processes established to make decisions about university operations, govern faculty tenure and promotion, and determine what actually happens in the classroom. This interference is tremendously dangerous; it risks our ability to educate and to do research.

TERRENCE: We have similar threats to academic freedom at the K-12 level with increasing attempts to keep our students from being exposed to honest history. Just a few years ago, Michigan legislators tried to decimate our social studies curriculum by limiting references to the Ku Klux Klan and the NAACP, among other topics; more recently, they advanced bills to restrict how teachers talk about racism, gender, sexual orientation, and sexism in the classroom. But when we elect leaders dedicated to honest history and inclusiveness, we're better able to fight off these threats and bring widespread improvements to public education in our country.

If we elected more leaders who shared our priorities, we could not only address our teacher shortage and inequitable school

funding problems but also grow our unions as we demonstrate that we respect and value all those who work in education—from the employees who prepare food, clean buildings, and drive buses to those who work with students in the classroom.

Our governor, Gretchen Whitmer, gets that. As an advocate for public education, she has increased funding for our schools and vetoed bills that would have funneled public funds to private schools. She has been steadfast in her support of our students and educators despite fierce opposition—and even threats to her life. Just a year ago, there was a plot to kidnap her, which is a clear sign of the danger our democracy is in when under the wrong leadership at the highest levels.

Governor Whitmer has an ambitious plan for investing in public education and pandemic recovery for our students on a scale we haven't seen in decades. It's important for us to reelect her this year so that she can continue to push for the changes that we need in Michigan.

NICOLE: In New York, our challenge for the upcoming election is mainly keeping likeminded leaders in office so that the progress we've made doesn't get overturned. Thanks to the leaders we elected, we haven't struggled with book bans or attacks on academic freedom like other states have—but we can't become complacent. The pendulum can swing suddenly, and we could easily end up with educational policies that hurt our students and our members.

That's why NYSUT has built a strong, well-structured political arm to help us fight for the education our students deserve. Part of my work as a NYSUT at large director (which is a regional elected position) is ensuring that we support local political candidates, including school board candidates, who will advocate for public education. We also have regional political action coordinators who work with state and federal representatives on education legislation and a 100-member committee of local leaders that lobbies as one collective for the issues we care about.

We've won significant victories for our students and members. We passed reform in our retirement system so that workers serving our state have access to a fair pension. We won an overhaul of the time-consuming, expensive performance-based assessment required to become a certified teacher in New York state—which was exacerbating our already critical teacher shortage—and are replacing it with a more equitable process. And after a lawsuit against the state, we've finally been able to get much-needed funds released for our schools that the state has owed our districts for decades.

EDITORS: What, in your opinion, is the end goal of officials who do not want to invest in public education?

NICOLE: I think there's an agenda to privatize our education system. In New York, the first step is to dramatically increase the number of charter schools. We see this in the receivership law that we've been fighting for years, which is just a convenient way for policymakers to turn our system over to charters. The law has destroyed so many schools in the name of "school improvement" by adding onerous and punitive regulations on top of the accountability measures schools must meet under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). When a school goes into a receivership designation, the testing and data reporting requirements to show the state that we're doing what's best to turn the school around are terrible for

our students because they take too much time away from teaching and building relationships. Many teachers have reported spending about 40 percent of their instructional time on these requirements; they have also been given scripted curricula and pacing guides that are developmentally inappropriate for students.

Meanwhile, the charter schools that drain money from traditional public schools aren't held to the same standards. NYSUT is fighting for federal legislation to ensure an equal level of accountability between traditional public schools and charter schools. It's a huge undertaking, but we need to see change.



COURTESY OF NICOLE CAPSELLO

ANDREW: In Florida, there's a clear agenda to eliminate public schools and create a universal voucher system. Some people refer to it as education savings accounts or scholarships, but the idea is the same: they want to wash their hands of the idea of public education for all. Texas Governor Greg Abbott essentially admitted this when he said he was considering a challenge to a longstanding Supreme Court ruling that access to public education is a constitutional requirement for all children in the United States, including undocumented children. This extremist idea that we don't need to educate people has been seen elsewhere in the world, and we know it doesn't work. Not only that—it's anti-American. America was founded on the premise that we need an educated electorate. And if you consider our country's history of voter suppression, it's largely been based on trying to keep people from getting the education they need to participate in our democracy.

The privatization agenda is also clear in the coordinated attacks on our schools and teachers. Our country is experiencing the worst teacher shortage I've ever seen, but instead of crafting solutions to recruit more teachers and keep experienced teachers in the profession, those who are anti-public education are vilifying teachers and pushing the false narrative that our students are being taught to hate themselves—or to hate law enforcement, as our governor has claimed. It's an attempt to turn families against teachers and cause families to doubt what they overwhelmingly believe: our teachers care about and want to do right by their students.

REBECCA: I absolutely think the long-term trajectory of disinvestment is about maintaining power and control by having a less well-educated population. Highly educated voters are a threat to some people, so higher education becomes a threat. There are also anti-tax

warriors who don't want to do anything that requires public money, even things like education that have a multiplier effect for society.

Education is a societal good; economists have repeatedly shown that an educated society can better innovate and compete in the global economy. That's why we fund K-12 for all students, and it's one of the reasons we need to invest more into higher education for all. But this objection to education is not just about the money; some anti-tax proponents have an ulterior motive to restrict who has access to education. This becomes clearer when you see that the political attacks on higher education—particularly claims that maintaining adequate funding for public colleges and universities was unaffordable—began after people of color started accessing higher education in greater numbers. It's a form of gatekeeping (different from prior generations' segregation) driven by a politics of grievance: "Why should we invest when those who look like us are not benefiting?" Now that the student body is more diverse, many elected officials see higher education as an individual good, not a societal good. The same thinking underlies rhetoric against student debt cancellation: "We didn't make that choice; we shouldn't be subsidizing it." Encouraging people to think that their money should not be spent on anything that they don't directly benefit from is a strategy to sow division, make higher education and all the doors it opens less accessible, and keep middle and working-class people from building solidarity.

TERRENCE: As Andrew said, many states are trying to get out of the business of educating the public, so yes, this is an attempt to dismantle public education. But I love that Rebecca brought up solidarity, because I also think the attacks on public education and attempts to divide the middle and working classes are deeply rooted in an effort to weaken unions. That's why the attacks blaming teachers for the ills of public education are being used to eliminate tenure protections and strip our ability to collectively bargain teacher placement, observations, or discipline.

An electorate that has been weakened by the undermining of its unions is less likely to show up at the ballot box and fight back. We've seen that here in Detroit—a town that was once extremely union strong but has continued to lose at the ballot box for years. We're just starting to reengage and gain back some power, and we have to use it to get folks to participate in elections and in our democracy. That's the only way our city will see real change.



LORI HIGGINS / CHALKBEAT

EDITORS: What are some of the issues driving you to vote?

NICOLE: When I go home and take my union hat off, I am a mom, a wife, a daughter, a sister, and a strong independent woman. What do I want from our elected officials? I want rights and protections for women and children that are at least equal to the rights and protections that guns have. I want to know that my daughters will not have to battle, like I have, to pull up a seat at any table they choose and have their voices heard without being immediately knocked down a notch for being women. I want us to elect people who want equality and human rights to be protected—and I want us to vote out those officials that don't value all humans equally.

REBECCA: We are in a critical time right now because the priorities of many of our elected leaders show that they don't value all humans equally. So many of the issues we've talked about here disproportionately affect people who are already marginalized: Black and brown communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people who need access to and choices regarding reproductive healthcare. I think any hope of getting significant investments in public education and stronger protections for these communities (and all who work in education) depends on the outcome of our next election.

I'm also concerned with broader issues like mass incarceration and the legalization of cannabis that might not seem closely connected but are critical to educators if we're serious about prioritizing equity and education. Mass incarceration is much more expensive than education, and it robs people, especially Black people and others of color, of opportunities to make a living, to support a family, and to survive, let alone thrive, in our society. And we can't have a discussion about cannabis without acknowledging the racially discriminatory laws that harmed cannabis users and dealers of color far more than their white counterparts. White people have long used and sold cannabis at the same rates but have relatively rarely been ensnared in the criminal justice system. Legalizing cannabis not only potentially rights this injustice but also creates a massive taxable good that can be invested in our priorities—like education.

ANDREW: I'm concerned about mental health and the ways that the strain of the last two and a half years—and the dramatic decrease in our civility to each other in that time—are impacting our children. We've heard from a lot of our members that student discipline issues are at an all-time high, and a lot of that has to do with what students are seeing in society. Not only are they still experiencing the stress and anxiety of dealing with a pandemic, but they're also witnessing the fallout from a very politically divided country: disagreements devolving into name calling and physical altercations, the storming of the capitol on January 6th, and generally reprehensible behavior unbecoming of adults and citizens of our country—some of whom are our students' family members. This is all impacting their behavior, and it does not bode well for the mental health of our students or our members.

We need to be able to talk with each other without incivility and without overruling or shutting down anyone we disagree with. We need to be able to teach honest history—the good and the bad—without fear of being silenced or losing our jobs. This is how our students will learn how our democracy works. This is how we give them the education they deserve and need.

TERRENCE: I've been thinking a lot lately about what our students deserve and need. Over the past two years I've had more conversations with my 15-year-old son about three things than any other topics: health, safety, and security. We talk about health because he and his classmates have been afraid for their physical health during this pandemic, and at the same time their mental health has suffered because of all they've seen and endured with the rising racism, police brutality, and attacks on Black, brown, and other marginalized people in this country. We talk about safety because my son doesn't know if police are going to attack him when he walks to the store or if white supremacists are going to hurl racial epithets—or worse—at him as he's representing his team at a basketball game or a track meet. We talk about security because our school buildings should be sanctuaries for students, but at any moment, someone who ought not have a gun can turn schools into places of chaos, death, and fear.

Our children are concerned about their health, safety, and security more than at any other time in our recent history. And we need people in office who are going to see them as human beings who deserve to be happy, healthy, and whole. I look at my son and at young people around the country who are standing up for these three issues, and I feel hopeful about the future because I know our children are concerned about the right things. What's important to them—getting back to being decent to one another and caring for each other—is what should be important to us.

EDITORS: How can members get involved?

REBECCA: Vote. Even if no candidate or policy platform is perfectly aligned with your own goals, the outcome of our elections is so critical that we must participate. But voting is the minimum; for union members, it's where our work should begin. There are so many opportunities to get involved leading up to an election: you can volunteer for text or phone banking to encourage others to vote. You can volunteer to go door to door in your own state or go to a swing state or swing district to help register voters—or just help get out the word about when and where people can vote.

After the election, we need to follow up with ongoing activism, working with the people we elected to have our priorities heard and acted on. We also must work in solidarity with our coworkers and communities to hold our candidates accountable and make sure they continue to be strong, effective advocates.

I think we're in a moment now when people are excited about unions and the labor movement. There are some tremendously energizing organizing drives going on across the country, and it's essential that we see ourselves as part of a broader movement to build a nation that is better and more just for all working people.

TERRENCE: Voting is the minimum that we can do, but we have to start there. People are questioning our democracy now more than ever, and false claims about “fake news” and the “Stop the Steal” lie have damaged people's belief in government and in voting. But voting is an essential vehicle for change. If we're going to restore the belief that government can work for the people, we have to prove we believe it ourselves and vote.

It may sound impossible because of the financial challenges we've discussed that are facing educators, but we also have to donate. It costs money to support candidates and causes we believe



COURTESY OF REBECCA KOLINS GIVAN

in, and we shouldn't be afraid to give as much as we can to help amplify our messages and our priorities.

And we need to talk with each other—yes, about the challenges we face, but also about our hopes for the future. In a national conversation that is too often focused on blaming teachers for what's wrong with public education, we should be lifting up our profession and proudly sharing our accomplishments and the ways that we show up, every day, for our students and communities.

ANDREW: Educators vote for the same reasons that we show up for our students every day: we are passionate about helping others and we care deeply about our students' futures. But we could do a better job of bringing everyone we know with us to the polls and making sure they also vote to support our public schools. And we could do a better job of building relationships with our elected officials, whether we agree with them or not, and finding ways to get the resources our schools need and our students deserve.

We can also advocate for our profession in our communities. We need to talk about our challenges—that we struggle to put food on the table for our families and how we routinely put the needs of others' children ahead of our own children. People know that teachers do amazing things, but they don't really understand the sacrifices that we make. We do ourselves a disservice when we miss opportunities to amplify our message and help create change.

Avenues like the AFT Teacher Leader Program are another opportunity to elevate our profession and our priorities. We need to assert ourselves as the education leaders we are, instead of continuing to allow nonpractitioners to influence our curricula and shape our policies. We are the experts, and we need to reclaim our profession.

NICOLE: I couldn't agree more. Educators know what our students need; that's why NYSUT supports and trains past and present educators to run for school boards and other offices. Through our Member Organizing Institute held each summer, NYSUT also helps members elevate public education issues and priorities. And this year, we're sending members into our communities to register people to vote and rally support for the candidates we'd like to see elected in November.

There's much at stake in every election, but the upcoming elections are critical for all who care about public education in this country. That's why we all need to vote, and beyond that, why we need to be active in the work of our union to effect change for our students, schools, and education professionals. Together, we can create a path to a better life and a better world for us all. □

The Benefits of Collective Action

Why Overcoming Racism and Inequity Is Good for All of Us



By Heather McGhee

“Why can’t we have nice things?” Perhaps there’s been a time when you’ve pondered exactly this question. And by nice things, you weren’t thinking about hovercraft or laundry that does itself. You were thinking about more basic aspects of a high-functioning society, like adequately funded schools or

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reliable infrastructure, wages that keep workers out of poverty or a public health system to handle pandemics. The “we” who can’t seem to have nice things is Americans, all Americans. This includes the white Americans who are the largest group of the uninsured and the impoverished as well as the Americans of color who are disproportionately so. “We” is all of us who have watched generations of American leadership struggle to solve big problems and reliably improve the quality of life for most people.

“Why can’t we have nice things?” was a question that struck me pretty early on in life—growing up as I did in an era of rising inequality, seeing the wealthy neighborhoods boom while the schools and parks where most of us lived fell into disrepair. My family and my neighbors were always hustling. I now know we were in what economists call “the fragile middle class,” all income from volatile earnings and no inherited wealth or assets to fall back on. We were the kind of middle class in the kind of community that kept us proximate to real poverty, and I think this shaped the way I see the world. My mother took us with

her to work in Chicago’s notorious Robert Taylor public housing projects while she gave health lessons to young mothers, and some of my earliest playmates were kids with disabilities in a group home where she also worked. (It seemed she was always working.) We had cousins and neighbors who had more than we did, and some who had far less, but we never learned to peg that to their worth. It just wasn’t part of our story.

My father turned 18 the year the Voting Rights Act was signed; my mother did when the Fair Housing Act was signed three years later. That meant that my parents were in the first generation of Black Americans to live full adult lives with explicitly racist barriers lowered enough for them even to glimpse the so-called American Dream. And just as they did, the rules changed to dim the lights on it, for everyone. In the mid-1960s, the American Dream was as easy to achieve as it ever was or has been since, with good union jobs, subsidized home ownership, strong financial protections, a high minimum wage, and a high tax rate that funded American research, infrastructure, and education. But in the following decades, rapid changes

to tax, labor, and trade laws meant that an economy that used to look like a football, fatter in the middle, was shaped like a bow tie by my own 18th birthday, with a narrow middle class and bulging ends of high- and low-income households.

Even in the supposedly good economic times before the COVID-19 pandemic, 40 percent of adults were not paid enough to reliably meet their needs for housing, food, healthcare, and utilities. Only about two out of three workers had jobs with basic benefits: health insurance, a retirement account (even one they had to fund themselves), or paid time off for illness or caregiving.

Upward mobility, the very essence of the American idea, has become stagnant. On the other end, money is still being made: the 350 biggest corporations pay their CEOs 278 times what they pay their average workers, up from a 58-to-1 ratio in 1989, and nearly two dozen companies have CEO-to-worker pay gaps of over 1,000 to 1. The richest 1 percent own as much wealth as the entire middle class.

Why? Why was there a constituency at all for policies that would make it harder for more people to have a decent life? And why did so many people seem to blame the last folks in line for the American Dream—Black and brown people and new immigrants who had just started to glimpse it when it became harder to reach—for economic decisions they had no power to influence? When I came across a study by two Boston-based scholars, titled “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” something clicked. I decided to pay the study authors a visit.

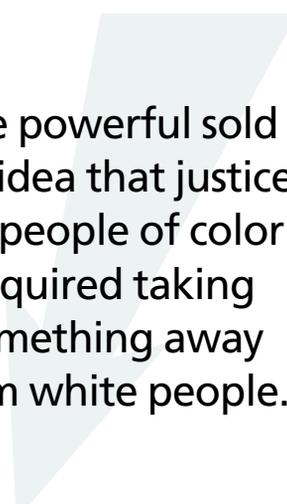
It was a hot late-summer day when I walked into the inner courtyard at Harvard Business School to meet with Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers, professors of business and psychology, respectively. They had begun their research during the first Obama administration, when a white Tea Party movement drove a backlash against the first Black president’s policy agenda. They had been interested in why so many white Americans felt they were getting left behind, despite the reality of continued white dominance in US life, from corporations to government. What Norton and Sommers found in their research grabbed headlines: the white survey respondents rated anti-white bias as more prevalent in society than anti-Black bias. On a scale of 1 to 10, the average white scoring of anti-Black

bias was 3.6, but whites rated anti-white bias as a 4.7, and opined that anti-white bias had accelerated sharply in the mid-1970s.

“We were shocked. It’s so contrary to the facts, of course, but here we are, getting calls and emails from white people who saw the headlines and thanked us for revealing the truth about racism in America!” said Norton with a dry laugh.

“It turns out that the average white person views racism as a zero-sum game,” added Sommers. “If things are getting better for Black people, it must be at the expense of white people.”

As to why white Americans, who have 13 times the median household wealth of Black Americans, feel threatened by dimin-



The powerful sold the idea that justice for people of color required taking something away from white people.

ished discrimination against Black people, neither Sommers nor Norton had an answer that was satisfying to any of us.

I needed to find out. I sensed that this core idea that’s so resonant with many white Americans—there’s an us and a them, and what’s good for them is bad for us—was at the root of our country’s dysfunction. To uproot this zero-sum idea, we’ll need first to understand when, and why, it was planted.

Our Zero-Sum Founding

The story of this country’s rise from a starving colony to a world superpower can’t be told without the central character of race—specifically, the creation of a “racial” hierarchy to justify the theft of Indigenous land and the enslavement of African and Indigenous people. In the 17th century, influential Europeans were starting to create taxonomies of human beings based on skin color, religion, culture, and geography, aiming not just to differentiate but to rank

humanity in terms of inherent worth. This hierarchy—backed by pseudo-scientists, explorers, and even clergy—gave Europeans moral permission to exploit and enslave. So, from the United States’ colonial beginnings, progress for those considered white did come directly at the expense of people considered nonwhite. The US economy depended on systems of exploitation—on literally taking land and labor from racialized others to enrich white colonizers and slaveholders. This made it easy for the powerful to sell the idea that the inverse was also true: that liberation or justice for people of color would necessarily require taking something away from white people.

With each generation, the specter of this founding zero sum has found its way back into the American story. It has always optimally benefited only the few while limiting the potential of the rest of us, and therefore the whole. In decade after decade, threats of job competition—between men and women, immigrants and native born, Black and white—have perennially revived the fear of loss at another’s gain. The people setting up the competition and spreading these fears were never the needy job seekers, but the elite. (Consider the *New York Herald’s* publishing tycoon, James Gordon Bennett Sr., who warned the city’s white working classes during the 1860 election that “if Lincoln is elected, you will have to compete with the labor of four million emancipated negroes.”)

The narrative that white people should see the well-being of people of color as a threat to their own is one of the most powerful subterranean stories in America. Until we destroy the idea, opponents of progress can always unearth it and use it to block any collective action that benefits us all. Today, the racial zero-sum story is resurgent because there is a political movement invested in ginning up white resentment toward lateral scapegoats (similarly or worse-situated people of color) to escape accountability for a massive redistribution of wealth from the many to the few.

Racial, and Government, Resentment

As someone who’s spent a career in politics, where the specter of the typical white moderate has perennially trimmed the sails of policy ambition, I was surprised to learn that in the 1950s, the majority of white Americans believed in an activist government role in people’s economic lives—a

more activist role, even, than contemplated by today's average liberal. According to the authoritative American National Elections Studies (ANES) survey, 65 percent of white people in 1956 believed that the government ought to guarantee a job to anyone who wanted one and provide a minimum standard of living in the country. White support cratered for these ideas between 1960 and 1964, however—from nearly 70 percent to 35 percent—and has stayed low ever since. (The overwhelming majority of Black Americans have remained enthusiastic about this idea over 50 years of survey data.) What happened?

In August 1963, white Americans tuned in to the March on Washington (which was for “Jobs and Freedom”). They saw the nation’s capital overtaken by a group of mostly Black activists demanding not just an end to discrimination, but some of the same economic ideas that had been overwhelmingly popular with white people: a jobs guarantee for all workers and a higher minimum wage. When I saw that white support for these ideas crumbled in 1964, I guessed it might have been because Black people were pushing to expand the circle of beneficiaries across the color line. But then again, perhaps it was just a coincidence, the beginning of a new antigovernment ideol-

ogy among white people that had nothing to do with race? After all, white support for these government commitments to economic security has stayed low for the rest of the years of ANES data, through a sea change in racial attitudes.

Conservatives’ real agenda was to blunt government’s ability to challenge concentrated wealth and corporate power.

It turns out that the dominant story most white Americans believe about race adapted to the civil rights movement’s success, and a new form of racial disdain took over: racism based not on biology but on perceived culture and behavior. As professors Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders

put it in *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*, “today, we say, prejudice is preoccupied less with inborn ability and more with effort and initiative.” Kinder and Sanders defined this more modern manifestation of anti-Black hostility among whites as “racial resentment.” They measured racial resentment using a combination of agree/disagree statements on the ANES that spoke to the Black work ethic, how much discrimination Black people had faced as compared to European immigrants, and whether the government was more generous to Black people than to white people. They found that “although whites’ support for the principles of racial equality and integration have increased majestically over the last four decades, their backing for policies designed to bring equality and integration about has scarcely increased at all. Indeed in some cases white support has actually declined.”

So how to explain the racial resentment and the correlated antigovernment sentiments by the 1980s? By then, white folks had seemed to acclimate themselves to a new reality of social equality under the law. The overt messages of racial inferiority had dissipated, and popular culture had advanced new norms of multiculturalism and tolerance. What stopped advancing, however, was the economic trajectory of

The Sum of Us

This book recounts my journey to tally the hidden costs of racism to us all. It starts where my own journey began, trying to understand how the rules of our economy became so tilted toward the already wealthy and powerful. I traveled to Mississippi and sat with factory workers trying to unite a multiracial workforce to bargain collectively for better pay and benefits. I talked to white homeowners who had lost everything in a financial crisis that began with the predatory mortgages that banks first created to strip wealth from Black and brown families. To understand when white America had turned against government, I traveled to one of the many places where the town had drained its public

swimming pool rather than integrate it.

As the descendant of enslaved Africans and of a line of Black Americans who were denied housing, equal education, jobs, and even safety from white lynch mobs, I am well aware that the ledger of racial harms is nowhere near balanced. This book amasses evidence for a part of the story I believe we are neglecting at our peril, but rather than shift focus from racism’s primary targets, I hope this story brings more people’s eyes—and hearts—to the cause.

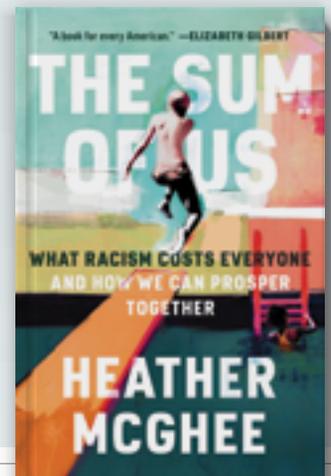
Black writers before me, from James Baldwin to Toni Morrison, have made the point that racism is a poison first consumed by its concoctors. What’s clearer now in our time

of growing inequality is that the economic benefit of the racial bargain is shrinking for all but the richest. The logic that launched the zero-sum paradigm—I will profit at your expense—is no longer sparing millions of white Americans from the degradations of American economic life as people of color have always known it.

The zero-sum paradigm is not just counterproductive; it’s a lie that has only ever truly served a narrow group of people. To this day, the wealthy and the powerful are still selling the zero-sum story for their own profit, hoping to keep people with much in common from making common cause with one another. But not everyone is buying it. Everywhere I went, I found that the people

who had replaced the zero sum with a new formula of cross-racial solidarity had found the key to unlocking what I began to call a “Solidarity Dividend,” from higher wages to cleaner air, made possible through collective action.

—H. M.



most American families—and it was on this terrain that racial resentment dug in.

While racial barriers were coming down across society, new class hurdles were going up—and the Inequality Era was born. That era began in the 1970s, but the policies cohered into an agenda guided by antigovernment conservatism under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Reagan, a Californian, was determined to take the Southern Strategy (launched by President Nixon) national. In southern politics, federally mandated school integration had revived for a new generation the Civil War idea of government as a boogeyman, threatening to upend the natural racial order at the cost of white status and property. The Reagan campaign’s insight was that northern white people could be sold the same explicitly antigovernment, implicitly pro-white story, with the protagonists as white taxpayers seeking defense from a government that wanted to give their money to undeserving and lazy people of color in the ghettos. (The fact that government policy created the ghettos and stripped the wealth and job opportunities from their residents was not part of the story. Nor was the fact that people of color pay taxes, too, often a larger share of their incomes due to regressive sales, property, and payroll taxes.)

My law professor Ian Haney López helped me connect the dots in his 2014 book *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. “Plutocrats use dog-whistle politics to appeal to whites with a basic formula,” Haney López told me. “First, fear people of color. Then, hate the government (which coddles people of color). Finally, trust the market and the 1 percent.” He went on, “Dog-whistle politics is gaslighting on a massive scale: stoking racism through insidious stereotyping while denying that racism has anything to do with it.”

As Haney López points out, priming white voters with racist dog whistles was the means; the end was an economic agenda that was harmful to working- and middle-class voters of all races, including white people. In railing against welfare and the war on poverty, conservatives like Reagan told white voters that government was the enemy, because it favored Black and brown people over them—but their real agenda was to blunt government’s ability to challenge concentrated wealth and corporate power. The hurdle conservatives faced was

that they needed the white majority to turn against society’s two strongest vessels for collective action: the government and labor unions. Racism was the ever-ready tool for the job, undermining white Americans’ faith in their fellow Americans. And it worked: Reagan cut taxes on the wealthy but raised them on the poor, waged war on the unions that were the backbone of the white middle class, and slashed domestic spending. And he did it with the overwhelming support of the white working and middle classes.

Political scientists Woojin Lee and John Roemer studied the rise of antigovernment politics in the late 1970s, ’80s, and early ’90s and found that the Republican Party’s adoption of policies that voters perceived as anti-Black (opposition to affirmative action and welfare, harsh policing and sentencing) won them millions more white voters than their unpopular economic agenda would have attracted. The result was a revolution in American economic policy: from high marginal tax rates and generous public investments in the middle class, such as the GI Bill, to a low-tax, low-investment regime that resulted in less than 1 percent annual income growth for 90 percent of American families for 30 years. When you cut government services, as Reagan strategist Lee Atwater said, “Blacks get hurt worse than whites.” What’s lost in that formulation is just how much white people get hurt, too.

Diversity Is Our Superpower

The mounting challenges we face in society are going to require strength and scale that none of us can achieve on their own. The crises of climate change, inequality, pandemics, and mass involuntary movements of people are already here, and in the United States, each has exposed the poverty of our public capacity to prevent and react. The refusal to share across race has created a society with nothing left for itself. With falling support for government over the past 50 years has come falling support for taxes, a brain drain from the public sector, and a failure to add to (or even steward) the infrastructure investments of the early 20th century.

Since this country’s founding, we have not allowed our diversity to be our superpower, and the result is that the United States is not more than the sum of its disparate parts. But it could be. And if it were, all of us would prosper. In short, we must emerge from this crisis in our republic



with a new birth of freedom, rooted in the knowledge that we are so much more when the “We” in “We the People” is not some of us, but all of us. We are greater than, and greater for, the sum of us.

After 50 years of disinvestment that hurts all of us, we are finally, if tentatively and precariously, beginning to reinvest. America’s new, multiracial governing majority has demanded an ambitious agenda to use the power of the government to address the country’s urgent needs. Upon taking office, the Biden administration announced a set of plans that read like a list of the “nice things” we’ve so long gone without: a massive infrastructure upgrade, aggressive action to stop climate change, tuition-free community college, universal elder care and childcare, paid family leave, a \$15 national minimum wage, more generous public healthcare benefits, and extra federal dollars to coax states to expand Medicaid.

Not every promise and intention has yet made it into law, but I have to admit that the Build Back Better agenda (the American Rescue Plan and the Jobs and Families plans) represents a new era in American policymaking, and a turn away from the austerity of the Inequality Era.

Our nation is beginning to tell a different story about who we are to one another. The well-funded, cynical backlash is only a desperate attempt to hold back the tide. And as more and more of us come together, across lines of race and origin, to demand and work toward the dividends of solidarity, our newfound power will shape our common future. □

For notes with sources, see *The Sum of Us*, by Heather McGhee, from which this article was excerpted with permission.



Pay Attention

Democracy Is on the Ballot

By Jeffrey C. Isaac and William Kristol

The 2020 election was a watershed moment for American democracy: it was the first time in the long history of the republic that a sitting president refused to recognize the results of an election, and that the normal transfer of power was challenged through secret subterfuge efforts and intentional misinformation designed to inspire public agitation, resulting in violence.

American democracy weathered that initial phase of the storm: key state election officials remained committed to the rule of law, the January 6 insurrection was quashed, and the effort to prevent the smooth transfer of power was defeated. But the storm only abated. It did not end. Indeed, in some ways, the storm has only intensified in the year and a half that has followed. And now, the elections of 2022 and 2024 represent inflection points in the history of American democracy.

This is not the first time that elections have really mattered. The election of 1860—when it was all but guaranteed that the victory of anti-slavery candidate Abraham Lincoln would push the United States into civil war—springs to mind; so does the election of 1932, when voters faced a choice between continuing with the incumbent whose policies had worsened the Great Depression or gambling on the big promises of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal.

In a way, the crisis that we face today is less dramatic than the crises of those eras. But the outcomes of our upcoming elections will nonetheless play a crucial role in determining the future of democracy in our country—and thus in the world.

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These elections are the first full tests of our electoral system since the crisis of the 2020 election, in which President Trump and his faction tried to overturn the election results and to prevent the inauguration of Joe Biden. That was a major stress test of American democracy. The fact that the political system barely survived the test should induce no false comfort.

In addition, the 2022 election (and 2024 as well, if pro-democracy leaders are not elected in 2022) will take place under new rules that have been instituted since the 2020 election. These rules, enacted by the Republican Party in a range of battleground states, are designed in many cases to make voting harder for people who historically have voted mainly for Democrats. Even more ominously, they are designed to empower Republican Party loyalists to administer elections, count the votes, and even decide who wins and who loses in their states.¹

The Trump faction, which controls the Republican National Committee and the party more generally, has continued to spread the big lie that Trump really won and Biden’s inauguration was illegitimate. Polls indicate that large numbers of Republicans believe this.² And many Republican candidates in 2022 are campaigning on it.³

On the basis of this big lie, Republicans have succeeded in reshaping state election laws to suit their purpose. They have made it easier to subvert Democratic election victories in the future and thus tilt the political playing field in their favor.

These election law changes are important.

The poisoning of public opinion, and the creation of an enormous reservoir of public skepticism about elections in general, is perhaps more important.

And as a result, it is not an exaggeration to say that democracy itself is on the ballot this November and in 2024.

Our shared concern over these coming challenges prompted this somewhat unusual writing partnership. We first came together in the fall of 2021, along with our recently departed friend and colleague, Todd Gitlin. One of us (Kristol) was a leader of what used to be known as neoconservatism and the editor of a lead-

ing conservative magazine; the other two (Gitlin and Isaac) were writers and activists on the democratic left and members of the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine. We came together as fellow citizens motivated by a similar fear about the fate of our democracy. Through many conversations, we discovered the depth of our shared convictions about the threats to, but also the inestimable worth of, our democracy. So we became friends and collaborators, even as we continued to be divided by real differences of opinion about matters of history, policy, and our hopes for the future.

Together, we organized an open letter calling attention to the threats faced by our democracy that was published in October 2021, with dozens of signers like us—experts with a range of political beliefs united in our desire to protect our democracy.⁴ And though Todd passed away not long after we began planning this article, we have continued sounding the alarm because we know that addressing this crisis will require all of us to work together.

In this article, we explain how the developments described above have seriously challenged our democracy and why these impairments are so dangerous. We briefly reflect on what this means for all of us and conclude with a focus on our civic duty: it is up to us to stand against those who seek to impair our democracy and to support those seeking to protect free and fair democratic elections and a free and pluralistic public life.

How the Republican Party Is Tilting the Playing Field

The Brennan Center for Justice is an independent, nonpartisan, and highly respected law and policy organization that publishes reports on questions of election security and the freedom and fairness of elections in the United States. It regularly publishes voting laws roundups documenting the status of election laws in every state. These reports show a dramatic increase in the number of laws, all pressed by statehouse Republicans, to restrict voting and potentially impair the fairness of the vote counting process under the guise of protecting the integrity of elections.⁵

These laws take different forms in different states, but their basic contours are similar and consist of voting restrictions and partisan administering of elections.

Voting Restrictions

In the past year, there has been a concerted effort to use the law to make voting more difficult by doing some or all of the following:

- limiting who can vote by mail-in ballot
- establishing new barriers to applying for mail-in ballots
- prohibiting the sending of unsolicited mail-in applications or ballots
- restricting how mail-in ballots can be returned, including eliminating drop boxes
- creating new grounds for rejecting mail-in ballots
- enacting onerous voter identification requirements and mechanisms for enforcement
- limiting Sunday voting
- limiting the number of polling places and drop boxes, particularly in communities that tend to vote for Democrats

Some of these laws involve criminal liability for voters who improperly fill out or submit ballots. Others involve criminal liability for election officials who are allegedly insufficiently strict in enforcing the new restrictions.

One law that has received much media attention is Georgia SB 202, which was enacted in March 2021.⁶ Along with many other voting restrictions, the new law makes it a crime to distribute water or snacks to voters waiting in line, a practice voter participation groups in Georgia adopted to help voters endure what were already “notoriously long wait times in some elections.”⁷

A similar bill, SB 90, took effect in Florida in May 2021. Although a federal judge barred the state from enforcing parts of the law, ruling that it was an unconstitutional and partisan effort to suppress voters—and particularly Black voters⁸—that ruling was overturned in May 2022.⁹

While there is strong evidence of the racial effects of such laws, political scientists debate whether they have a substantial partisan effect in decreasing voter turnout. But there can be no question that these laws are being actively promoted by Republicans who believe that Democrats have cheated by encouraging “invalid voters” to vote. The real challenge for our democracy is that many of these Republicans, animated by extremists, believe that “invalid voters” include people of color, people with low incomes, and students. And it is equally clear that the purpose of such laws is to make it harder for these citizens to vote. To make their voter suppression seem more palatable, many Republicans claim that they are striving to protect our democracy by preventing undocumented immigrants, people who live outside the voting district, and people who vote more than once or on behalf of dead people, for example, to vote.¹⁰ But such voter fraud is essentially nonexistent.¹¹

The outcomes of our upcoming elections will play a crucial role in determining the future of democracy in our country.

Partisan Election Administration and Vote Counting

Republicans have also introduced bills that affect how elections are administered after the votes are cast. In 2021, there was a big jump in the number of bills that could make it possible for Republicans to do what they tried and failed to do in 2020: sabotage fair elections so that their preferred candidates win.¹² As the Brennan Center documents, “The most extreme of these ‘election sabotage’ bills would have allowed partisan officials to simply reject election results.”¹³

Election sabotage bills have taken a number of forms; they might

- initiate or allow biased citizen reviews or audits of elections in ways that lack transparency, show disregard for the security of election data, and make it easy for political operatives to cast suspicion on the credibility of elections;
- expand criminal law enforcement powers over election affairs or establish new prosecutorial authorities;
- impose new criminal or civil penalties on election officials; or
- allow state legislatures to remove professional election officials, shift authority over election administration away from election officials, or simply override the determinations of election officials and assume authority for deciding electoral winners and losers.



It is up to us to stand against those who seek to impair our democracy.

These are not just extreme bills to rally the Far Right base; some are becoming laws. For example, Florida's SB 524,¹⁴ which was signed in April 2022, creates a state Office of Election Crimes and Security with a police force to investigate allegations of voter fraud—a forceful reminder of the South's history of voter intimidation by law enforcement.

In April 2021, a full year before Florida created its election police force, three democracy-oriented groups—the States United Democracy Center, Protect Democracy, and Law Forward—had already produced a report on these efforts to politicize, criminalize, and interfere with the administration of elections. The report sums up the problem in stark terms:

These are substantial changes that, if enacted, could make elections unworkable, render results far more difficult to finalize, and in the worst-case scenario, allow state legislatures to substitute their preferred candidates for those chosen by the voters. American democracy relies on the losers of elections respecting the results and participating in a peaceful transition of power. If, instead, the losing party tries to override the will of the voters, that would be the death knell for our system of government.¹⁵

And in July 2021, the National Task Force on Election Crises published a report that also makes clear how dangerous these developments are for American democracy:

Any legislative activity premised on lies and conspiracy theories is deeply concerning. But recent efforts by highly partisan state legislatures to interfere in election administration in a way that may disrupt the conduct of elections or allow for manipulation of election outcomes pose a particularly acute risk of future crises. Combined with a failure to address critical weaknesses in our election systems and protect election workers, as well as a failure to address the root causes of the January 6th insurrection, these efforts are a threat to the very foundation of our democracy.... [and] pose an especially urgent threat of future election crises.¹⁶

The fact that so many reputable, nonpartisan public interest groups are expressing such a high level of alarm is reason to take these developments seriously—and to be alarmed ourselves. Worse, the fact that their efforts to warn lawmakers and citizens have largely

gone unheeded shows that we are on the edge of a precipice. But the danger to our democracy does not end there.

The Dangerous Delegitimization of the Democratic Public Sphere

The legislative changes we describe above have been accompanied by a broader incitement of distrust and anger toward ordinary democratic political processes. These efforts have had a huge influence on the Republican Party, with many candidates in 2022 running on a platform of denying the results of the 2020 presidential election and hostility toward democratic processes.¹⁷

Without doubt, the most consequential form of this delegitimization of electoral processes has been the ongoing “Stop the Steal” rhetoric of Trump,¹⁸ who remains the leader of the Republican Party. His claims of the election being stolen from him not only help sustain his political power but also spur his followers to act in ways that further undermine our democracy.

One form that this distrust and anger has taken has been an upsurge of physical threats toward, and actual intimidation of, professional election officials. Secretaries of state, other election officials, and members of their staffs in states where Trump claims election fraud occurred have been the targets of near-constant harassment and numerous death threats, to the extent that some have had to hire private security or have 24-hour police protection.¹⁹ These threats are so serious that in June 2021, two of the top election lawyers in the country—Democrat Bob Bauer and Republican Ben Ginsberg—organized an effort to provide legal support to besieged election officials who “face threats, fines, or suspensions for doing their jobs.”²⁰

Special targets of attack have been Republican elected officials—such as Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger—who insisted on doing their duty and refusing to subvert the election results in their states in 2020.²¹ It has sadly become increasingly clear in 2022 that many Republicans want such law-abiding officials purged from their party.²²

A second form of this distrust has been a rash of partisan and unprofessional election audits that purportedly aim to boost voter confidence in the election results but instead are likely to undermine voter confidence.²³ In Arizona, for instance, an audit found no evidence of fraud (even though it was partly funded by Trump supporters and criticized as partisan and unprofessional by election experts), but the media attention generated by doing the audit spurred the spread of election misinformation.²⁴

All of this means our democratic processes and norms are at risk. America is on the verge of becoming an authoritarian state. How will we respond?

Our Responsibilities as Citizens

Our October 2021 open letter made two basic points: that American democracy was in grave danger, and that all who care about democracy ought to come together to strengthen voting rights and democratic guardrails and to oppose those who seek to weaken them.

The letter was signed by almost 50 writers, academics, and political activists from across the political spectrum. To underscore the broad, nonpartisan nature of the appeal, the letter was simultaneously published in the *New Republic*, one of the nation's oldest and most reputable liberal publications, and *The Bulwark*, a relatively new publication created by former Republicans who remain conservative yet oppose Trumpism and seek to safeguard America from it.

We were hardly alone in expressing our apprehension about democracy. A week later, over 100 former high-level national security officials published a similar letter,²⁵ and a week after that, over 100 scholars of democracy did the same.²⁶

That our democracy may be headed over a cliff is now widely understood among those who pay close attention to politics. But the danger we face seems not yet widely understood among the general public. What is to be done to defend democracy as the November 2022 and 2024 elections loom?

There is no one thing. But we would like to offer some recommendations.

As you think about these elections, be aware of what the candidates and the party platforms have to say about democracy. Do they promote versions of the big lie? Do they support the kinds of anti-democratic measures we describe above? Do they ignore or evade the question of democracy entirely? Or do they stand squarely behind democracy and support measures designed to strengthen rather than weaken it? More specifically, are they in favor of increasing access to voting, and are they honest about the security of mail-in voting, drop boxes, and other practices that make voting easier?

Elections in normal times are occasions for candidates and parties to offer policy options to voters, and for voters to choose those candidates and parties whose policies they most prefer. Tax rates. Spending priorities. Social programs. Health, safety, and environmental regulations. Education policies. These are issues about which it is possible to disagree strongly—indeed, the two authors of this article disagree about many of them. But it is the right of all citizens to freely associate with the causes they believe in, to express themselves publicly, and to vote in free and fair elections. These are not policy issues. These are matters of fundamental principle, and the principle is democracy itself.

As you think about discussing these elections with others—be they students or community members—you need not wade into the policy issues on which we all may disagree. Instead, you can highlight all that is at stake. Through your local union or another community group, you can volunteer to engage in phone banking, texting, or going door to door to call attention to the need to protect voting rights. You can also attend (or even organize) rallies to underscore the threats to our democracy. Or, if you prefer an entirely neutral way to get involved, you can volunteer for Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaigns. The goal of GOTV efforts is for every eligible person to vote—that’s all. And if you want to defend democracy, volunteering to increase voter participation is a great start.

Will we be a country where we can agree to disagree and still respect the rules of the democratic game? Where we can seek to persuade and still respect each other as individuals and fellow citizens?

Will we be a country whose elected leaders submit themselves to electoral accountability and then respect the results of elections?

These questions are up for grabs in a way that hasn’t been the case in our lifetimes. Defending our democracy is a burden and a challenge. But to be able to do our part—as others have done before us, and as others are doing now, at great risk, elsewhere in the world—is a privilege. It is a privilege of democratic citizenship. It is also a moment that we can seize or neglect. Let us rise to the occasion. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/isaac_kristol.



Teaching Students to Be Active, Responsible Participants in Our Democracy

Because young people are preparing now to make the decisions that will shape our nation for decades to come, it is important that they also understand this critical moment in our democracy.

To that end, the Albert Shanker Institute has partnered with the AFT, Share My Lesson, and the AFT Innovation Fund on the Educating for Democratic Citizenship project. The project provides action civics lessons and resources that educators can use to teach students how government systems work and how they can become informed, active participants in our democracy.

Among the dozens of resources in the collection are

- **American Citizenship—Rights and Responsibilities** (grade 3, go.aft.org/9jj): this lesson teaches concepts of citizenship for the common good, including obeying laws, voting, and respecting others’ rights.
- **Spreading Fake News** (grades 5–8, go.aft.org/tlk): this four-lesson unit teaches students how to decipher bias in sources to better participate in meaningful discussions on civic issues.
- **Right to Vote** (grades 6–8, go.aft.org/4u9): in this lesson, students consider voter suppression from a historical lens to understand why all voices must be heard in a democracy.
- **Representative Webquest** (grades 9–12, go.aft.org/61t): to learn about the impact of political representation, students use Vote Smart to research their representative’s legislative record on issues relevant to their communities.

Educators can register for on-demand sessions of the April 2022 Educating for Democratic Citizenship Conference (go.aft.org/g0j) for more strategies to increase students’ civic awareness and engagement. Topics include making civics education instruction accessible for all students; teaching voting rights; and using music, film, and literature to deepen students’ understanding of civic issues.

—EDITORS

Conspiracy *in* America

Recognizing and Confronting
Assaults on Our Democracy



SHAY HORSE / NURPHOTO VIA AP

By Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum

Watching the spread of fantastical narratives like Pizzagate, which charges Hillary Clinton with running a child sex trafficking ring out of a pizzeria in Washington, DC, we grew concerned. Although the story is outlandish, some believe it—such as Edgar Welch, who was sentenced to federal prison for firing his assault rifle in the pizzeria because he was sure children were being held captive in the basement.¹ Many others did not take the conspiracy charge literally, but still eagerly shared it on social media. Why? Pizzagate converted a legitimate partisan opponent, Hillary Clinton, into someone who represents pure evil, so that the only appropriate action is to “lock her up.” This is one example of how today’s conspiracies assault democracy. These conspiracies—“rigged elections,” “birtherism,” and “deep state,” for instance—come from the Right, but there is nothing about conservatism or the Republican Party that makes the Right the natural or only carriers of conspiracism.

Our 2019 book, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, is our effort to make sense of the startling appearance of conspiracy charges enveloping American politics. Here, we expand on that discussion of the ways

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conspiracy allegations threaten our democracy, and we describe the essential role of educators in helping students learn to critically evaluate such claims.

The most important example of current conspiracies is the “rigged election.” The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol provided a comprehensive account of the connection between the stolen election conspiracy charge and attempts by the former president to prevent the certification of the Electoral College votes in the 2020 election. Conspiracy charges were the necessary element in this, the first and only attempt in American history to prevent the peaceful, democratic transfer of power. Congresswoman Liz Cheney put it best: “Washington set the indispensable example of the peaceful transfer of power. What President Reagan called nothing less than a miracle. The sacred obligation to defend this peaceful transfer of power has been honored by every American president except one.”²

The stolen election conspiracy charge of 2020 did not come out of the blue. Donald Trump invented “rigged” in 2016 to explain why he lost the popular vote and he resorted to it again in 2018 when his party lost control of the House. And it is alive today, stalking the upcoming elections of 2022 and 2024. It is motivating efforts in the states to rewrite—and corrupt—the administration of elections.³

Conspiracy charges have distorted our politics and degraded the institutions that make our democracy work. The damage goes further, for they have also opened a path to threats, intimidation, and violence. And they know no bounds. Conspiracy charges spill over from Washington, DC, to state and local politics, workplaces, neighborhoods, and families and friends.

Conspiracies have even come to the classroom. Like civil servants in federal agencies who are cast as members of a “deep state” scheming to undermine Trump and the country, teachers are cast as subverting American values. The attack does not spring simply

from disagreements about the educational merits of curricula or the medical effectiveness of masking. It springs from the assumption that teachers are a cabal aiming to weaken the nation. So masking in schools is represented as the work of despotic school boards or teachers' unions whose purported aim is nothing less than an assault on personal liberty and parental authority.⁴ Assigned readings in K–12 are seen as the agenda of educators intent on poisoning the patriotism of children or more broadly dictating cultural attitudes that some parents disagree with.⁵ Those who see teachers as agents in a conspiracy want to microregulate what teachers say and do;⁶ for instance, in the 2022 session, the New Hampshire state legislature considered a bill that would enforce teachers' "loyalty," prohibiting not only advocacy of communism, socialism, and Marxism but any teaching that deviates from heroic accounts of the American founding by examining the influence of racism on the drafting of the Constitution.⁷

Many forces are eroding democracy around the world today, from India to Hungary to Brazil to the United States.⁸ Elected executives inclined to authoritarianism exploit constitutional loopholes and disregard settled political norms and "guardrails."⁹ The rise in conspiracy charges is another key element in the assault on democracy, and it has a character all its own. One striking feature of conspiracy allegations is that they invade and distort not only official political arenas but every domain of social life.

How did we get here?

Conspiracy Without the Theory

Conspiracy theories have always been a feature of American politics. The Declaration of Independence itself outlines a conspiracy theory that charges the British king with a scheme: a "long train of abuses" all tending to extinguish liberty in North America. Many conspiracy theories are vexing, self-validating systems of thought that attract and enmesh true believers. But some conspiratorial allegations can be true. And like the Declaration, true conspiracy theories can be liberating because they expose the covert workings of power.

The word "conspiracy" goes with "theory" naturally, but not every allegation of conspiracy is a conspiracy theory. A conspiracy *theory* is an explanation that tries to make sense of the world. It often starts with an event that is hard to understand: how a lone gunman managed to assassinate a US president, one of the most protected people in the world, or how a small band with few resources plotting from a compound in Afghanistan managed to destroy the World Trade Center and attack the Pentagon. In these examples, conspiracy theories supply a cause on par with the world-historical effect: the CIA, the Mob, or Cuba played a part in the Kennedy assassination; the US government itself plotted to destroy the World Trade Center.

For some, these often erroneous theories provide a more satisfying account than official explanations. Conspiracy *theorists* do not merely throw allegations at the wall to see what will stick. They do research, mimicking investigative journalists. They ferret out anomalies, gather evidence, and often devote their lives to connecting the dots to reveal patterns that others miss. A well-known example is Jim Garrison, the one-time New Orleans district attorney whose research on the Kennedy assassination became the basis for the 1991 Oliver Stone film *JFK*. While Garrison's assertions have been discredited, they were a genuine *theory*—an attempt to offer a better explanation than the official account by excavating previously unseen facts and evidence. Garrison was a maverick who

disputed official commissions, put himself forward as an expert, and fashioned an explanatory theory notwithstanding its defects.¹⁰

This is not to say that conspiracy theories are always well-intentioned or benign. Often, they see intentional patterns where there are only accidents or coincidences, or they feed deep-rooted prejudices. At their darkest, they scapegoat hated minorities—like blaming economic recessions on Jewish bankers.

Our purpose in introducing conspiracy theory is this: what we see enveloping American politics today is not conspiracy theory at all. It is *conspiracy without the theory*, accusations that float free of facts and events and are disconnected from serious (even if incorrect) evidentiary explanation. Just the words "hoax" or "witch hunt" dismiss any need for explanation. Conspiracy without the theory may claim to explain the world, but in fact it remakes it. Facts that are inconvenient to one's partisan loyalties are erased or denounced as "fake," and new fictions that serve political purposes are invented. Conspiracy without the theory is not an attempt to explain reality; it is an attempt to own reality.



To distinguish between allegations of conspiracy with and without theories, we use the term *conspiracism* for those allegations that disregard evidence (though we admit that there is a continuum from theory-based to theory-free charges). Relatively new communications technologies make today's conspiracism possible. With YouTube, Twitter, or TikTok, anyone can circulate their charges around the world for free. Fictional narratives like Pizzagate or QAnon—the mashup centered on the belief that Trump will arrest a cabal of liberal globalists engaged in child trafficking—are consumed by millions. The crucial payoff comes when unsupported charges are made respectable through sheer repetition.¹¹ If "a lot of people are saying it," it must be "true enough." True enough to retweet, to forward, to "like." True enough to be plausible, to affirm, and to act on. And conspiracy without the theory is easy to digest; it can be communicated in just a few characters on Twitter.

Conspiracism has distinctive appeal: it affords the immediate gratification of lashing out at those who disagree and identifying alleged political enemies. It also offers the gratification of belonging

Conspiracism remakes the world: opponents are enemies and the losers of elections are winners.

to an exclusive group, a cognoscenti with inside knowledge of how to decode the machinations of the enemy within. QAnon is not a set of propositions about the way the world is so much as it is the membership card of a club. If you “get it,” you belong.

Today’s conspiracism does not try to explain the world or hold the powerful to account in a meaningful way. Take the birther conspiracy, which posited that former president Barack Obama was constitutionally ineligible to serve in the presidency. There is no theory here at all—just fact-free fantasy of an African birth and Muslim faith that fuels and focuses political outrage.

So it is with Trump’s charge of a rigged election. The facts do not matter. He used that charge to refuse to do what every sitting president who lost an election has done since John Adams lost to Thomas Jefferson in 1800: peacefully turn over power to the opposition.

Conspiracism remakes the world into one where opponents are enemies and the losers of elections are winners. It is meant to arouse followers, stoke their anxieties, and organize and direct their fury. It is an instrument in the grab for power. And it is an irreplaceable weapon in the assault on democracy.

Conspiracism’s Three Assaults on Democracy

Conspiracists are attacking our democracy by cultivating disorientation, denigrating specialized knowledge, and delegitimizing their political opponents. Although we discuss each in turn, these strategies mutually reinforce one another.

1. Cultivating Disorientation

The initial effect of the wave of evidence-free conspiratorial charges is disorientation. For many people, an early experience of disorientation happened on the first day of the Trump administration, when the National Park Service retweeted a post with photographs comparing Trump’s and Obama’s inauguration crowds. Trump had boasted that his crowd was the biggest ever, bigger than Obama’s. When the photos showed that attendance was modest, Trump raged that the images had been doctored. His press secretary repeated the absurdity.¹²

This was not just a lie, it was a conspiracy charge: unnamed civil servants were plotting to undermine the president by manufacturing evidence that his inaugural crowd was not the biggest in history. The charge came without argument or explanation of why, how, or who among the federal government’s official photographers would maliciously distort the true record of this national event.

The accusation of doctored photos was disorienting. It insulted our common sense. We had seen the ceremonies live on television. This conspiracy charge raised in stark terms the question of what it means to know something. What would it mean to know that

the 2017 inaugural crowd was the biggest in history, in spite of the evidence of our own senses and contemporary media accounts? Conspiracism’s power is to assert over and over that our basic perceptions have no reliable foundation. The point is to make these perceptions seem unmoored and to make us doubt our capacity to observe, understand, and challenge claims. Repeated over and over, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, the charge comes to seem unassailable—or at least plausible—to many people.

2. Denigrating Specialized Knowledge

Disorientation points to a second effect of conspiracy without the theory: denigrating the knowledge necessary for governing and for assessing government (and everything else). Public policymaking requires contributions by scientists, legal experts, economists, public health professionals, the diplomatic corps, experts on national security, and many others.

To be sure, skepticism about the power of experts is warranted. Specialists may be wrong. Conclusions may be uncertain and changeable as knowledge advances, so expert advice can be confusing. Experts may also be biased or bought.* Elected democratic officials have the responsibility to weigh expert judgments and their appropriate place in making policy.

Conspiracism’s assault on knowledge does not correspond to reasoned skepticism, however. The assault is relentless and wholesale. It categorically denies the reliability of all the sources of evidence on which we depend. Only a tiny loyalist faction of the national press can be trusted. Climate science is a “hoax,” full stop. We saw a president decline to read the daily intelligence reports brought to him by his own national security team.¹³ Judgments brought by multiple courts, including the Supreme Court, and opinions by specialists in electoral law were summarily dismissed as part of the “steal.”¹⁴ Claims of deep state activity, rigged elections, and witch hunts were all that was on offer in the ceaseless rejection of unwelcome knowledge.¹⁵

The nation has paid a measurable price for conspiracists’ war against the advice of experts. Take the disregard of epidemiologists during the COVID-19 pandemic and the substitution of pseudoscience for their expertise. Trump sidelined his own medical team, recommended harmful alternative medicines, flaunted his own refusal to take precautions, and encouraged followers to resist public health measures.¹⁶ This rejection was encased in conspiracism. Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the charge goes, was conspiring to thwart Trump’s “total” authority (and Fauci’s life was threatened).¹⁷ CDC scientists were said to constitute a “resistance unit” trying to undercut Trump’s reelection by tanking the economy.¹⁸ There was even a vile conspiracy charge that the death rate was inflated by doctors who received a \$2,000 bounty for each death they claimed was because of COVID-19.¹⁹ For conspiracists, the real “invisible enemy” is not the virus but “deep state” public health officials and others who advocate stringent measures designed to prevent deaths, which reached 1 million as of May 2022 in the United States alone.²⁰

Denigrating expert knowledge is more than summarily rejecting the advice offered by doctors who study communicable diseases; it

*To learn how some corporations influence expert opinion to protect their profits, read “Mercenary Science: A Field Guide to Recognizing Scientific Disinformation” in the Winter 2021–22 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/winter2021-2022/michaels](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2021-2022/michaels).

targets their advice as lies and manipulation. It targets the evidence offered and substitutes misinformation, and it flat-out attacks the knowledge-producers themselves. As a result, there is no need to comply with expert judgments, and the stage is set for resistance.

3. Delegitimizing Political Opposition

Democracy is not only about coming together (out of many, one); it is also about pluralism and disagreement (out of many, many). To make democracy work, we must work with those who disagree with us and who, even after hearing all the arguments we can muster, continue to disagree with us. Making it impossible to peacefully disagree is one of the gravest ways conspiracism damages democracy.

The first rule of democracy is that partisan opponents are not enemies. Democracy is a political system in which the opposition will not be murdered, exiled, or locked up. Political losers will live to try again. But today's conspiracism delegitimizes opposition. We pointed out how the Pizzagate conspiracy converted Hillary Clinton from an ordinary candidate into a figure of pure evil. Conspiracism extends the designation of enemy to Democratic officials, their supporters, and even Republicans who break with the new orthodoxy—charging them all with engaging in treasonous attempts to undermine the nation. “Lock her up” did not stop at Clinton; it is alive and well in the promise made by Newt Gingrich that if Republicans retake control of Congress in the upcoming 2022 midterm elections, the members of the House committee investigating the January 6 attack will face prison.²¹

Everywhere, rejection of legitimate political opposition is linked to both conspiracy theories and evidence-free charges that opponents are enemies conspiring to turn the United States into an alien country, alter the United States as a Christian nation, dilute the United States as a white nation, and cede sovereignty to a “new world order.”²² What's more, partisan opponents-turned-enemies are believed to be a violent collection of “the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters.”²³

To some people immersed in conspiracism, violence can come to seem like the only appropriate response. The opposition, believed to be treacherous, must be thwarted by any means.



AP PHOTO / JESSICA GRESKO

Conspiracism's Path to Violence

Conspiracism dissolves the willingness to wait until the next election, when “our” side might win and get a chance to change things. When partisans absorb the lesson that the opposition is an enemy plotting to overturn the United States as they know it—when the threat is existential—there is no time to wait for regular policy processes, election cycles, or forms of advocacy (like citizen protests) that move officials to change course.

Before conspiracism entered the White House with Trump's 2016 election, rogue violence and intimidation spurred by large numbers of public officials to foment political divisions had not become an organized feature of public life. In the past few years, however, escalating conspiracism has cleared a path to threat, intimidation, and physical assault. With the January 6 insurrection, the potential of conspiracist charges to inspire violence and to create an atmosphere of fear and unsafety—both at critical political moments and in ordinary situations—was plain.

Conspiracist violence has roots in the great American tradition of freedom of association, specifically in the voluntary associations of “uncivil society” organized around guns. Self-styled militias, white supremacists, posses, the aptly named “sovereign citizens,” coercive cults, and other extremists in the grip of conspiracy notions have always existed on the fringes of political life. Today, they harass and intimidate, revile and discriminate, in full public view.²⁴ These associations revolve around preparing to combat what they see as tyranny and threats to “our way of life.”²⁵ They claim special authority to defend liberty against opponents cast as enemies. Many violent conspiracists see themselves as patriots—heirs of the revolutionaries of 1776 resisting despotism or carriers of the Confederate cause.²⁶

The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, whose violence Trump coyly encouraged, have come in from the cold. He invited them into national political life. He created a new, collective identity out of this disparate array of armed groups and enraged, unaffiliated citizens. He gathered them into what amounts to a private army directed to overturn the results of the 2020 election.²⁷

Conspiracists' assaults are fueled by righteous anger. We have seen that for agitated defenders of freedom, “despotism” is not just a form of government or specific set of policies. Many conspiracists today embrace a brittle, extreme idea of personal liberty, so hospitals that require healthcare workers to be vaccinated against communicable diseases or schools that require students to wear masks are seen as attacking personal liberty.²⁸ Who should decide how much protection students, teachers, healthcare professionals, or workers on factory lines should receive? The conspiracist answer is “we alone decide.”

Here, we arrive at the most malignant effect on democracy: the insinuation of conspiracism and, with it, intimidation and violence everywhere. We call this *totalism*.

Totalism: Conspiracism Everywhere

Conspiracist charges may appear anywhere. They have migrated from accusations of a deep state in the recesses of the federal government to the states and local communities. There is no place conspiracism cannot go. It seeps into social life and private life: into voluntary associations, workplaces, neighborhoods, families, and circles of friends. Conspiracism brings fear: How can we trust or build the reciprocal relationships on which the democratic social contract depends if our neighbors are inflamed and armed?

We could not have anticipated its scope. Some targets of conspiracist threats are simply bizarre—like the butterfly refuge at the Texas border that, despite a newly installed police guard tower, had to be abandoned by staff.²⁹ But other targets clearly reveal the agenda. Threats are leveled at judges.³⁰ Mobs support a plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan (after Trump directed followers to “liberate Michigan”).³¹ Threats are aimed at state health officials and at government election workers and their families—and at

the 13 Republican members of Congress who voted for President Biden’s infrastructure bill.³²

And as we said above, conspiracism and conspiracy theories even threaten the classroom. Local school board officials, principals, and teachers who encourage any measure judged as an assault on personal liberty are liable to become targets.³³ Teachers grapple with whether and how to discuss conspiracy claims that their students are exposed to online or at home. Should they ignore or discuss QAnon followers—those who believe satanic pedophiles are plotting against the nation—when the subject makes its way into their schools? Intimidation by students, parents, and opportunistic conspiracists enters into the decisions educators are now forced to make. As AFT President Randi Weingarten wrote in *American Educator*, “we must all take a stand against violence—just as we must all take a stand against systemic racism,”³⁴ but teachers who take on conspiracism risk being labeled as part of an organized plot to impose a radical ideology on children.

That conspiracism has seeped into the classroom points to the way totalism—the impetus for conspiracism to go everywhere—has become a defining element of the crisis of democracy. When the cast of enemies is ever-growing and pursued anywhere, when agents of violence spill their vitriol and menace everywhere, no sphere of social and personal life is secure from their charges and threats.

Consider what this means for day-to-day life. We all move in and out of social spheres, each with its own norms and practices. We participate in government; we work alongside colleagues; we join civil society groups like religious associations and advocacy organizations. We engage in daily interactions with neighbors, and we create our own company of family and friends. When colleagues, family members, and neighbors bring conspiracism into these spheres of life, accompanied by aggressive threats and what they believe to be righteous anger, it is not only political institutions that are damaged. Conspiracism today has the capacity to deform the different spheres of life into sites of partisan enmity and political extremism. Liberal democratic institutions and our own lives are being diminished.³⁵

Although today’s conspiracism is disorienting and damaging to both political institutions and everyday relations, we are not signing on to a version of what Trump called “American carnage.”³⁶ Malignant conspiracism is not yet a malignant normality. Only some school boards, teachers, public health experts, Justice Department lawyers, and neighbors are targeted and have their lives turned upside down. Americans have been asking one another, “What is to be done?” We now have good answers in the robust resistance to democracy-destroying conspiracism.

What Is Being Done?

A lot is being done.

The most elemental and yet powerful response to conspiracist fictions is simply speaking truth. Anyone can do it and everyone must—especially the responsible press and myriad advocacy groups dedicated to countering misinformation. Speaking truth seldom converts those possessed by conspiracist zeal. The purpose instead is to contain the effects of conspiracism, embolden the rest of us, and give strength to common sense. Speaking truth bolsters confidence in our collective ability to fight conspiracists’ attempts to own reality.

The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol tried to reclaim reality by offering a

coherent, comprehensive account of the course of events and the part played by individuals—both those who sought to destroy the integrity of the 2020 election and those who protected it. After the Committee interviewed over 1,000 people over the course of nearly a year, it held a series of public hearings beginning in June 2022. The hearings’ tone mattered: steady, deliberate, and self-disciplined. Although these congressional representatives’ own safety was threatened, the emotional undertone of Chair Bennie G. Thompson’s openings was a combination of outrage and sadness for the nation, rather than fear.

At another level, the Committee’s narrative was governed by the broader necessity to re-legitimate democratic processes. Significantly, the formal account of January 6 was not delegated to a remote special counsel or to a court but taken on by a congressional committee of bipartisan representatives chosen by the speaker of the House. They worked as democratic decision-makers must: in the face of uncertainty, disagreement, floods of information, and the need to come together to make difficult judgments. They took special care to articulate how their investigation proceeded and how their public hearings were organized. They demonstrated their adherence to regular investigative practices. They credited their staff, which provides professional counsel. They made the demanding requirements of democratic decision making legible. In all these ways their work, in our phrase, *enacted democracy*.



AP PHOTO / J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

The responsibility to speak truth falls to all public officials and political candidates, especially Republicans. They have authority with their followers, and their rejection of conspiracism gets media attention. What’s known as John McCain’s “‘No ma’am’ moment” is a sterling example. While McCain was running for president in 2008, a voter in the grip of the birther conspiracy said at a town hall that Obama was ineligible to be president. McCain took the microphone from her and said, “No ma’am, he’s a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about.”³⁷ That is what we saw in the public hearings of the January 6 Committee, and it is what we need from political candidates today.

Speaking truth is also the work of “witnessing professionals.” National intelligence experts defend colleagues against feckless charges of a “deep state.” Election law experts successfully challenge charges of “stolen elections” in court. Secretaries of state and other state officials, including some Republicans, gather and publicize evidence that American elections have been free and fair. Psychiatrists and psychologists identify the cognitive reasons behind dangerously distorted conspiracist thinking. Public health experts

publicize the traumatic effects and material costs of intimidation and violence.

Teachers are professionals on the frontlines who, like other witnessing professionals, are in a distinct position. As educators, we know that citizens need tools to identify the misinformation, particularly conspiracism, that permeates information streams today.

Teachers can engage the subject of conspiracism without parsing the specifics of particular charges. They might begin with the fundamental distinction we've emphasized here, between conspiracy theories that come with evidence and raw, evidence-free conspiracism. The educational aim is to equip students to critically evaluate particular charges, keeping in mind that not all conspiracy theories are false and that not all believers in conspiracy are delusional or senselessly following a leader. Students can be encouraged to try to identify the political purposes behind various conspiracy charges. It can be helpful to discuss why democracies will always have conspiracy theories: there is always the worry that those operating the levers of power will act in their own interests and betray the public good. And it is important to note that because conspiracy theories can be true, they can also be a form of vigilance.

It's also important for teachers to help students recognize the gratifications of conspiracy charges that make them alluring even when they lack evidentiary support. Students may subscribe to this or that conspiratorial allegation themselves, after all, and they may encounter ardent conspiracists among their families and friends.

What is conspiracism's appeal? To believe in conspiracism is to belong to a club of those with special knowledge. Adolescents especially face the temptation to belong to a community; they also understand the costs of going against the crowd and experience very real consequences when they do.³⁸ Teachers are in a unique position to help inoculate students against greedy, consuming political cults and to point to the countervailing gratification of collective opposition.³⁹

Above all, teachers have an opportunity to help students understand the defining place that legitimate political opposition occupies in democracy. Citizens in a democracy have to live with, tolerate, and do

Speaking truth bolsters confidence in our ability to fight conspiracists' attempts to own reality.

business with those who disagree—sometimes radically—about moral and political questions. To be a citizen is to have opponents in an ongoing system of political contest. But opponents are not enemies. Of course, teachers often focus on encouraging cooperation, but it is also necessary to work with students to understand democratic conflict. If students don't grasp the profound moral and political value of legitimate political opposition, they will be vulnerable to the kind of conspiracism that ushers in anti-democratic politics.

Right now, many forces of democracy are rallied against conspiracism and its effects on our political, social, and personal lives. Even so, conspiracists are unlikely to retreat to the political fringes any time soon. They will continue to agitate and motivate large numbers of people to engage in intimidation and violence. Conspiracism is a powerful tool for those who seek to own reality and achieve unconstrained power, and extremists have taken hold of this lever.

What has changed, however, is that we are paying careful attention. We have seen this script playing out, and we understand how it works. We are alert to how—and how badly—conspiracism degrades our governments and communities. We have witnessed its intimidation and seen its violence for what it is. We are ready now to recognize and confront conspiracism everywhere and stop this assault on our democracy. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/muirhead_rosenblum.

Resources for Educators and Families

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to conspiracism and can be easily misled if they have trouble distinguishing reliable news from misinformation or assessing the credibility of a source.¹ Here are a few of the many resources available to help educators and families stop the spread of conspiracism and sharpen students' media literacy.

- **Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home:** This resource by the Western States Center highlights the appeal of conspiratorial ideas for adolescents, details ways that conspiracists and anti-democracy groups manipulate young people to promote their ideologies, and provides conversation starters and strategies to help parents and caregivers

recognize and counter conspiracism: westernstatescenter.org/caregivers.

- **NewsGuard:** This journalism and technology tool advances news literacy and promotes online safety by rating the reliability of websites and tracking the spread of misinformation narratives. NewsGuard partners with schools, public libraries, and other organizations to help users evaluate online news sources and identify misinformation. AFT members can access NewsGuard for free: newsguardtech.com/aft.
- **Share My Lesson:** The AFT's Share My Lesson (SML) community has dozens of resources to help students make informed judgments about the news they consume. SML's Threats to Democracy collection includes webinars, lesson plans, and hand-

outs from iCivics, the Anti-Defamation League, Common Sense Education, and other contributors that highlight the importance of digital literacy and citizenship: go.aft.org/37i.

- **News Literacy Project:** This nonpartisan education nonprofit provides lesson plans, classroom activities, and more to help educators teach news literacy; these free resources, also available to the general public, include a podcast, learning games, and the Checkology virtual classroom to help users distinguish between fact and fiction: newslit.org.

—EDITORS

For the endnote, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/muirhead_rosenblum.

Economic Inequality Is Undermining America

Worker Solidarity Will Build a Better Future



By Harold Meyerson

How has America come to this? A third of the nation, perhaps more, is so steeped in a politics of hatred and fear that it believes the preposterous: that a conspiracy of elites rigged the 2020 election, and that those same mysterious elites mean to take everything that's theirs away from them—their nation most particularly.

This isn't a new fear. Since before the founding of our nation by people who were themselves unwelcome settlers on the North American continent, most white residents of what is now the United States have seen each wave of newcomers as a potential threat to the American way of life and the nation's prospects. From the antebellum slavocracy to the postbellum Klan; from the anti-Irish contempt of Northern Protestants to the anti-Catholic, antise-

mitic, anti-Slavic, and anti-Asian nativists who dominated the politics of the 1920s and effectively banned immigration for the next 40 years; and from the antisemitic populism of radio priest Charles Coughlin in the 1930s to the culture war cries of Pat Buchanan in the 1990s, nativist, religious, and racist phobias have been a recurrent feature of American life.

Now, however, they've come to define one of our major political parties more completely than ever before and to the point that they threaten our democracy's foundations. One year after Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump by seven million votes and a decisive margin in the Electoral College, a poll asked Americans if they agreed that "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country." Fully 30 percent of Republicans said they agreed, and an even higher share of Republicans (68 percent of respondents) believed that the 2020 election was somehow stolen from Trump, though no credible evidence of vote tampering or voting by nonciti-

zens had been adduced. Daily, the line between a violent, racist, fascist fringe and the mainstream of the current Republican Party grows fainter.

What lies behind this paranoia, anger, and refusal to recognize reality? The most likely explanation is discomfort with the reality that has been emerging in recent decades. As my *American Prospect* colleague Paul Starr has noted:

Contemporary liberalism and progressivism have been trying to upend five separate sets of social relationships that have been the traditional basis of American society. White over Black has been the basis of the American racial order. Men over women has been the basis of gender relations. Straight over queer has been the basis of acceptable sexual orientation. Religion over irreligion has been the basis of acceptable public expressions about faith. The native-born have dominated immigrants.

These hierarchies are being challenged, and in some parts of the nation

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(chiefly in cities), they have been at least partly undone—not by creating new hierarchies, but by increasing equitable treatment. But neither the challenges nor the backlash against them are new—so how is it that the backlash has hit with such force that it all but defines the Republican Party in the age of Trump?

For that, we need to look at the economic landscape on which they play out.

The Abandonment of Working People

As the Pew Research Center documented in April 2022, the nation's middle class, which constituted 61 percent of Americans in 1971, made up just 50 percent in 2021 and accounted for only 42 percent of total income (down from 62 percent). Both lower- and higher-income groups have grown compared to 1971, but the money only moved in one direction: the lower-income group's share of total income has also dropped, while the upper-income group's share has ballooned from 29 to 50 percent. The rich have gotten much richer—and everyone else has gotten poorer.

The destruction of the industrial economy and decline in union membership, in addition to capital's abandonment of rural areas, have cast millions of working-class Americans adrift. The political consequences of these changes have registered most strongly in the states that were the nation's industrial heartland for most of the 20th century, but they affect us all.

Prizing Profits Over Worker Well-Being

The factory jobs of the mid-20th century frequently involved demanding and repetitive physical labor, but thanks to the high rate of unionization, they offered greater pay and benefits for the white working class than those workers had enjoyed before, along with a level of stability. And as more unions desegregated in this period, workers of color increasingly enjoyed some of those same benefits.

For the 30 years following World War II, industrial unions ensured that their members' wages and benefits steadily increased—gains they realized through notably successful strikes. Throughout the 1950s, the yearly number of major strikes averaged more than 300.

Management was no fan of these disruptions, but they were regarded as the normal ebb and flow of labor relations.

Indeed, throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, many corporate executives believed, or at least affirmed, that their workers' well-being mattered. "The job of management is to maintain *an equitable and working balance* among the claims of the various directly affected interest groups ... stockholders, employees, customers, and the public at large," the chairman of Standard Oil of New Jersey (now ExxonMobil) said in 1951. He was espousing a principle that became known as *stakeholder theory*, in which attention to worker well-being is a crucial part of the strategy for corporate success. Once hired, good workers had something close to lifetime employment, which entitled them to certain rewards. "Maximizing employment security is a prime company goal," Earl Willis, General Electric's manager of employee benefits, wrote in 1962.

Unions give workers a stronger voice to fight for greater economic equality.

Through the early 1970s, workers' wages rose at the identical rate that productivity rose. But as the economies of Germany and Japan recovered from the devastation of World War II and began exporting goods to the United States, American companies responded to this competition by sharing less of their revenues with their employees. Following the recommendations in a memo by future Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell, they began lobbying Congress as never before for lower taxes and for more restrictions on unions. The National Labor Relations Board, then controlled by Richard Nixon's nominees, weakened to near nonexistence the penalties employers incurred if they illegally obstructed their workers' attempts to unionize; thereafter, the number of such illegal obstructions soared, even as the number of successful organizing campaigns dwindled.

The anti-union turn of American business in the 1970s greatly accelerated in 1981 with Ronald Reagan's ascent to the presidency. Reagan's firing of the nation's

air traffic controllers for having waged an illegal strike triggered a similar wave of firings by some of the nation's leading corporations, which rendered the strike a tool that unions employed more warily and far less frequently. The number of major strikes plummeted from 286 a year in the 1960s and 1970s to 83 a year in the 1980s, 34 a year in the 1990s, and 20 a year in the 2000s.

Also in 1981, to reduce high levels of inflation, Federal Reserve chief Paul Volcker raised interest rates to the point where they induced double-digit unemployment and hastened the permanent downsizing and closing of thousands of factories, large and small. The industrial Midwest never recovered.

By the 1990s, the *stakeholder* ethos that some leading corporations had professed to follow in the 1950s had been thoroughly repudiated by CEOs in favor of the doctrine

of maximizing value for *shareholders*. In the 1980s, 56 percent of corporate executives surveyed by Conference Board agreed that "employees who are loyal to the company and further its business goals deserve an assurance of continued employment"—but when executives were asked the same question in the 1990s, a scant 6 percent agreed.

Declining Worker Security and Opportunities

The abandonment of the once-secure sector of America's working class accelerated as companies began moving their plants to cheaper climes—initially to the largely non-unionized South, and eventually to such low-wage havens as Mexico, China, and Vietnam with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 and Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China in 2000. According to a working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, the flight of American industry to China cost the nation roughly 2.4 million jobs, with spillover effects that further decimated a number of local economies.



The post-2000 offshoring of industry has understandably drawn a great deal of attention—so much that the role of the American South in reducing workers’ economic security has not been sufficiently scrutinized. The manufacturing industries are a critical example. In the first decade of the 21st century, manufacturing job loss was comparable in northern and southern industrial regions; both lost about a third of their manufacturing jobs, thanks in large part to globalization and the Great Recession. By 2015, the South had rebounded, with 13.5 percent more manufacturing jobs than in 2000, while the North still had not returned to 2000 levels. But all those new jobs didn’t necessarily add up to better earnings. In Alabama, where auto industry growth was highest, workers at auto-parts factories saw a 24 percent decline in earnings from 2001 to 2013; in Mississippi, earnings were down 13.6 percent for the same period.

Confronted not only with the financial collapse of 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession but also with much cheaper production in the American South and overseas, the median wage of all US manufacturing workers fell by 4.4 percent between 2003 and 2013. And the decline of Northern wages to Southern levels hasn’t been confined to manufacturing. The expansion of Walmart, the nation’s largest private-sector employer, from its Southern base into the North and West has had a profound downward effect on the incomes of retail workers.

As bad as all this is, the employment picture in rural areas is even worse. A 2016 study by the Economic Innovation Group charts the grim decline of the nation’s rural areas and the increasing concentration of economic activity in major cities. Between 2000 and 2018, 52 percent of rural counties saw their populations shrink, while the populations of urban and suburban areas of the United States have continued to grow. Smaller populations spread across much larger areas mean that critical services like education and healthcare are harder to access. And because rural households are less likely to have access to broadband internet than metropolitan counties, telehealth and virtual education opportunities are also out of reach.

While unions give workers the stronger voice needed to fight for greater security and economic equality in these communities, corporate America’s hostility to workers and unions—evident in the recent anti-union activity of not only Amazon but also the supposedly more enlightened management at Starbucks—has been matched by the hostility of Republican politicians. Over the past decade, Republican governors and legislators of such onetime union bastions as Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin have joined the South in enacting laws intended to reduce union membership. Moreover, these states have joined most of the once-Confederate states in enacting voter identification laws designed to depress voting by people who might want to strengthen worker protections, such as people of color, millennials, and Democrats. Like the pre-1861 enslaver elites, today’s Republicans appear increasingly dedicated to Southernizing the North.

Economic Insecurity Feeds Fear, Scapegoating, and Division

For those who wonder how rural America and much of the nation’s historically Democratic white working class have turned Republican, and in many cases have embraced racist and nativist demagogues and conspiracy theories, the four decades of downward mobility and economic and social abandonment described above should dispel much of that mystery.

The phenomenon of economically vibrant, diverse, and progressive cities juxtaposed with economically struggling, insular, frightened, and reactionary rural areas isn’t limited to the United States. Its

parallels can be found throughout post-industrial Europe. London has a socialist mayor, but Northern England, once home to a thriving manufacturing economy and a reliable base of Labour Party voters, is now thoroughly deindustrialized and voting increasingly for Tory candidates and for nationalist, anti-European initiatives like Brexit. Paris has a socialist mayor, but the north of France, once that nation’s industrial belt and the political base of the French Communist Party, is now the base for the xenophobic nationalism of Marine Le Pen. The cities of Hungary are as vibrant and progressive as the cities of Texas, but just as in Texas, they are outvoted by an economically floundering, radically right-wing, nationalist countryside.

This adds to the challenge facing those of us who want to increase opportunities for all working people. Although rightly focused on the many ways that people of color are being disenfranchised, and that women and LGBTQ people are being threatened, the Democratic left must also attend to its failure to recognize and address the casting adrift of its onetime white working-class base. The political consequences of this failure became strikingly clear with Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. An analysis of the vote by Working America, the community mobilization arm of the AFL-CIO, found that in five key swing states that Clinton lost to Trump—Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—81 percent of the difference in votes from Barack Obama in 2012 to Clinton in 2016 came from rural and small-town population centers, areas with both high economic distress and large working-class populations.

The Democrats’ political prospects are imperiled by the narrative that has become Republican holy writ—that white working-class Americans are the victims of progressive cultural elites and people of color.* As in Britain, France, Hungary, and elsewhere, that narrative would be far less effective if the voters to whom it’s directed weren’t, in fact, being victimized by another group altogether: the economic elites across the political spectrum who have enriched themselves at the expense

*For more on this intentional divisiveness and how we can defeat it, see “The Benefits of Collective Action: Why Overcoming Racism and Inequity Is Good for All of Us” on page 24.

of all middle- and working-class people over the past 40 years.

Uniting Working People

What we need now is solidarity—and the union movement is critical for changing the narrative and bringing people together. When the unionization rate was higher, far more voters heard presentations and explanations of policy options from their unions that were factual alternatives to the demonization of people of color and immigrants routinely proffered by the likes of George Wallace, Rush Limbaugh, and Tucker Carlson.

millions of Americans who understandably feel abandoned and offer hope for all workers by addressing their very real concerns through the kinds of investment and inclusion that our nation sorely needs.

That would include a number of Biden administration proposals that would benefit working-class Americans as a whole. A child tax credit, the public provision of childcare, and universal pre-K would ease the burdens of families with children, just as student debt relief and protection of reproductive rights would give rising generations greater control over their lives. Enabling the government to bargain

law protecting workers' right to organize has been weakened over the decades. The PRO Act, which passed the House but has languished in the Senate like so many other proposals, would restore those rights. But even without the PRO Act, Biden's appointees at the National Labor Relations Board have reinstated some crucial rights that previous administrations failed to enforce.

Much of Biden's agenda has been stymied by the narrowness of the Democrats' majority in the Senate. The 2022 midterm elections could uncork these proposals should the Democrats gain—or the elections could condemn the nation to even

Pulling together to rebuild our country can guide us back to our shared values.

A December 2021 study from the Center for American Progress Action Fund showed that unions' political programs still have a significant effect on their members' voting. Union women were 21 percentage points more likely than nonunion women to vote for Biden, while union men were 13 points more likely than their nonunion counterparts. College-educated unionists went for Biden at a rate 22 percent higher than their nonunion counterparts; among voters without four-year degrees, however, the difference between union members and nonmembers was only 6 percentage points (though that six-point margin certainly helped Biden carry Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania).

The problem, however, is that union members now comprise just over 10 percent of the workforce and a mere 6 percent in the private sector—down from about a third of the nation's workforce in the middle of the last century. As recent union victories at Starbucks and Amazon make clear, discussions with informed fellow workers can provide credible narratives workers aren't likely to hear elsewhere. But for unions to grow and have worker-friendly policies to share, they need more allies in office. Democrats need to do what they've only begun to do during the Biden presidency: recognize the

down the cost of prescription drugs (which happened for some under Medicare as this *American Educator* went to press) will rein in the skyrocketing rate of inflation inflicted on those in need of medications, as would universal Medicare proposals such as that of Senator Bernie Sanders.

Making work pay again for tens of millions of Americans requires a host of major reforms. The nation needs the kind of industrial policy that returns manufacturing to our shores, invests in environmentally friendly new technology (while training existing workers for these new green jobs), and diminishes our dependence on imports, which renders us vulnerable to the shortages that have triggered inflationary pressures, eliminated millions of jobs in the United States, and reduced the wages of millions of workers as a result. Workers in the service and retail sectors don't hold jobs subject to the downward wage pressure of foreign competition, but their lack of power to bargain for better pay and working conditions has ensured that an increasing share of corporate revenue goes to major shareholders while wages stagnate.

Successful unionization campaigns across the country reflect the clear popular sentiment now in favor of unions, but the

greater neglect of its economic and social needs should the Republicans prevail. With even modestly larger Democratic majorities, the work of serious economic reconstruction can begin. And at the same time, working- and middle-class Americans can experience the benefits of pulling together to rebuild our country—from our bridges to our public schools. That, I hope, will guide us back to our shared values of diversity, equality, and opportunity and refocus our energy on creating a more perfect union. □

For a more comprehensive version of this article with extensive endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/meyersen.



FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization and the Erosion of Liberty



By Khiara M. Bridges

In 1973, the Supreme Court held in *Roe v. Wade* that the Constitution protects a fundamental right to terminate a pregnancy. Seven justices—including five appointed by Republican presidents—joined the majority opinion. Only two justices disagreed with the majority's conclusion that the Constitution does indeed protect the right to an abortion.

Roe did not fall from the sky. In fact, the court's holding in the case logically followed a half century of case law that had preceded it. In the 1920s, the court began to interpret the Constitution to protect the rights of individuals to be free from governmental intervention in matters involving the family. In *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), the court held that the Constitution protects the right of parents to educate their children in the manner that they deem fit. In *Skinner v. Oklahoma* (1942), the court held that the Constitution protects the right of an individual to bear children and that the government was prohibited from sterilizing persons without their consent. In *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), the court held that the Constitution protects the right of married individuals to access contraception and to avoid becoming parents.

In *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), the court struck down Virginia's prohibition on interracial marriage, holding that the Constitution protects the right of an individual to marry a person of a different race. In *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), the court held that its decision in *Griswold* applies to unmarried persons as well, interpreting the Constitution to protect the right of all people to access contraception and to avoid parenthood (or avoid having a larger family), regardless of marital status. Thus, when the court in *Roe* was asked to decide whether the Constitution protected the right to an abortion, it observed that the Constitution had already been interpreted to protect the individual's right to become a parent, to avoid parenthood, and to parent their children in the manner that they thought appropriate. In light of this, the court reasoned that the Constitution also protects a fundamental right to an abortion insofar as the abortion right was consistent with all of the other fundamental rights regarding families, and the decision whether or not to create or expand a family, that the court had already interpreted the Constitution to recognize.

In June 2022, the court released its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Five justices—all appointed by Republican presidents—voted to overturn *Roe*, discarding close to 50 years of precedent and denigrating the logical expansion of family rights that began a century ago. *Dobbs* allows states to criminalize abortion or otherwise make the procedure illegal at any point during pregnancy. Approximately half of the states have

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABRIELLA TRUJILLO

done, or are on the verge of doing (as this issue of *American Educator* goes to press), exactly that.¹

Supporters of the court's decision in *Dobbs* assert that it is not radical because it does not impose a nationwide ban on abortion procedures; it simply permits states to limit or ban abortion if they so desire. Political majorities in the states can now decide whether the procedure should be permitted in their state, they say.

This argument ignores the entire point of a fundamental right, which is to remove certain issues from the will of political majorities. Fundamental rights protect areas of life that are too vital to the individual and to our nation to leave to democratic processes. For example, the right to practice one's religion is a fundamental right. This is because we do not think that a fair and just society would allow people's ability to practice their religion to hinge on whether they can convince a majority of voters in a jurisdiction that their religion should be respected and they should be permitted to observe it. Our democracy emerges from our fundamental rights; if our democratic processes could easily alter our fundamental rights, democracy itself would be in peril. Our nation would be unrecognizable as our nation. The country would no longer be American.

Another example is instructive. As mentioned above, the court in *Skinner v. Oklahoma* held that the Constitution protects a fundamental right to bear a child; thus, states are prohibited from sterilizing persons without their consent. This is because the Constitution endeavors to create a fair and just society, and no such society would allow a person's ability to become a parent to hinge on whether they can convince a majority of voters in a jurisdiction that they are worthy of parenthood. If the US permitted this, the nation would cease to be essentially American.

The same logic applies to the fundamental right to an abortion. In *Roe*, the court held that a fair and just society would not allow a person's ability to terminate an unwanted pregnancy to hinge on whether they can convince a majority of voters in a jurisdiction that the individual should have the ability to control what happens to their body and to determine the trajectory of their life. The ability to avoid becoming a parent—or to avoid the birth of another child—is too consequential to leave to the whims of an electorate. In this way, *Dobbs* is radical because it eliminates a fundamental right and allows political majorities to determine life courses.

Who Gets to Vote?

Compounding the problem, those who support the court's decision in *Dobbs* ignore that several states with Republican-controlled legislatures have been on an aggressive campaign to disenfranchise voters who would likely support abortion (and Democratic candidates in general). In 2013, the court decided *Shelby County v. Holder*, which effectively struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.* Since then, states with

histories of denying people of color the ability to vote have been actively attempting to disenfranchise not only voters of color but also poor people, young people, people with disabilities, and others who would likely support Democrats. The sundry efforts at disenfranchisement include restrictive voter ID requirements, limitations on early voting and absentee voting, the closure of polling places in neighborhoods of color, and voter roll purges.† Supporters of these restrictions on voting claim that they are necessary to prevent voter fraud. However, these supporters have never been able to provide evidence that any meaningful voter fraud is taking place—let alone at a level that warrants the disenfranchisement of large swaths of people. So the court's decision in *Dobbs* returns the question of abortion's legality not to all voters, but only to voters who have not been disenfranchised.

It is likely no coincidence that many of the states with the most restrictive abortion laws are also the states with the most restrictive voting laws.² One set of researchers ranked Mississippi, whose 15-week abortion ban set the stage for the court's decision in *Dobbs*, among the worst in terms of state-erected obstacles to casting a ballot.³ This same set of researchers ranked Texas—which rendered most abortion services unavailable in the state several months before the court released its decision in *Dobbs*—

as *the worst* state in terms of obstacles to voting.⁴ Accordingly, we should be skeptical about whether the abortion bans and restrictions that states have passed and will pass in the future actually reflect the will of the majority of people in the state. Instead, they likely will reflect the will of the people *who were able to vote* in the state.

Dobbs eliminates a fundamental right and allows voters to determine the course of other people's lives.



A Return to 1868?

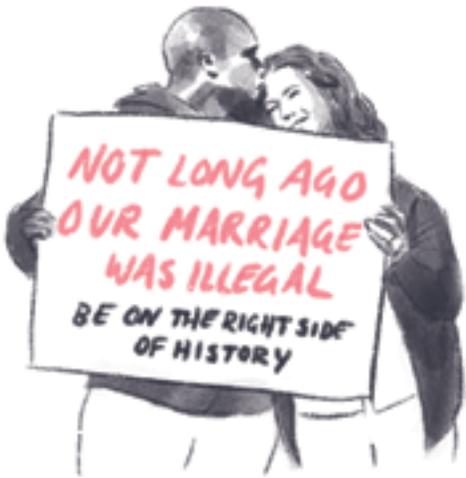
Dobbs is a terrifying decision not only because it permits states to force their residents to give birth but also because it calls into question all the cases upon which *Roe* relied, as well as several cases decided after *Roe*. This is owed to the method of constitutional interpretation that the court uses in *Dobbs*. In the case, the court argues that the 14th Amendment, which is the textual home of all the above-mentioned rights concerning the family, only protects those rights that were enjoyed at the time of the amendment's ratification—in 1868. Because abortion rights were not protected then, the court concludes that abortion rights do not enjoy constitutional protection today. This method of interpreting the Constitution is disastrous for individuals who belong to groups that were not considered full citizens or valued parts of the body politic in the mid-19th century. This, of course, includes women—who did not even have the right to vote until

*To learn more about this decision, see "One Person, One Vote" by Eric H. Holder, Jr., in the Fall 2020 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/fall2020/holder.

†For details on these efforts to limit voting, see "Pay Attention: Democracy Is on the Ballot" on page 28.

50 years after the 14th Amendment was ratified. Thus, the method of constitutional interpretation employed in *Dobbs* removes issues that are important to women and people who are capable of pregnancy—like the ability to become pregnant and to avoid pregnancy and parenthood—from the scope of constitutional protection.

Moreover, many of the cases upon which *Roe* relied interpreted the Constitution to protect rights that people in 1868 did not care to protect. *Skinner v. Oklahoma* (1942) interpreted the Constitution to recognize the right to be free from compulsory sterilization. But in 1927, in the infamous case of *Buck v. Bell*, the court denied that the Constitution protects that right. Thus, *Skinner v. Oklahoma*—alongside the cases protecting the right to access contraception and the right to marry someone of another race—rests on shaky ground after *Dobbs*.



Many of the states with the most restrictive abortion laws have the most restrictive voting laws.

Further, *Dobbs* calls into question the legitimacy of several cases decided after *Roe*. In 2003, the court handed down *Lawrence v. Texas*, which prohibits states from criminally punishing LGBTQIA+ people for their sexual relationships. And in 2015, the court handed down *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which held that the Constitution protects the right of an individual to marry someone of the same sex. Both of these decisions are precarious after *Dobbs* insofar as LGBTQIA+ people enjoyed precious few rights in 1868. Indeed, LGBTQIA+ people were subjected to punishment, censure, and erasure until very recently in our nation's history. Thus, the court's method of constitutional interpretation in *Dobbs* results in a Constitution that only protects the rights of cisgender, affluent, nondisabled, native-born, white men—the group that shaped the nation's laws in mid-19th-century America.

The damage that *Dobbs* inflicts cannot be undone. As noted above, about half of states either have already criminalized abortion or are expected to do so soon. People in those states will only be able to legally terminate an unwanted pregnancy if they are able to travel to states where abortion is still legal. However, those who are able to travel are the lucky ones. They are fortunate because they can afford the cost of travel. They can take time off work. They can pay for childcare while they are away from home. They do not have to hide their whereabouts from an abusive partner or parent. They do not have a physical or mental disability that makes travel difficult or impossible. They are not undocumented

and unable to cross immigration checkpoints. In this way, the most unprivileged and most vulnerable among us will not be able to avoid the criminal abortion laws in their states. Many people may resort to unsafe methods of abortion. Others will be forced to give birth—despite their knowing that it is not in their best interests or the best interests of their families to bring a child into the world. Intensifying the injury is the fact that the states banning abortion also tend to have policies that are not family friendly, resulting in high rates of child poverty, maternal mortality, and teen births.⁵ There is no way to undo that harm.

As long as *Dobbs* remains the law, we are in the tragic position of needing to convince political majorities in the states that they should allow individuals to determine the content and trajectory of their lives.

While it has always been important to vote, it is even more important now. On the most basic level, we have to vote for lawmakers who will protect the right to vote. Democracies in which substantial portions of the electorate are unable to vote are not democracies. Beyond that, we have to vote so that we can be part of political majorities that understand the devastating consequences of forcing birth and that refuse to compel people to continue a pregnancy against their will. While it is extremely unlikely that the court will hand down a decision in the near future that protects abortion rights, Congress has the power to pass

federal legislation that prohibits states from criminalizing abortion or otherwise making the procedure inaccessible. Thus, we have to vote for senators and representatives who will support such a law.

Even more broadly, we have to vote for lawmakers who understand that the right to an abortion is just one in a bundle of rights that individuals must have in order to fully control their reproductive destinies. While we desperately need laws that protect the rights of people to avoid pregnancy and parenthood, we also need laws that protect the rights of people to become pregnant and to become parents if they so desire. People must be protected against the environmental degradation that increases the incidence of miscarriages and stillbirths;⁶ they must also have the healthcare that will provide them with treatment for infertility. Further, we desperately need laws that protect individuals' rights to parent their children with dignity and in conditions that support children's physical, mental, and emotional health. Children should be able to breathe clean air, drink uncontaminated water, live in safe and secure housing, play in unpolluted communities free from violence, be educated in well-funded schools that meet their needs, access affordable healthcare, and be cared for by families and caretakers who have all the resources that they require. A society that provides as much is one that truly values life. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2022/bridges.



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Summer
Simplifying student debt