

ADVOCATE

AN INDIANA STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION PUBLICATION



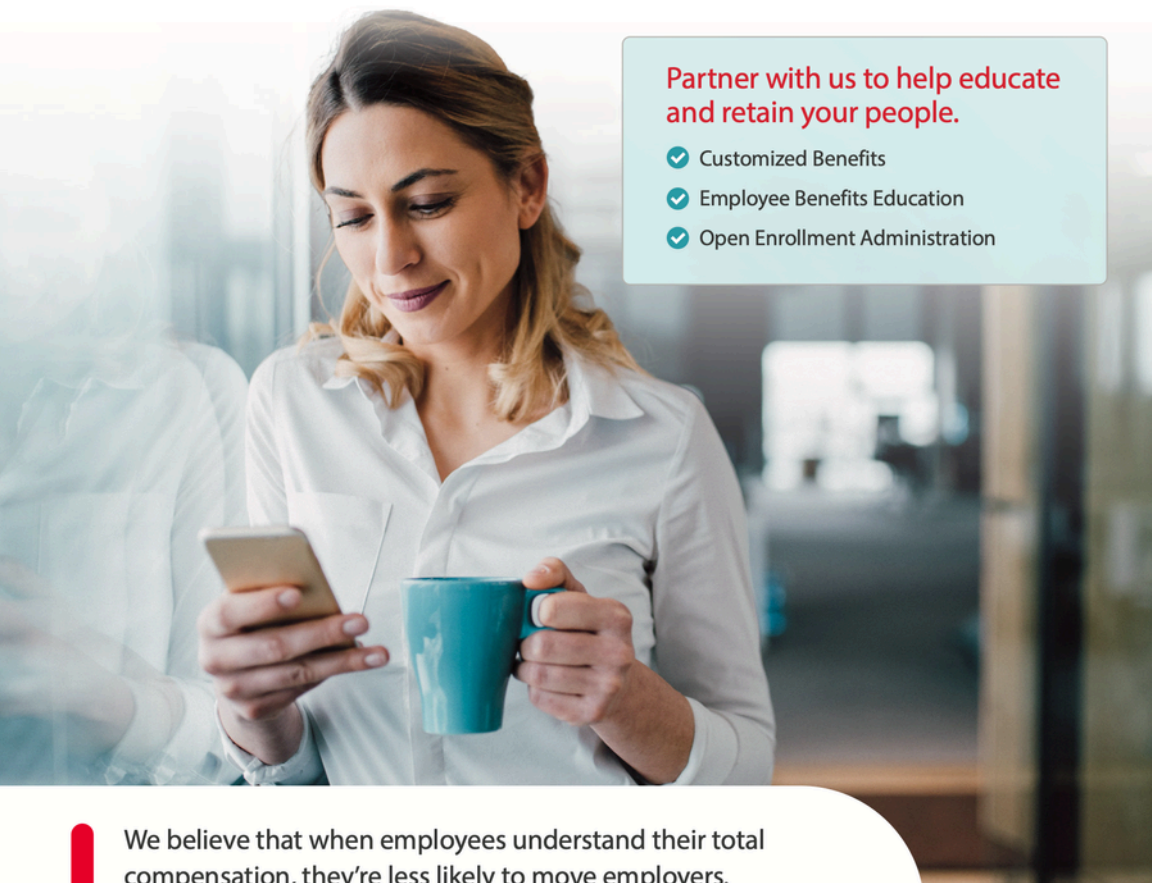
The Back-to-School Briefing for Indiana Educators

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AS AN EDUCATOR WITH A CLEAR BREAKDOWN OF THE TOP PROTECTIONS TO REMEMBER GOING INTO THE SCHOOL YEAR

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We'd love to hear from you!

Are you passionate about defending public education, advocating for equitable schools, building strong locals, protecting our future, culturally responsive teaching or new education trends? Email us at communications@ista-in.org to contribute to The Advocate or fill out the interest form by scanning the QR code.



The *Advocate* is the official quarterly publication of the Indiana State Teachers Association, the state level of the United Education Profession. The content of the Association's publications will be consistent with its mission, strategic objectives and policies.

Summer 2026:
VOL. 9, ISSUE 4

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PURPOSE, MISSION AND GOALS

PURPOSE

To advocate for and advance the interests of Indiana's students, educators and public schools.

MISSION

The Indiana State Teachers Association is a professional association organized to sustain quality public education, improve students' educational opportunities and advance the professional status of educators.

GOALS

- Unify our voices — we are stronger together.
- Provide economic security and professional working conditions for educators.
- Create a premier public education system that serves all kids regardless of ZIP code, culture or ability.
- Fight for racial and social justice.

Greetings, fellow ISTA members!

As we head back for a new school year, I know that your focus is on the possibilities that this new year will bring. A new year means a new group of students ready to engage, learn and grow and new opportunities for educators to build relationships, refine their craft and make a difference in the lives of the next generation.



Jennifer Smith-Margraf, ISTA President

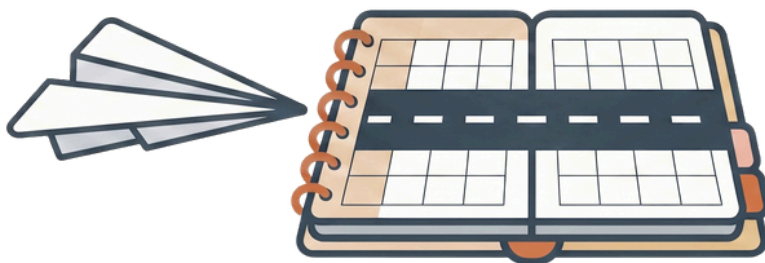
A new year also means new opportunities to build power with the members in your local and statewide to improve public education policy on the local, state and national level. Whether your local is running one of the over one hundred referenda statewide, participating in your local school board elections or working for a state house or senate candidate, there are many opportunities for you to engage to ensure that folks vote for pro-public education candidates in the November elections. Be sure that your local leadership knows how to reach you at a personal email address or phone number with important updates and actions that you can take to make a difference this election cycle.

There will also be plenty of opportunities for you to engage with your fellow ISTA members this year. Solidarity and camaraderie are key to feeling supported throughout the year. Make sure that you make time to engage with your fellow members at local events, district council, the All-Committee meeting, the Good Teaching Conference or wherever allows you to fill your cup with the camaraderie and support of others.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Smith-Margraf". The script is fluid and cursive.

Jennifer Smith-Margraf
ISTA President



PRACTICAL WAYS TO RESET FOR BACK-TO-SCHOOL



RAIN SMITH

Rain (Raenell) Smith is a member of Clark-Pleasant Education Association and the ISTA PPS Committee Chair. Additionally, she is an award-winning school library media specialist at Whiteland Community High School. She is also the chair of the Association of Indiana School Library Educators.

You have soaked up the sun and had tons of fun, but now school is about to start. Avoid having a rough start by gently preparing your body and mind to get back into your school routine. Starting about a week out, here are some tips that focus on you to ensure a gentler start to the school year.

Reestablish Daily Routines:

Start your daily school sleep schedule. Activate your alarms and notifications. Start eating your meals and taking your meds at school-day times. Hydrate on your school schedule.

Set Goals & Boundaries:

Set personal goals for the upcoming year that include boundaries to hold yourself accountable to your life outside of school.

Automate Life Processes:

If possible, automate things like bill paying, grocery shopping or housekeeping to take some things off your plate.

Address Your Needs:

Clean the house. During the first week, pack your lunches, snacks and drinks for the week and choose all of your outfits. Pack a self-care kit for those daily items you may need. This will save you some time the first week back.

Rewards & Self-Care:

Plan something special to reward yourself after a successful first week of school.



EDUCATORS, ELECTIONS AND ADVOCACY

As Election Day approaches and campaign season heats up, many educators are paying close attention to the issues, candidates and decisions that will shape the future of public schools and public education.

Educators have always played an important role and a trusted voice in their communities, not only in classrooms but also as informed citizens, voters and advocates. From school funding and educator pay to curriculum, student support and school safety, decisions made by elected officials directly affect students, educators and public schools.

At the same time, many educators today feel hesitant about speaking publicly on political issues, especially online. Social media posts can quickly spread beyond their intended audience, and in recent years educators across the country have faced increased public scrutiny and online targeting over political speech and advocacy.

That reality should encourage thoughtful engagement, not silence.

Educators can still participate in campaigns and civic life in many ways. That may include volunteering on personal time, attending candidate forums, sharing information about issues affecting public schools, supporting candidates or referendums on personal social media accounts or encouraging friends and family to vote.

ISTA encourages members to stay informed, participate in elections and advocate for strong public schools while understanding the professional responsibilities that come with working in public education.

A few important reminders:



Use personal time, personal devices and personal accounts for political advocacy and campaign activity.



Avoid using school resources or instructional time for political advocacy.



Remember that private groups and private accounts are never truly private online.



Avoid sharing confidential or non-public information learned through your role as a school employee.



Before posting online, consider how a message could be interpreted by students, parents, coworkers or the broader community.

Political engagement and civic participation matter. Educators bring important experience and perspective to conversations about public schools and public education. Thoughtful advocacy can help ensure educators, students and families are heard.



REVIEW FULL GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

ISTA has developed a more detailed guidance document for members with additional information and common questions related to political activity, elections and social media.



NEW LAWS AFFECT TEACHER CONTRACTS, STUDENT WIRELESS DEVICES



Two new laws passed during the most recent legislative session will affect Indiana educators and public schools. One creates serious concerns around teacher contracts and the workday, while the other strengthens statewide restrictions on student wireless devices.

The most concerning change comes from **HEA 1004**, a broad education deregulation bill. Among its many provisions, the law removes from the regular teacher contract the number of hours per day a teacher is expected to work.

For ISTA members, this is not a minor technical change. It weakens one of the few remaining contractual guardrails around the teacher workday. Educators already work well beyond the school day, including planning lessons, grading, communicating with families, attending meetings, completing paperwork and supporting students outside regular instructional time. Removing daily work-hour language from the regular teacher contract raises serious concerns that districts could attempt to add duties, extend workdays or blur the boundaries of educators' professional responsibilities without clear contractual limits.

ISTA strongly opposed HEA 1004 as long as this provision remained in the bill and repeatedly shared educators' concerns with lawmakers. ISTA is now evaluating multiple avenues to address the hours issue and will continue engaging with school boards, lawmakers and other partners as implementation moves forward. Members should pay close attention to how districts interpret this change locally and work with their local association if questions or concerns arise.

The second new law, **SEA 78**, expands Indiana's restrictions on student cell phones and other wireless communication devices. The law requires stricter enforcement of device restrictions throughout the full school day, often referred to as a bell-to-bell ban. It also creates more uniform statewide expectations while allowing some local flexibility on matters such as storage.

The law maintains exemptions for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEPs), a medical condition, emergency situations, instructional purposes or approval from a school administrator. It also adds an exemption for English language learner translation. Students may use note-taking devices in class if online activity is blocked, and for one year may use personal devices for that purpose if the school blocks internet access.

As these laws take effect, ISTA will continue advocating for implementation that protects educators' time, respects professional judgment and supports safe, focused learning environments for students.



LEARN MORE

View ISTA's 2026 legislative summary recap video or view the document for a full recap of the legislative session.



THREE RIGHTS EVERY EDUCATOR SHOULD CARRY INTO THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR



A new school year always arrives with fresh energy, new faces and a long list of expectations. But before the meetings, lesson plans and initiatives start stacking up, it's important to remember that educators don't just have responsibilities, they have rights. And those rights are what protect the conditions that make strong teaching and meaningful learning possible.

Here are three rights every educator should remember as the year begins.

1. The Right to Safe, Respectful Working Conditions

Educators have the right to work in environments that are physically safe, emotionally respectful and professionally supportive. That means there should be clear procedures for addressing student and staff safety concerns. It means there should be administrative systems that respond to issues—not ignore or minimize them. It also means there should be a workplace culture where educators are treated as professionals. When conditions become unsafe or disrespectful, it is not an expectation to “push through.” It is a signal that the environment must change.

2. The Right to Professional Autonomy and Voice

Educators are trained professionals, not scripted deliverers of curriculum. While standards guide instruction, educators have the right to use their expertise to decide how learning happens in their classrooms. This includes having a voice in instructional decisions, participating in meaningful collaboration rather than performative compliance and being trusted to adapt instruction based on student needs. When educators are stripped of voice, students lose access to creativity, responsiveness and the human judgment that no curriculum can replace.

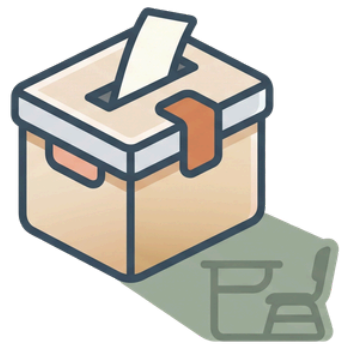
3. The Right to Fair Compensation and Sustainable Workload

Educators have the right to compensation that reflects their professional value and workloads that are sustainable for real human beings. That includes reasonable expectations around after-hours demands, planning time that is protected and compensation that acknowledges the emotional and intellectual labor of the job. Burnout is not a personal failure—it is often a structural issue. And systems that rely on exhaustion are not sustainable for educators or students.



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Review more of Educators' Rights Under the Law.



From the Ballot to the Classroom:

How School Boards and Referenda Shape Our Schools

When most people think about what shapes a classroom, they picture teachers, students and curriculum. But long before a lesson is taught or a textbook is opened, many of the conditions that define school life are decided somewhere else entirely - at the ballot box and in school board meetings.

From staffing levels to building repairs, from instructional priorities to student services, school boards and local referenda quietly determine the day-to-day realities of education. Understanding that connection is essential—not just for educators, but for families and communities who depend on public schools.

School Boards: Where Local Education Policy Begins

School boards are one of the most direct forms of democratic governance in public education. Elected by local voters, board members set the direction for school districts through policy decisions that affect nearly every aspect of schooling.

Their responsibilities often include:

- Hiring and evaluating the superintendent
- Approving district budgets
- Setting district policies and priorities
- Making decisions on curriculum adoption and instructional resources
- Overseeing facilities, transportation and operations

While teachers and principals manage the daily work of schools, school boards shape the framework those schools operate within. A board's priorities can influence class sizes, staffing levels, mental health supports and even how much autonomy educators have in the classroom.

In other words, school boards don't just oversee schools, they shape what is possible inside them.

Referenda: When Community Votes Become School Resources

School referenda are another powerful way public decisions directly impact education. These ballot measures ask voters to approve additional funding for school districts, often through property tax increases or other local revenue mechanisms.

Referenda typically fund things like:

- Teacher and staff salaries
- Classroom resources and instructional materials
- School safety and security measures
- Building renovations and new construction
- Transportation and operational costs

When referenda pass, districts may be able to hire more educators, reduce class sizes or invest in long-overdue infrastructure. When they fail, schools often must make difficult choices like cutting programs, delaying repairs or stretching already limited resources even further.

These votes are not abstract financial decisions. They determine whether the school library stays open, whether a bus route continues or whether a district can fill critical staffing gaps.

Why Community Participation Matters

Because school boards and referenda are local, they are also highly responsive to voter participation. Small turnout can have large consequences. A few hundred votes can determine whether a funding measure passes or fails. A handful of seats on a school board can shift the direction of an entire district.

That means families, educators and community members all play a role in shaping school conditions—not just through advocacy inside schools, but through civic engagement outside of them. Attending board meetings, staying informed about ballot measures and voting in local elections are not separate from supporting public education. They are part of it.

Schools are often described as the heart of a community, but they are also a reflection of their decisions. School boards and referenda are where those decisions are made, shaping everything from daily classroom conditions to long-term district stability.

When we talk about supporting educators and students, we must look beyond the classroom. We must look at the ballot, the boardroom and the policies that determine what schools can do.

Because every vote cast locally is, in many ways, a vote on what kind of learning environment we believe children deserve.

Meet ISTA Member: Chelsea Wyatt

Chelsea Wyatt is an aspiring educator, who recently graduated from Ivy Tech Evansville. In August, she will attend the University of Evansville and pursue elementary education and music education. She currently serves as the ISTA Aspiring Educators Chapter President.



Q. What inspired you to pursue a career in education and not something in the music field?

My passion for education started early when I helped tutor my older brother, who has developmental disabilities and experienced the joy of watching someone gain understanding and confidence. While exploring different paths—including history, political science and theater education—I realized none felt quite right until I took a piano class and discovered a deep passion for music. When I later began studying education, I realized I didn't have to choose between the two, so I pursued both music and education and have never looked back.

Q. What made you want to run for Aspiring Educator president?

I was on the issues and concerns committee as the AE rep last year and I got to vote on legislation from across the state. When it was time to run, all my friends asked what I was running for. I had no idea what to run for, but they were like, you're going to run for president, right? And I was like, something. And they were like, president. And I was like, okay, you guys seem to have a lot of beliefs in my abilities. So I informed my professor that I was going to run for president. She immediately said, "Do it". And that confirmed it. Two years ago, I was a quiet person who sat in the corner of the room, couldn't talk to anyone and couldn't go to a store by myself without having a panic attack. And now I look forward to going to conferences and big events because it means I get to meet people who are like me. So using my position to give back to a company that has given me so much is truly an honor and getting to serve my fellow aspiring educators so I can ensure that the policies, methods and strategies we use are supporting them as they continue on their journey is just truly one of the highest honors I've been given in life.

Q. How do you plan to set the tone for your classroom?

My goal is to create a safe and welcoming space for every student, whether they are in my classroom or not, because I believe every child deserves a trusted adult who will listen, support and advocate for them. Guided by the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, I work to ensure all students have the opportunities and resources they need to succeed. From providing access to basic necessities like school supplies and snacks to offering a compassionate ear, I strive to support students in every aspect of their life, not just academically.

Q. Why is representation in education important? You talked a lot about DEI and that being like your core values, but why is that important for you?

I personally belong to many minority groups. I am a neurodivergent person. I'm queer. I'm non-binary. I'm biracial. It doesn't look like it, but I am. But I've been through a lot of ostracization from society for different parts of my identity growing up. And when I started seeing other people being mistreated for the same thing, I knew I wanted to change that because I know how it feels and I don't want other people to feel that way. So, ensuring that every culture, ethnicity, race, identity, neurodivergence, neurotypical – just everyone is represented is important. If a student can't see themselves in the classroom, they're not going to feel welcome or safe and they're not going to want to learn in that environment. And we all deserve to be seen. One of my favorite Rita Pearson quotes is, "Every child deserves one champion, one person who is absolutely crazy about them. And if we're not showing support for a student, we're not their champion." And as a teacher, we should be every student's champion. And I want to make sure that each student is represented equitably and equally because we all deserve the chance to be successful and happy.



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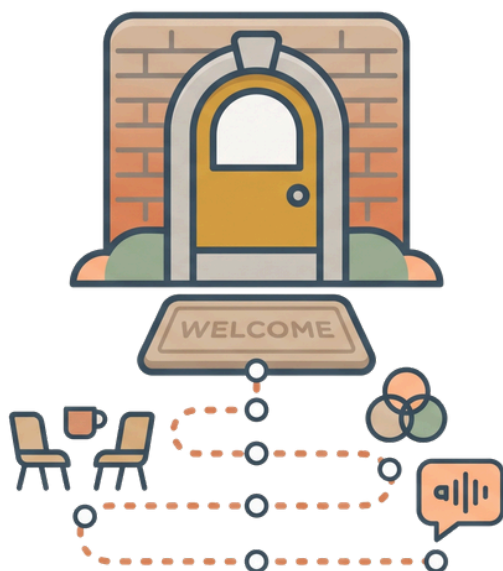


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BEYOND THE WELCOME: HOW TO KEEP NEW EDUCATORS ENGAGED

The beginning of the school year is filled with introductions, orientation sessions and welcome events. **While these first impressions are important, meaningful engagement doesn't end after the first week of school.** The real opportunity is helping new educators feel connected, supported and valued throughout the year.

Many new educators are navigating lesson planning, classroom management, school culture and work-life balance while trying to build relationships with colleagues. **A simple invitation to join the association is only the first step.** Lasting engagement comes from creating genuine connections and helping educators see how the association can support them throughout their careers.

**Here are some steps you can take
to build meaningful connections:**



1. Check in regularly

A quick conversation in the hallway, an invitation to lunch or simply asking how the week is going can go a long way. Pair new educators with experienced members who can answer questions, share resources and provide encouragement beyond formal mentoring programs.



2. Look for opportunities to involve new members

Get to know members interests and look for opportunities that match their interests and schedules. Invite them to help with a community event, participate in a schoolwide project or attend a social gathering. Small, meaningful experiences often lead to greater confidence and deeper involvement over time.



3. Ask for their ideas

New educators bring fresh perspectives, creative solutions and valuable insights. Ask for their ideas. When they know their voices are heard and their contributions matter, they are more likely to stay engaged and invested in the association.

Building a strong association isn't about expecting every new member to become a leader overnight. **It's about creating an environment where every educator feels welcome, supported and empowered to contribute in their own way.**

This school year, move beyond the welcome. Invest in relationships, celebrate small moments of involvement and remember that **today's new educator could become tomorrow's advocate, organizer or local leader.**

CONFERENCE SEASON:

TWO EXPERIENCES EVERY ISTA MEMBER SHOULD CONSIDER



It's summer in Indiana, and for ISTA members this also means it is conference time. The **Indiana Educators of Color Network Conference** and the **ISTA Summer Conference** offer all educator members an opportunity to engage in diverse and meaningful learning and networking. This year, I was an attendee and presenter at both conferences.

The Educators of Color Network Conference is open to all ISTA members and is quite frankly the best conference around. This conference is **thoughtfully planned and operated with everyone in mind**. A new activity this year was affinity spaces for attendees to share our feelings and perspectives on various topics. It was as if you could feel the growth of the group as it was happening. This conference does not shy away from challenging conversations, instead it puts you directly into them by offering inclusive and eclectic workshops. This conference will challenge you. **You will always leave with a broader understanding of the world not only around you, but the world our students are navigating.**

The ISTA Summer Conference switches gears to a more union member-centered experience. Here you will not only **learn about self-care, but about how to make your voice heard**. You will learn how to build your local, advocate for our profession and students, testify and grow as a union member. This conference will **give you the tools you and your local need to grow into leadership roles** within your local and ISTA. If you want to learn how to be a decision maker and/or a strong advocate voice, this is the conference for you.

Both conferences had **powerful keynote speakers**. Dr. Tia Mills, NEA Executive Committee member, inspired us with her fierce words about our profession and student advocacy at the EOC Conference. Her passion for advocacy for both those of us in the profession and for the students and families we serve is unparalleled. Terrell Taylor, a CTE instructor from Merrillville and the 2025 ISTA Minority teacher of the year award recipient was the keynote speaker at the Summer Conference. He reminded us of the importance of taking care of ourselves and doing what we love.

If you are looking for a positive environment to grow in your profession, union and personally look no further. These conferences offer them, plus a lot of fun and experiences you will not get anywhere else.



Andie Renner-Miller is a member of Michigan City ESP. Additionally, she serves as an association representative and PAC committee member.

ANDIE RENNER-MILLER



VIEW PHOTOS

Review more photos from both conferences to experience the fun and engagement.



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LEARN ANYTIME, LEAD EVERYWHERE:

ISTA Academy Course Offerings Now Available



ISTA Academy is a comprehensive online professional learning hub designed exclusively for ISTA members, offering high-quality courses and resources to support educators at every stage of their careers. The platform provides flexible, on-demand professional development aligned with current educational priorities, classroom practice and leadership growth, allowing members to learn anytime, anywhere.

As you prepare for a new school year, here are some courses available that may be helpful.

Foundations and Applications of AI

This lesson will focus primarily on generative AI tools. These tools are the most widely used and readily available for both students and educators.

Classroom Management: Communication with Families

In this course, you will explore how communication among parents, colleagues, and students plays an integral role in shaping an engaging, equitable and safe learning environment.

Classroom Expectations and Routines

This course will help you develop effective classroom expectations and routines that incorporate both teacher and student voice.

Classroom Management: Building Positive Relationships

This course focuses on developing skills to build positive student relationships in your classroom.



BEGIN LEARNING

Enroll in self-paced and facilitated courses that will support your professional growth.

OUR ASSOCIATION



CELEBRATING

Indiana's Public Education Champions

Congratulations to all 2026 ISTA scholarship and award recipients.

Dave Hanna Golden Touch Award

Harriet Klene, ISTA-Retired

Theresa Tafflinger, ISTA-Retired

Lifetime Achievement Award

Doug Taylor, ISTA-Retired

Brenda Buckingham-Ehrmann, Frankfort EA

JD Miller Outstanding Local Student Leader Award

Katelyn Wade, Liberty Perry CTA

Community Service Award

Janet Anthony, ISTA-Retired

N. Robert Montfort Communications Award

Monica Shellhamer, Indianapolis EA

Fort Wayne EA

Phillip Carey for Human Relations Award

Carey Ann Obye, Lawrence EA

Hoosier Educator of the Year Award

Jason Damron, Mooresville CTA

ESP of the Year Award

Kathy Schroll, Michigan City ESP

Minority Educator of the Year

Rita Maxey, Pike CTA

\$500 Scholarships

Shantae Ferguson - University of Evansville

Delanie Potts - University of Southern Indiana

Elijah Schmidt - Ivy Tech - Terre Haute

Jesamie Moore Memorial Scholarship

Delanie Potts, University of Southern Indiana

Outstanding Local Chapter Excellence Award

Ivy Tech - Evansville

Outstanding Senior Recognition Award

Han I 'Elaine' Chuang - Purdue University



LEARN MORE

Learn more about ISTA's scholarships and awards and review full list of 2026 scholarship and award recipients. Scholarship and award applications for 2027 open in January 2027.



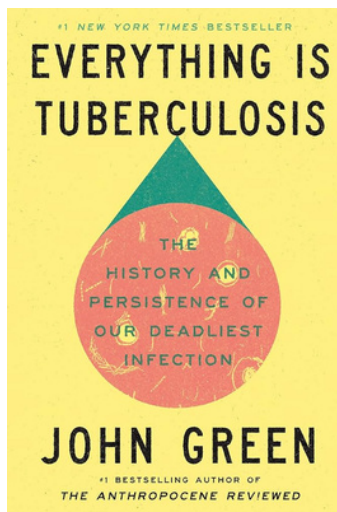
EVERYTHING IS TUBERCULOSIS:

BOOK REVIEW



JILL
SILLERY

Jill Sillery is a member of Southeast Fountain EA, where she is a speech-language pathologist for the Southeast Fountain School Corporation. She has been a member of the ISTA for 26 years and is currently serving as president of the SEFEA.



I've been a longtime fan of John Green's other works, but those were all fiction and leaned toward the young adult genre. For that reason, **I held off on reading this one until the ISTA recommended it as part of their newly launched book club.** I should've known he wouldn't disappoint. Green managed to take a decidedly unsexy, rather morbid topic and turn it into a gripping read. He includes plenty of history and statistics. New Mexico became a state because of tuberculosis. The physical characteristics of tuberculosis were once romanticized and considered highly desirable. However, he interweaves this information with the story of a young man he met while with his wife in Sierra Leone. Henry is a charming character, cheerful and highly intelligent. He is also suffering from tuberculosis--a condition that is completely treatable and not even considered relevant to those of us in modern America.

In fact, prior to this book, I wasn't even aware tuberculosis still existed, much less afflicts over 10 million people and kills 1.23 million people annually. Henry's narrative embodies nearly everything regarding the modern tuberculosis condition from early misdiagnoses to mistrust of doctors to developing the more drug-resistant version of TB. Thankfully he was able to persist and is now doing well with an appropriate cocktail of medications.

It is difficult not to be enraged and disappointed in equal turns after completing this book. **This is not an untreatable condition. Yet people continue to suffer and die from this disease**, mostly people of color from nations that lack funding and resources. My fervent hope is that Green's spotlight on this issue **will resonate with his readers and affect true change.**



JOIN THE CLUB

Read, reflect and connect with fellow educators through ISTA Reads.



YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS BACK TO SCHOOL

HERE ARE A FEW HELPFUL REMINDERS FOR SURVIVING AND THRIVING DURING YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS BACK TO SCHOOL:



SET UP A SUBSTITUTE BINDER

Prepare a substitute binder with important information that someone would need if you were unexpectedly absent. Include:

- Seating charts for each class
- Bell schedules
- Lunch times and planning periods
- Extra duties or supervision responsibilities
- Helpful neighboring teachers or contacts
- Lockdown procedures and emergency information
- General classroom expectations and routines



AMY MITCHELL

Amy Mitchell is a member of Northeast Dubois CTA. Additionally, Amy serves as an ISTA board member and a member of several committees including PAC, District Council and Credentials.



CREATE A FLEXIBLE CALENDAR

Set up a calendar for each course you teach and try to have at least the first 30 days penciled in with lessons and activities. Flexibility is one of the greatest strengths a teacher can have.



GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Your students are human beings who want to feel valued and connected. Take time to learn about their interests, strengths and goals. Make them feel welcomed, needed and important in your classroom.



BUILD POSITIVE PARENT COMMUNICATION

Send welcoming emails or messages to parents and guardians introducing yourself and your classroom expectations. Open communication early in the year helps families feel connected and comfortable reaching out if questions or concerns arise.



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SB-10019-04 | 2024/10/17