

For the latest news, sign up for our e-newsletter at nea.org/signup.

January 2026

neaToday

Dwayne Taylor teaches kindergarten in Frontenac, Kansas.

What's the best recipe for teaching boys?

PAGE 38

inside

How AI Is Changing the Way We Teach PAGE 42

Do Schools Start Too Early? PAGE 46

What Shoes Are Best for Educators' Feet? PAGE 49

nea
NATIONAL
EDUCATION
ASSOCIATION



Crayola
Creativity Week

Color
Inspires
CREATIVITY

Join the free celebration

JAN. 26–FEB. 01, 2026

Your Class and Entire School Can Celebrate Every Child's Creativity!

Plan to join the colorful fun that's part of each day of Crayola Creativity Week. Schools across the nation and around the world are participating in this fifth annual celebration. Last year, over 13 million students from 99,000+ schools and 122 countries participated!



Videos from Celebrity Creators with a Featured Book & Read-Aloud Each Day



Sweepstakes & Giveaways* Including Trips, Teachers' Lounge Makeovers, Musical Instruments, Tech, Crayola Art Supplies & More



Daily Activities & Challenges Created to Help Children Build Creative Skills & Confidence



Downloadable Activity Sheets (available in 8+ languages) & Helpful Planning Guides.

Here's the Lineup for Each Day of Crayola Creativity Week 2026!

Each day's celebrity video and connected activities take just 30 minutes of class time and there's a helpful planning guide each day so it's easy to create colorful, fun learning opportunities in class and beyond!

MON. JAN. 26



FACING THE MUSIC

with artist **Kate Micucci** and illustrator **Mark Hoffmann**

Featured Book:
The Note Who Faced the Music

TUES. JAN. 27

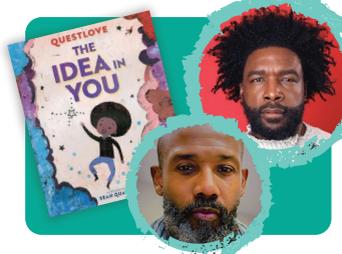


BUILDING TOGETHER

with *Property Brothers* **Drew & Jonathan Scott** and illustrator **Kim Smith**

Featured Book:
Builder Brothers: Big Plans

WED. JAN. 28

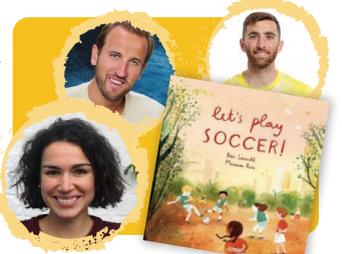


EMBRACING YOUR IDEAS

with filmmaker, musician, and author of *The Idea in You* **Questlove** and illustrator **Sean Qualls**

Featured Book:
The Idea in You

THUR. JAN. 29



REACHING TEAM GOALS

with football/soccer players **Harry Kane & Matt Turner** and illustrator **Marina Ruiz**

Featured Book:
Let's Play Soccer!

FRI. JAN. 30
1:00-1:30PM ET
SPECIAL EVENT:
GLOBAL SCHOOL ASSEMBLY

Get your singing and dancing groove on to celebrate creativity around the world and welcome some special guests including Geena Davis, Paris Hilton, and Savannah Banana players including Malachi Mitchell aka Flash Tha Kid!

FRI. JAN. 30



EXPLORING THE MOON

with **NASA** astronauts and *Snoopy* artist **Mary Valencia-Shyne**

Featured Book:
Shoot for the Moon, Snoopy!

SAT. JAN. 31



EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

with actor **Michael Rainey Jr.** and illustrator **Rob Flowers**

Featured Book:
A Quick History of Money

SUN. FEB. 1



STORYTELLING ADVENTURES

with *Bluey* artists from Ludo Studio **Jasmine "Jazz" Moody & Nick Rees** and wildlife conservationist **Bindi Irwin**

Featured Book:
Bluey: The Creek

Sign Up for Free Today at Crayola.com/CreativityWeek

Sign Up for Free Today at Crayola.com/CreativityWeek



*All participating schools are eligible to win prizes as part of Creativity Week by signing up online. ©2025 Crayola. Crayola Oval Logo®, chevron®, serpentine®, and Crayola Creativity Week® are trademarks of Crayola LLC.

The Sooner You Sign Up, the More Opportunities There Are to Win Prizes and Plan Celebrations!

COVER

What's the Recipe for Reaching Boys?

38 Step into Dwayne Taylor's kindergarten classroom, where he helps boys thrive by modeling empathy, teamwork, and resilience.



FEATURES

Dear Teacher

28 A transgender student shares how his educators make him feel welcome and supported.

'Are They Coming to Take Us Away?'

30 Immigration raids are traumatizing students and families—and hindering learning. But educators are fighting to protect their students.

How to Help Students Value Democracy

34 Gen Z's faith in democracy is fading fast. Educators are responding with creative civic lessons and real-world engagement.



42

How AI Is Changing the Way You Teach

42 Is artificial intelligence friend or foe? The answer is both! Teachers share how they use the

technology to support real learning and connection.

Do Schools Start Too Early?

46 Teen sleep matters, but the verdict is still out on whether later start times are the best solution.

What Shoes Are Best For Educators?

49 Classroom tested, educator approved! NEA's Shoe Council—made up of NEA members like you—reveals the best shoes to keep your feet happy all day long.



IN EVERY ISSUE

7 CLOSE TO HOME

Find members from your region in this issue.

8 BECKY'S JOURNAL

NEA President Becky Pringle teams up with local unions to provide food to families in need and speaks out against federal cuts to public education.

10 NEA IN ACTION

NEA supports a Colorado teachers strike, helps Arizona educators rein in standardized testing, and more.

12 NEWS YOU CAN USE

"Digital masculinity" harms boys; the cost of school supplies is soaring; and SEL works!

16 ISSUES AND ACTION

Learn how federal funding cuts harm students.

18 EDUCATION SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

Discover the secret to successful teacher-paraeducator teams.

OUR VOICES

20 Member Spotlight: A science teacher ignites curiosity and inspires students to love learning.



22

22 Quick Takes: What movie does your work life resemble?

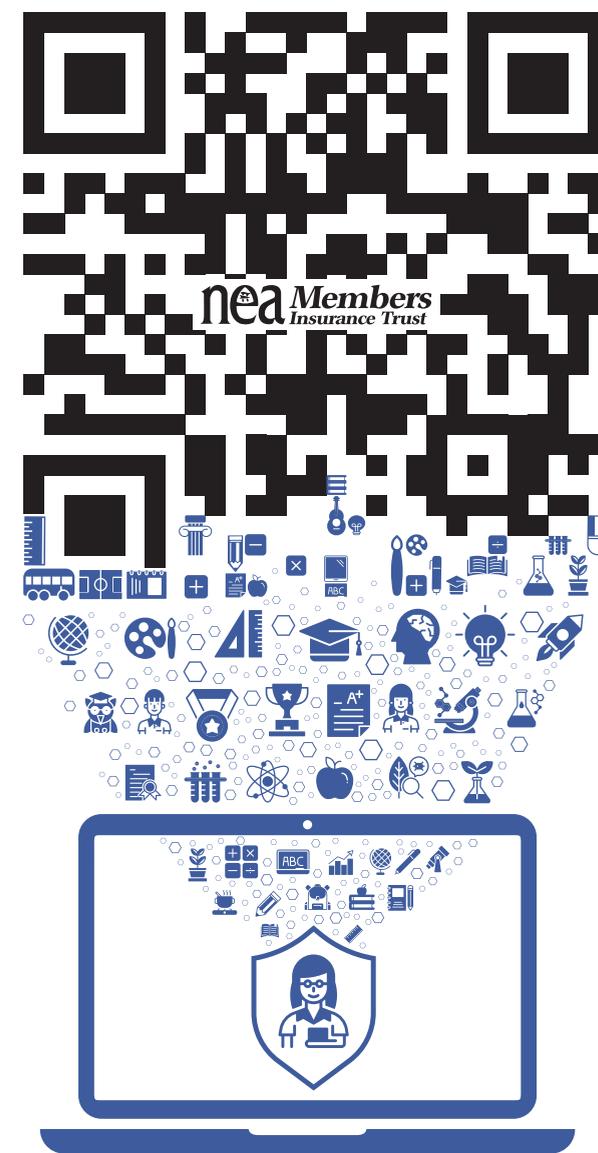
24 TRY THIS

How bird-watching can help you with classroom management; and tips for using technology to cultivate collaboration over isolation.

56 LAST LOOK

A school mural blooms with flowers from around the world, celebrating the diversity of the student body.

Over 900K members have completed registration for this **no-cost-to-you** benefit. **Scan this code** to join them.



If something were to happen to you, **would your family be protected?**

Scan the QR code above to register or go to neamb.com/mycomplife

nea **Members**
Insurance Trust

JOIN THE CONVERSATION



Sign up for **NEA Today news!** For timely news about issues impacting educators, visit nea.org/NEAToday or sign up for *NEA Today's* biweekly e-newsletter at nea.org/signup.

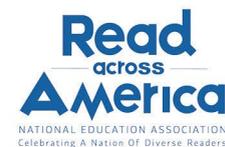


ESSA-certified and built on the five pillars of reading success.

Improve Your School's Literacy Levels with Our Award-Winning Online Reading Program, Fully Aligned with the Science of Reading.



Learn more at www.readingeggs.com



Reading Eggs is a proud sponsor of Read Across America.

MISSION, VISION, AND values



NEA PRESIDENT
Rebecca S. Pringle

NEA VICE PRESIDENT
Princess Moss

NEA SECRETARY-TREASURER
Noel Candelaria

NEA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
Noel Candelaria, Texas
William (Bill) Farmer, Illinois
Mark Jewell, North Carolina
Gladys Marquez, Illinois
Ronald Duff Martin, Wisconsin
Shannon McCann, Washington
Dr. Tia Mills, Louisiana
Princess Moss, Virginia
Rebecca S. Pringle, Pennsylvania

NEA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Kim A. Anderson

NEA DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Karen White

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
We, the members of the National Education Association of the United States, are the voice of education professionals. Our work is fundamental to the nation, and we accept the profound trust placed in us.

OUR VISION IS A GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR EVERY STUDENT.

OUR MISSION
To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.

OUR CORE VALUES
These principles guide our work and define our mission:

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY.
We believe public education is the gateway to opportunity. All students have the human and civil right to a quality public education that develops their potential, independence, and character.

A JUST SOCIETY.
We believe public education is vital to building respect for the worth, dignity, and equality of every individual in our diverse society.

DEMOCRACY.
We believe public education is the cornerstone of our republic. Public education provides individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy.

PROFESSIONALISM.
We believe that the expertise and judgment of education professionals are critical to student success. We maintain the highest professional standards, and we expect the status, compensation, and respect due to all professionals.

PARTNERSHIP.
We believe partnerships with parents, families, communities, and other stakeholders are essential to quality public education and student success.

COLLECTIVE ACTION.
We believe individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As education professionals, we improve both our professional status and the quality of public education when we unite and advocate collectively.

NEA TODAY (ISSN 0734-7219) is published four times a year by the National Education Association, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-3290. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *NEA Today*, Attn: NEA Membership Management Services Address Change, Suite 510, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-3290. Copyright 2025 by the National Education Association of the United States. All rights reserved.

Telephone: 202-833-4000.

NEA Today is mailed to all NEA members as a benefit of membership.

Advertising within *NEA Today* is screened, but the publishing of any advertisement does not imply NEA endorsement of the product or views expressed.

To change your address and/or stop receiving print materials from NEA, visit nea.org/about-nea/contact-us, or call 202-833-4000.



Fully Online, Fully Accredited Through Multiple Universities

50% Off
Any 3-Credit Graduate Course-Only \$189!



Scan for more info.
Self-paced, asynchronous courses created by teachers
Master's Degrees Available

Find out why teachers everywhere trust us to help them earn credits



contact: mwalsh@edtechnologyspecialists.com or www.edtechnologyspecialists.com

SWITCH & GET \$50 OFF.

Big Wireless Coverage Without Big Wireless Cost



PLANS START AT \$20/MONTH.



FAST, RELIABLE NATIONWIDE COVERAGE.



TRY US FOR 30 DAYS NO OBLIGATION.

MEMBER EXCLUSIVE:
GET \$50 OFF PER LINE
CODE **NEA500FF**

OUR PLANS INCLUDE UNLIMITED TALK AND TEXT

1GB	10GB	Unlimited	Unlimited AGE 50+
1 LINE	1 LINE	1 LINE	2 LINES
\$20 MONTH	\$35 MONTH	\$40 MONTH	\$60 MONTH

Plus, Add Lines to Any Plan for Starting at Just \$15.

CONSUMERCELLULAR.COM/2008

(888) 996-2008

© 2026 Consumer Cellular, Inc. Terms and Conditions subject to change. New service activation on approved credit. Cellular service is not available in all areas and is subject to system limitations. For unlimited data plans, access to high-speed data will be reduced after 50GB of use, and you will experience slower speeds for the remainder of your billing cycle. All other products are trademarked by their respective manufacturers. Phones are limited to stock on hand. Terms and Conditions subject to change. Taxes and fees apply. New service activation on approved credit. Plans include a \$5 monthly credit for participation in AutoPay and E-Billing. If you are not completely satisfied within 30 days (data use is limited to 500MB) of activation of your service, cancel and pay nothing. New NEA affiliated customers receive \$50 off each new line activated by 10/31/2026, applied as individual \$5 credits on ten (10) monthly invoices. Promotional credits will be applied to customers' accounts for each new line and will remain valid only for lines remaining in service. Redeemable by using the promo code online, by phone or at Consumer Cellular Retail Stores. Offer not valid for GrandPad, Personal Emergency Response, or watch lines. If the account becomes inactive for any reason prior to receiving the full amount, the remaining credits will be forfeited. The offer may be modified or discontinued at any time, may not be combined with other offers, is not redeemable for cash, has no cash value and is not transferable or refundable.



CLOSE TO home

Find Members From Your Region in This Issue!

Meet these inspiring educators and many others in this magazine.



JIRSA



WADDELL



STORK



WHEELLES



RAMCHANDRAN



VAN BRUNT



YORK



DIOZZI



MERCIADENZ



NELSON

MIDWEST

Illinois: Amber Jirsa, English teacher, p49
Kansas: Dwayne Taylor, kindergarten teacher, p39
Michigan: Kecia Waddell, special education teacher, p43
Minnesota: Molly Peddycoart, special education teacher, p53
Ohio: Bryan Stork, school counselor, p50

WEST

Alaska: Lem Wheelles, government teacher, p36
California: Thomas Courtney, sixth-grade teacher, p44
Meera Ramchandran, science teacher, p51
Utah: Kristin van Brunt, instructional coach, p44
Washington: Amy Dingfield, paraprofessional, p52

NORTHEAST

Maine: Julie York, computer science teacher, p42
Massachusetts: Alicia Diozzi, social studies teacher, p52
New Jersey: Lauren Hallgring, civics teacher, p37
Michelle Merciadenz, occupational therapist, p50
Pennsylvania: Daniel Derflinger, band teacher, p52
Joseph Derrick Nelson, associate professor of educational studies, p40

SOUTH

Florida: Charmaine Emmanuel, classroom aide, p53
Erik Fiske, political science professor, p37
Lynne Formanski, paraeducator, p18
Nancy Tate, paraeducator, p18
Kentucky: Zach Fisher, special education teacher, p48
Madison Sharp, fifth-grade teacher, p51
Maryland: Laura Ellis, library media specialist, p35
South Carolina: Carlos Grant, high school principal, p39
Texas: Agustín Loredo, Spanish and Mexican American studies, p32
Maricruz Martinez, second-grade teacher, p31



EMMANUEL



SHARP



ELLIS

NEATODAY

PUBLISHER AND SENIOR DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
May Malik

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER AND DIRECTOR
Anitrá Speight

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR EDITORIAL CONTENT AND PUBLICATIONS
Giovanna Bechard

EDITOR
Robin Terry Brown

SR. WRITER/EDITORS
Brenda Álvarez
Mary Ellen Flannery
Amanda Litvinov
Cindy Long

COPY EDITOR
Judy Rowe

PROGRAM AND PRODUCTION SPECIALIST
Tammy Funderburk

NEA.ORG/NEATODAY
Tim Walker

SR. CONTENT STRATEGIST, NEA.ORG
Michelle Chovan

DESIGN AND ART DIRECTION
Groff Creative LLC

ADVERTISING SALES
Shawn Stabell
sstabell@neamb.com

CONTRIBUTORS
Jeff Bradbury
Blue K.
Ronak Shah

WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK:

MAIL: NEA Today, 1201 16th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036

EMAIL: neatoday@nea.org FACEBOOK: facebook.com/neatoday

WASTE HERO

Offers 19 activity-based lessons on;

- Circular Economy
- Recycling
- Zero waste principles

Fully Customizable with optional scripts in multiple languages



Bring Circularity Learning to Your Classroom!



Discover at
WasteHeroEducation.com

Joy, Justice, and Excellence

Dear NEA members,
I am honored to serve as
your president.

United, we will reclaim public education as a common good and transform it into a racially and socially just system that actually prepares every student—not one, not some, but every single student—to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world. **Onward!**

Becky Pringle
NEA President



“

We refuse to allow our students, our researchers, our higher education faculty to live in fear of their own government. We will not allow their brilliance to be self-censored before it has a chance to shine. We will not allow the Trump administration to erase academic freedom or steal our future.”

—Becky, speaking at a meeting with NEA Higher Ed state leaders

Face to Face with NEA members

Some of my proudest moments with NEA members happened this fall. I met Iowa educators who are making sure children don't go hungry in the face of historic cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). And at the No Kings rally in Atlanta, I joined educators in protesting the injustices carried out by the Trump administration.

We are taking our place as leaders in this movement by educating and organizing and mobilizing ... and electing! That leadership culminated in MAJOR wins in the November election. American voters were very clear. We care about our kids. We care about our communities. We care about our country!



(Top) In Des Moines, Iowa, I joined members of the Iowa State Education Association, who were delivering food for hungry families. (Bottom) U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (on my right) and I united with educators and families at Atlanta's No Kings rally this fall.

PHOTOS: NEA

JOIN ME 3 Things To Do For Yourself and Your Union

- Honor Martin Luther King Jr. Day!**
On January 19, join me in reflecting on the contributions of Martin Luther King Jr. and how his legacy impacts our schools and communities today. Visit nea.org/MLKDay.
- Save federal programs for students.**
Every state will feel the impact of cuts to federal funding for public education. See how the cuts will affect students in your state at nea.org/FederalFunding and learn how you can speak out against the cuts at nea.org/ProtectOurSchools.
- Get ready for NEA's Read Across America!**
Students all over the country will come together for a love of books and reading during Read Across America Day, on March 2. Then keep it going all year long with our calendar of 12 months of recommended titles, authors, and teaching resources that promote diversity and inclusion at nea.org/ReadAcrossAmerica.

Find out how NEA is working every day for and with educators, students, and public schools in "NEA in Action" (Page 10).

In the News: Federal Cuts to Special Education

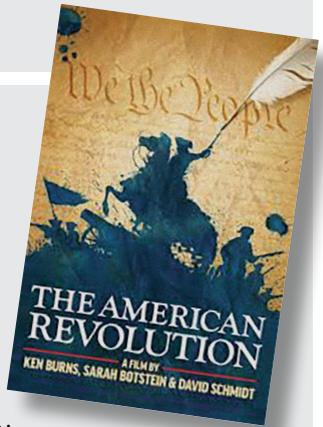
"The alarm we are sounding is that it isn't just bureaucratic neglect, it's a deliberate rollback to a darker time when Americans with disabilities were denied access, opportunity, and dignity before IDEA [Individuals With Disabilities Education Act]."

—Becky, *Maine Public Radio*, October 17, 2025

What I'm Watching:

The American Revolution by Ken Burns

In his editing room, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns has a neon sign that says, "It's complicated." The sign is there to remind him to embrace complex truths—and that's exactly what his documentary on the American Revolution asks of viewers. We know the Revolution was devastating. The film shows us just how destructive and grisly it was, and how the Revolution was steeped in failures, contradictions, and hypocrisy. But I was also reminded that it was ultimately about possibility and progress toward a "more perfect union." The series includes firsthand accounts of people too often left out of the usual histories of the war: Native Americans, women, and Black people, both free and enslaved. While watching, I felt a lot of different things—anger and frustration, but also pride and hope. The nation was even more divided than it is now, and the series reminds me that our nation is a work in progress. We are still becoming a more perfect union. And that requires active participation and civil discourse, now more than ever.



Stay connected with me
through Bluesky
[@neapresident.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/neapresident).

Becky Pringle
[@neapresident.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/neapresident) + Follow

Clearly, it is no secret that this administration does not care about children—especially those with disabilities in special education. Rather than investing in these students, they are disrupting IDEA and putting it on the back burner at HHS.

This is just their newest way to dismantle education.

Trump Administration Threatens Support for Children With Disabilities
Earlier this month, the Trump Administration took aim at a vital program with deep bipartisan support that provides screening, accommodations, and interventions for 7...
© www.cbpp.org

NEA Supports California Dream Centers

Three NEA-funded Dream Centers across the Alhambra Unified School District, in California, are changing lives. These safe, welcoming spaces meet the needs of students, many of whom are recent immigrants living under the threat of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

An inclusive and welcoming sign hangs in the Dream Center at Alhambra High School, in California.

The Dream Centers offer safe spaces for a community under ICE surveillance, as well as tangible support that helps students thrive, including:

- Tutoring and academic support.
- Peer-to-peer mentoring.
- Food and pantry items.
- A clothing closet.
- A safe space to share concerns and build community.

Learn more about NEA's community grants at nea.org/CAPE.



NEA Backs Colorado Educators

NEA stood with the Colorado Springs Education Association during their one-day strike, calling for the restoration of their collective bargaining rights.

Educators organized for change when the school board allowed a decades-long master agreement to expire, replacing it with a non-binding employee handbook. Over 1,000 teachers, parents,



and community members rallied across the city. Educators emphasized that stable schools and fair contracts benefit students by providing consistency, smaller class sizes, and stronger support.

NEA Helps Arizona Local Push Back Against Too Much Testing



With NEA's support, Arizona's Tucson Education Association (TEA) led a successful grassroots campaign to eliminate non-mandatory standardized tests required by the school district—putting students' learning first.

TEA collected more than 1,200 petition signatures, held multiple public forums, spoke at board meetings, and gathered educator stories that illustrated the toll of excessive testing on students.

- The results:
- More instructional time for educators and students.
 - Less focus on test preparation and less stress.
 - A stronger, community-centered approach to teaching and learning.



NEA President Pringle presents a \$25,000 check for Iowa school pantries.

NEA Provides Food to Iowa Families

NEA donated \$25,000 to the Food Bank of Iowa. The donation will help sustain the network of school-based food pantries across Des Moines Public Schools.

NEA President Becky Pringle also joined leaders of the Iowa State Education Association and the Des Moines Education Association in delivering boxes of food to Callanan Middle School, to support the school's families.



Bring some **Chill** to your classroom this winter

Winter just got a little brighter.

Warm up your literacy block with the largest digital collection of Disney educational content.

Made by real teachers and classroom-ready, you won't need to work through your break anymore! And yes — they're standards-aligned. Because quality isn't optional.

A cooler way to help kids crush ELA...

- ❄️ Activities featuring Anna, Elsa and Olaf
- ❄️ Support key reading objectives from Pre-K to Grade 2.
- ❄️ Ideal for group work, centers, or home practice.



Scan to explore the full collection of Disney activities

Visit Twinkl.com/GetDisney



BOYS AND 'DIGITAL MASCULINITY'

A new report by Common Sense Media analyzed how boys' self-esteem is often impacted by their exposure to specific types of content featuring "digital masculinity." This content may reinforce specific gender roles or cover anything from getting fit and building muscle to making money to fighting or using weapons.

According to the report, nearly three-quarters of boys regularly encounter such content, and nearly one in four experience high levels of exposure.

The report found that boys with high exposure to digital masculinity are more likely to report they feel "useless at times," think they're "no good," and are more likely to report being lonely.

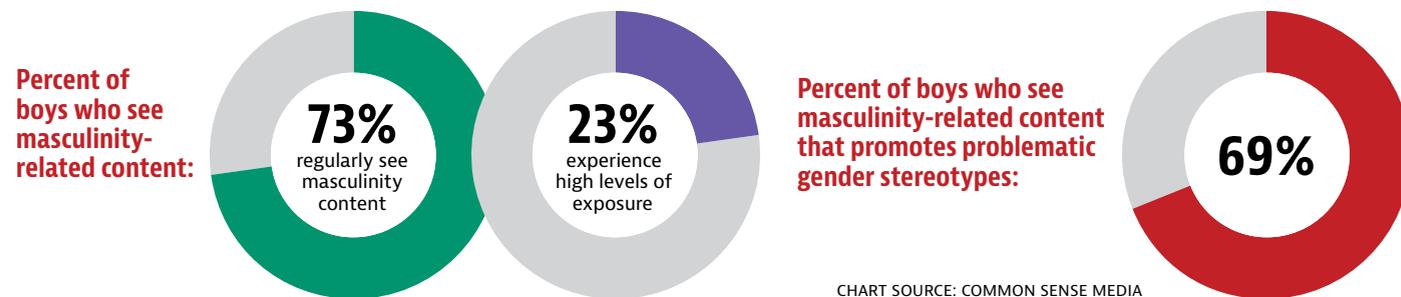
In addition, over two-thirds of adolescent boys regularly see masculinity content that promotes stereotypical gender roles. And exposure increases with age—older boys (14–17) are much more likely to view this content than younger boys (11–13).

How do boys find this content? They're not searching for it. According to the report, more than two-thirds say



it just started showing up in their social media feeds, while 1 in 4 say friends shared it with them, usually through TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram.

Want to know more? Turn to Page 38 to read our story, "What's the Recipe for Reaching Boys?"



More Legislation Targets Sex Education

How sex education should be addressed in classrooms has always been a political minefield, but efforts to limit what is taught have accelerated over the past couple of years. As of fall 2025, more than 650 bills on the topic had been introduced in state legislatures, according to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S., a nonprofit organization advocating for comprehensive sex education. Of those bills, nearly one-quarter sought to pare back or remove access to sex education—a 35 percent increase in these restrictive bills from the year before.

Tariffs: Rising Cost of School Supplies Increases Burden on Educators

As the Trump administration's tariffs kick in, the price of school supplies could increase by as much as 15 percent before the end of this school year, according to a report from the Groundwork Collaborative and the Century Foundation.

Roughly 90 percent of teachers pay for classroom expenses out of their own pockets. Recent surveys indicate that teachers, on average, are forking out anywhere from \$500 to as much as \$900 in the first two months of the school year.

And it's not just teachers. Support staff also spend their money on classroom materials, field trips, and projects.

The 2025 – 2026 school year could be educators' most expensive yet. According to the report, at the beginning of the current academic year, school supplies cost an average of 7.3 percent more than the previous year—nearly triple the overall inflation rate. Index cards are up more than 42 percent; notebooks are up 17 percent; binders and folders are up around 12 percent.

The tariffs on China have had a significant impact. China is the largest exporter of office and school supplies made from plastic.



Cost of school supplies, 2025 versus 2024

ITEM	2025 PRICE	2024 PRICE	PERCENT INCREASE
Adhesive notepads	\$3.93	\$3.69	6.5%
Binders	\$13.74	\$12.18	12.8%
Composition notebook	\$6.34	\$5.86	8.2%
Glue sticks	\$6.04	\$5.76	4.9%
Hand sanitizer	\$4.54	\$4.20	8.1%
Headphones	\$22.96	\$21.38	7.4%
Highlighters	\$3.98	\$3.56	11.8%
Index cards	\$2.31	\$1.62	42.6%
Lunch box	\$15.13	\$13.97	8.3%
No. 2 pencils	\$12.24	\$11.56	5.9%

Teach The Words That Shaped A Nation

New online resources from Ford's Theatre help students examine how the Declaration of Independence has shaped our national dialogue through history. Designed for easy classroom integration, these materials support meaningful conversations about freedom, equality and civic identity.



Photo: Google Expedition

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR STUDENTS

- Engage in inquiry-based learning adapted for each grade band.
- Analyze the Declaration, Gettysburg Address and Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" speech to trace evolving ideas of freedom.
- Learn how Lincoln linked the Civil War to the Declaration's core promises, including a "new birth of freedom."

Visit the Education Resources page at www.fords.org or scan the QR code.



NEW RESEARCH:
SEL Leads to Greater Academic Performance

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has long been recognized as a powerful tool for student growth, teaching essential life skills, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relationship-building. According to a new large-scale analysis of existing research, SEL is also beneficial to students' academic achievement.

The American Education Research Association (AERA) reviewed 40 studies involving more than 33,700 students in grades 1–12. The researchers concluded that students who participated in universal SEL programs (provided to all students in a school) performed better on academic outcomes—including grades and standardized tests—than students who did not. Gains were reported in both literacy and math. The duration of the programs is a key factor. Those lasting more than one semester produce higher gains than shorter programs.



"Our analysis underscores the importance of explicit SEL instruction in schools," says Christina Cipriano, associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine and leader of the AERA research team. "These programs should not be viewed as add-ons, but as essential components of all students' school experiences."

"Never before in the life of any living American have so many books been systematically removed from school libraries across the country. ... Never before has access to so many stories been stolen from so many children."

—"The Normalization of Book Banning," a new report by PEN America, which recorded 6,870 instances of book bans during the 2024 – 2025 school year. Since 2021, when the current wave of book bans began, there have been 22,810 cases of banned books across 45 states and 451 school districts.



DO STUDENTS READ FOR FUN?

Most people have to read—but too often it's an activity limited only to school or work. Reading for pleasure, on the other hand, has long been recognized as a critical factor in supporting mental health and creativity, not to mention lifelong learning. But, according to a new study from the University of Florida (UF) and University College London, reading for pleasure has declined by more than 40 percent over the last 20 years.

"Reading has historically been a low-barrier, high-impact way to engage creatively and improve quality of life," says UF's Jill Sonke, a co-author of the study. "When we lose one of the simplest tools in our public health tool kit, it's a serious loss."

There are a number of factors behind this decline, Sonke explains. "Our digital culture is certainly part of the story.



But there are also structural issues—limited access to reading materials, economic insecurity, and a national decline in leisure time. If you're working multiple jobs or dealing with transportation barriers in a rural area, a trip to the library may just not be feasible."

Is Homework Necessary for Student Learning?

HERE'S WHAT EDUCATORS HAD TO SAY IN A RECENT *EDUCATION WEEK* POLL ON LINKEDIN:



HOW RECENT FUNDING CUTS WILL HURT STUDENTS

By Amanda Litvinov and Cindy Long

Nancy Baker Curtis's son, Charlie, loves monster trucks, playing with his friends, and bike-riding with his mom. "It's amazing because, at the age of two, he couldn't crawl or even sit up," says Baker Curtis, who teaches Spanish at Johnston Middle School, in Iowa.

Six days after Charlie was born, he was diagnosed with a serious infection that would leave him with lifelong disabilities.

When Charlie wasn't hitting developmental milestones, Baker Curtis called in early intervention services.

"The reason Charlie can run and swallow and use his talker is because Medicaid has covered life-changing therapies for our son," she says.

But now Congress has cut Medicaid by a whopping \$1 trillion, making it likely that students with disabilities—kids like Charlie—will lose therapies and services they count on to thrive and even survive.



Nancy Baker Curtis, with her son, Charlie, speaks out against Medicaid cuts at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing.

'WHAT WILL WE DO?'

Charlie's school-based Medicaid services include specialized transportation and a one-on-one aid, as well as speech, occupational, and physical therapy.

Baker Curtis and her husband—who also have a 12-year-old daughter to care for—both have employer-provided health insurance. But their policy doesn't cover anywhere near the amount of services Charlie needs.

"Under our PPO, we qualify for a total of 30 appointments for occupational and physical therapy," Baker Curtis says. "We would blow through those in about three and a half months. What will we do for the rest of the year?"

Nationwide, Medicaid supports over \$7.5 billion of school-based health services annually.

A BARRAGE OF CUTS

Incredibly, Congress voted to sacrifice the well-being of millions of students like Charlie to help finance tax breaks for the ultrawealthy.

When federal support for health care is cut, states are forced to try to make up the difference—and that could result in cuts to education spending. For students, that could mean larger class sizes, losing school counselors, or many other negative outcomes.

Read on to see how students will be directly affected by three reckless moves by the Trump administration. 🚩

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NANCY BAKER CURTIS

What's at risk? School meals, Title I funding, and health care

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM HAS ALREADY HAD DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION. HERE ARE THREE WAYS STUDENTS WILL CONTINUE TO PAY THE PRICE:



Fewer school meals for hungry kids

WHAT WAS CUT: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) faces \$186 billion in cuts over the next decade—the largest reduction ever made to an anti-hunger program.

WHY IT MATTERS: Students whose families qualify for SNAP are automatically eligible for free school meals. With fewer kids receiving SNAP benefits, some districts will lose community eligibility, a provision that allows schools to provide universal meals to the entire student body.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: These cuts will result in as many as 18 million children losing access to free school meals. That means more students will face food insecurity and come into the classroom hungry. Studies show—and educators know—that hungry kids have a hard time focusing and have more behavior issues.



Title I funds uncertain

WHAT WAS CUT: The Trump administration gutted the U.S. Department of Education (ED), including its National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)—the agency responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting U.S. education data. NCES staff was reduced from 100 employees to 3.

WHY IT MATTERS: ED's number crunchers provide the data that determines how much funding schools receive for programs such as Title I, which helps K–12 schools serve low-income families.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: Today, nearly 90 percent of U.S. school districts receive some Title I funding, which has long had bipartisan support among lawmakers. By firing the statisticians and data experts who determine which schools qualify for that money, the Trump administration has made it virtually impossible to deliver on those programs going forward.



Medicaid cuts mean students lose critical health services

WHAT WAS CUT: Congress slashed Medicaid by \$1 trillion; most cuts will be phased in between 2026 – 2028.

WHY IT MATTERS: Nearly 80 million Americans—including 38 million children and 1 in 10 education support professionals—receive health care coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

HOW IT AFFECTS STUDENTS: The Congressional Budget Office estimates that 16.9 million people will lose their health coverage by 2034. Medicaid is also the fourth-largest source of funding for the public school system, supporting over \$7.5 billion in school-based health services annually.

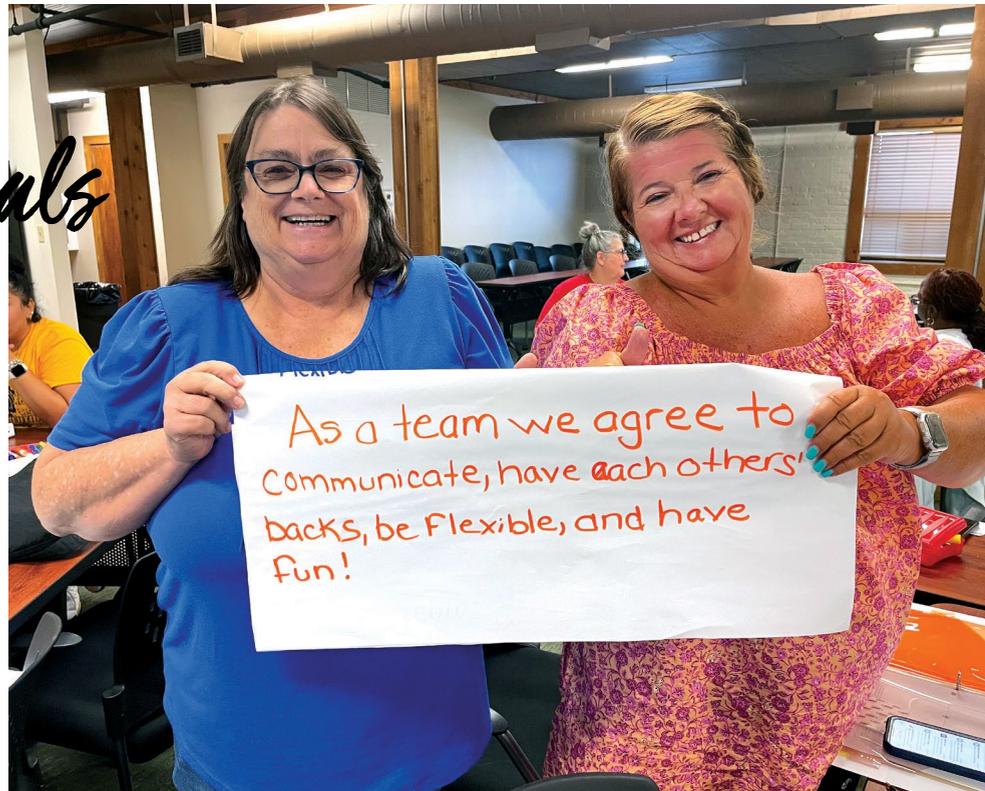
TAKE ACTION

Join the movement to stand up to reckless education cuts at nea.org/ProtectOurSchools.



TEAR IT & SHARE IT

Share this with your colleagues and ask them to speak out for their students. Find out how at the link below.



Teacher Nancy Tate (left) and paraeducator Lynne Formanski (right) drafted a team statement during a “Building Winning Teams” training in Hillsborough County, Florida.

HOW TO BUILD BETTER TEACHER-PARAEDUCATOR TEAMS

By Cindy Long

When Connecticut paraeducator Jean Fay was starting out in her career, she walked into her new kindergarten classroom in a skirt and heels, carrying a big bucket of My Little Pony figurines. The classroom teacher who greeted her wore flannel, Converse high-tops, and an uneasy expression that seemed to say, “This is never going to work.”

But Fay maintained her confidence and told the teacher, “We’re going to be great partners.” In fact, they meshed after day one, Fay recalls, and became such good friends that they even vacationed together. They became known as the “dream team.”

In a school in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood, the superintendent and chancellor of the city’s public schools stopped by a classroom where paraeducator Margaret Dalton-Diakite and her partner teacher were working with students. The visitors couldn’t tell who was the paraeducator and who was the teacher.

Dalton-Diakite says, “We looked at each other like, ‘Yes!’

We moved simultaneously. We flowed. We were a team!”

The secret to successful partnerships

Fay and Dalton-Diakite’s classroom partnerships were so productive that they decided to share their success stories at last year’s NEA Education Support Professional National Conference.

Becoming a dream team isn’t always easy, acknowledges Sabrina Gates, an NEA member and union activist who leads the Hillsborough Consortium for Technology and Education (CTechEd)—a Tampa, Fla., nonprofit that provides professional development for educators.

She recognizes that paraeducator-teacher relationships can be difficult, so she jumped at the chance to lead an NEA training called “Building Winning



Jean Fay



Margaret Dalton-Diakite



Sabrina Gates

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

Teams: Effective Paraeducator-Teacher Teams.” The series of eight trainings is designed to engage teams and includes topics such as communication, establishing a shared vision, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

NEA Today spoke with paraeducators Dalton-Diakite and Fay, as well as CTechEd trainer Gates, who offered this advice about creating winning teams:

1. Respect yourself and each other.

Fay: We teach respect to students, but we need to model that respect, too. Often we, as paraeducators, don’t think about the talents we have and how we enhance the learning environment for students and colleagues.

Respecting yourself means valuing what you do and what you represent. Don’t minimize the importance of your accomplishments and contributions. Paraeducators bring a lot to the table and are critical to student success.

Dalton-Diakite: If a paraeducator has served for years in a school, the para might have more knowledge than the teacher about that community. The para knows the families, the students, and the culture. That can be tremendously helpful, especially for newer teachers. When there’s mutual respect, teachers can tap into that knowledge.

Gates: Respect also means understanding the roles and dynamic of a partnership. You can’t have a winning team if a teacher feels they are “the boss.” It doesn’t work if the paraeducator feels they’re being assigned tasks that aren’t their role or if they are relied on solely to clean up the classroom and organize bookshelves.

Set the tone of a true partnership based on mutual respect: The teacher

is the leader of the team, but not a supervisor. Ask each other, “What are we going to do together to make this a great partnership?”

2. Nurture your relationship.

Gates: When you focus on building rapport, you can have honest conversations. In one training activity, I ask each team member, “What is it that you want?” and “What do you offer?”

I’ve noticed that paraeducators can be reticent about their wishes and skills. This exercise helps them speak up and say, hey, I have an idea, and here’s what I think we can do to accomplish it.

It’s also important to have the confidence to admit when you don’t know something and to say, “I don’t know how to do this, but you can help me to better our students.”

Your position entitles you to gain more knowledge. Grow that ownership by saying, “This is my job, and I want to do it better, please help me get there.”

3. Refine lessons together.

Dalton-Diakite: A teacher can break down the lesson plan for the paraeducator, who is then better able to teach it to students in the most effective ways.

The paraeducator might have questions about the lessons, and the teacher might have questions about what works best when reinforcing the lessons to students who need more explanation.

The teacher should be giving outlines of lessons to the paraeduca-

Try These Tips for Creating Effective Partnerships

- Establish routines so everyone knows how the class or the day will unfold. No surprises!
- Meet regularly to talk about lessons and the strengths or weaknesses of your team dynamic.
- Include teachers and paraeducators in team meetings, so everyone is on the same page.
- Overcommunicate. Avoid lack of clarity and missing information. Be open to new ways of doing things.
- Find time in the day for planning. Negotiate for it with your district, and ask your union for help.
- Advocate for professional development for paraeducators! Learn more at nea.org/ESPLearning.

tor, and then the pair should sit down together to go over it. The teacher could say something like, “Remember the science lesson I taught on Monday? I don’t think Sue, Johnny, and Mary got it. Can you sit down with them and go back through the lesson and try to see what they are missing?”

It’s wonderful when you work together as a team to make sure all students have a good understanding of the curriculum. ✨

TAKE ACTION

Want to Strengthen Your Paraeducator-Teacher Team?

NEA offers a series of eight trainings, called “Building Winning Teams: Effective Paraeducator-Teacher Teams.” Learn more at nea.org/WinningTeams.



(Left) New York teacher Samuel Washington Jr. taps into kids' natural interest in science topics, including the human body; (right) Washington fosters a love of learning in his students, including Kenly McDonald (in red hood) and Tiffany Williams.

A SCIENCE TEACHER SPARKS CURIOSITY AND CONNECTION

"At first, kids love science—bugs, their bodies, the outdoors. But if you don't tap into that natural curiosity, they lose it."

—Samuel Washington Jr., high school science teacher, in New York

Fewer than half of the cells in our bodies are human cells. That's the kind of fun fact that science teacher Samuel Washington Jr. loves to drop on his students at the start of the school year. He'll also have his biology students design "weird but true" bumper stickers. Things like, the human stomach can dissolve razor blades, a cloud can weigh more than a million pounds, and hot water can freeze faster than cold water. And if you're still wondering, the rest of the human body is made up of trillions of non-human microbial cells, including bacteria, fungi, and viruses!

Washington has taught for more than three decades and knows science can lose its spark if it's reduced to textbooks and note-taking.

"You want to catch their attention first," says Washington, who teaches at Woodlands High School, in Hartsdale, N.Y. "At first, kids love science—bugs, their bodies, the outdoors—but if you don't tap into that natural curiosity, they lose it. To me, that's the ticket to bringing education forward."

He also uses science to meet students where they are and draw them into learning through wonder and relevance.

A CLOUD CAN WEIGH MORE THAN A MILLION POUNDS.

The need to 'be better'

Men of color make up just 2 percent of educators nationwide, so Washington sees representation as central to his work.

"Growing up I didn't see a lot of me in my own teachers," he says. "That really inspired me to go just a little harder in terms of what I bring to the table ... to be better."

Today, that commitment translates to setting high expectations for himself and his students.

"I don't have time to slack off because I want [my students] to be the best they can be," Washington says. "I'll say, 'I know sometimes you don't want to be here, sometimes I don't want to be here—we're human. But if you can give me

your best, I'll give you my best.' And that's all I can ask for."

Holding students to high standards goes hand in hand with creating a classroom where they feel seen and valued.

Washington makes sure his students feel like they belong in school. For example, during Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and Women's History Month, he asks students to research scientists whose names don't appear in the usual textbooks.

And when one of his students was allowed to profile her mother, a hospital worker, her grades started improving.

"She was like, wow, he really does care about what I have to offer and where I come from," Washington recalls.

He adds: "Not only am I beneficial to students of color, especially young Black males, but I feel I'm a benefit to all students."

A bond beyond the classroom

Some of Washington's most powerful connections stretch across years. He recalls one ninth grader who entered his honors biology class nervous and unsure—both about her own abilities and about Washington's, since he was a newer teacher at the time.

By the end of her senior year, she had taken every course he offered and later went on to Harvard. Her younger brother followed the same path.

Recognition, he admits, is gratifying. But what means the most to Washington is how his lessons in science continue to resonate years later.

"Sometimes, as a teacher, the impact of our work can go under the radar until years after a student has



graduated," he says. "I've had former students come back after 20 years to thank me for how much I did to prepare them for life after high school. To be honored in real-time makes it come alive." 🌟

—BRENDA ÁLVAREZ



How does Samuel Washington Jr. work his magic in the classroom? Scan this code to check out his video.

Who is Samuel Washington Jr.?

"[My friends and I] always joke that we were bowling alley kids," says Washington, whose father was an avid bowler. His last memory with his dad, who died when Washington was 16, was winning a tournament together.

That moment inspired him to coach, mentor, and guide young people through a school bowling program. Over the years, his youth league and high school teams have earned championship titles and collected thousands in scholarship money—extra support that helped many students pursue college.

"I've found that students who bowl, or who are in clubs, perform a little bit better in school," Washington says. "They know someone cares about them, and that makes all the difference."

What movie does your work life resemble?

OUR VOICES

quick takes

Finding Nemo.

That scene with Marlin telling Nemo not to touch the boat, and then Nemo touches the boat while looking right at Marlin!

—Connie Miner (below), Michigan



Connie Miner teaches third grade in Bronson, Mich.

50 First Dates!

Teach it today, and tomorrow they have never heard of it.

—Marshia P.



"I'm a music teacher, so it's *Mr. Holland's Opus!* Still one of my favorite movies of all time!"

—Karen Waters, Tennessee



Some days ... Jurassic Park.

—Amy K.

Forrest Gump!

All of my kids can and will succeed, ... and Lieutenant Dan (that's me!) will be right by their side!

—April W.



The Hunger Games.

The federal and state [legislatures] are the "Capitol," and public education is the "outer districts." We're told to provide while given minimal (or no) support.

—Patrick Bentley, Florida



Groundhog Day.

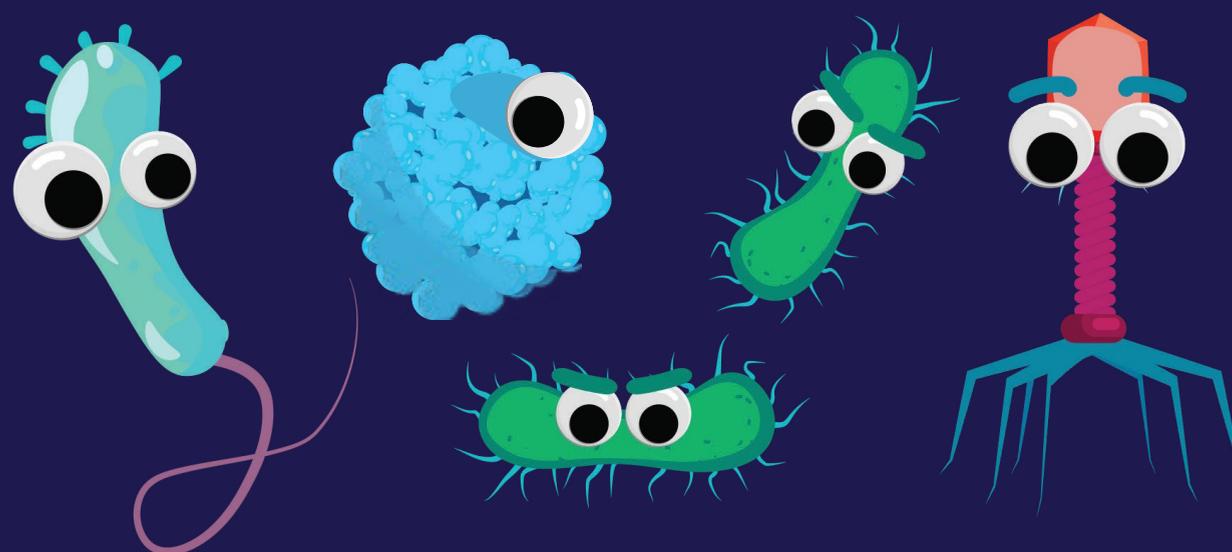
—Brad B.



HERE

For Healthy Schools

Lysol's *HERE for Healthy Schools* program is intended to reduce school absenteeism through creating hands-on activities that are fun and engaging while teaching the science of germs and better hygiene behaviors.



FREE DOWNLOADABLE RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE AT

WWW.LYSOL.COM/LYSOLMINILABS/



© 2025 Reckitt Benckiser LLC

SHARE THIS

We want to know what's on your mind. We asked this question on *NEA Today's* Facebook page and received so many great answers! Keep an eye on [facebook.com/NEAToday](https://www.facebook.com/NEAToday) for our next question, and share this link with your fellow NEA members.

TRY
THIS

engage

WHAT BIRD-WATCHING TAUGHT ME ABOUT CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

By Ronak Shah, seventh-grade science teacher, Indiana State Teachers Association



During a quiz on plate tectonics, two students whisper in the back of my room. I notice but stay quiet. I have one chance to redirect them. Forty-seven seconds into their conversation, with my back to them, I spin around, make eye contact, and say, "I know, right?"

They pause mid-sentence, shocked. "How did you hear us?"

"This may come as a surprise, but when the room is silent, I can hear you whisper."

Teachers often seem to see all. They respond to a murmured question in a class full of conversation. They can tell if someone's skipping class a floor away by reading faces in the room.

Cognitive scientists call this ability to filter signals from noise "the cocktail party effect." Teachers sometimes call it radar, and we use it every day.

Thirteen years in, I credit this radar with much of my success as a teacher. But it's not instinctual. My radar used to be terrible. The good news is, it's something anyone can develop with practice and coaching.

As I gained experience, I lost sight of my growth trajectory—specifically, of how I developed the radar necessary for

classroom management. And that made it harder to help new teachers when they asked for guidance.

But everything changed when I got into bird-watching.

Sharpen your senses

Birding is astonishingly multi-sensory. Your eyes scan for the slightest disturbances in a still forest. Was that a wing flapping or an acorn falling? When the wind and rain pick up, you peer more vigorously, discerning the types of motion that leaves and branches make when pressed by different forces.

Simultaneously, you're listening for calls and knocks that distinguish one bird from another. Was that one bird or two? Was that the same bird I just heard a half-mile back?

Novel sounds became distinct notes. It's the feeling of hearing a song and suddenly recognizing it's a familiar tune.

These sights and sounds meld with texts, guides, and knowledge about what species are likely in an area and when they migrate.

Could that actually be a rose-breasted grosbeak at this time of year? Is that pecking more likely to be a red-bellied woodpecker or a northern

Science teacher and bird-watcher Ronak Shah hones his powers of observation in the classroom by identifying birds like these: (clockwise from left) red-bellied woodpecker, northern flicker, and rose-breasted grosbeak.

flicker? A birder filters what to attend to and what to ignore.

How can anyone learn this? For me, it took authentic practice and constant feedback from experienced birders. I realized that I was basically relearning radar. And it's changed the way I look at my early days of teaching.

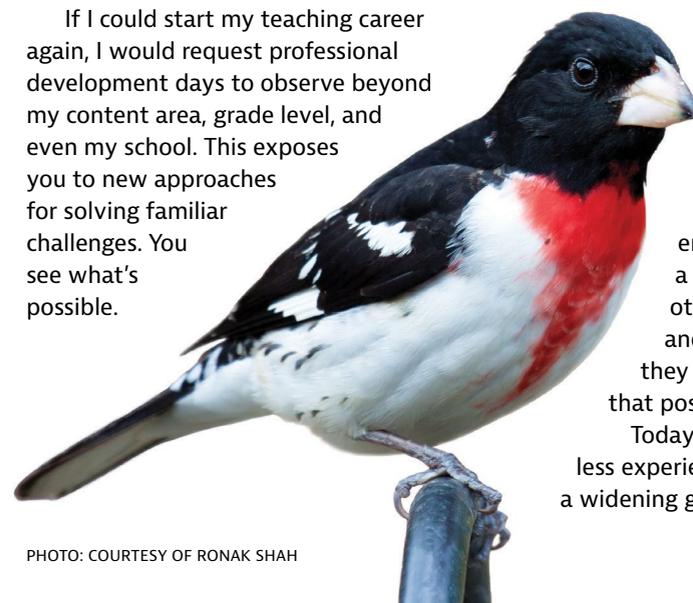
Help your teaching take flight

Incorporating these bird-watching skills into your practice, could transform your classroom:

Notice the little things. On a bird-watching trail, I learned to slow down for every slight movement and sound. I perceive things I didn't know I could notice. It works in the classroom, too. Just name what you observe aloud: The new kicks, the haircut, a student's posture. Statements of fact build the muscles of radar.

Learn through observation. Sit in on other teachers' classes as often as possible. My birding skills improved by moving beyond my backyard, to lakeshores and prairies and thickets.

If I could start my teaching career again, I would request professional development days to observe beyond my content area, grade level, and even my school. This exposes you to new approaches for solving familiar challenges. You see what's possible.



Have a mentor. Just as I need pointers when I misidentify a feather or birdcall, early teachers grow and sustain themselves with great coaching.

When I started teaching, I was lucky to have a trusted mentor who saw the teacher I could be, even when I was at my worst. A good mentor is the equivalent of an additional year of experience.

Even though long-term retention of high-quality teachers pays for itself, not all schools invest in coaching. Look for educators you feel an affinity for and trust, if this is an issue in your school. Ask these colleagues to observe you and provide feedback, or watch footage of you teaching.

Experienced teachers want to work in a building filled with other great teachers, and they'll share what they know to make that possible.

Today's teaching force is less experienced than ever, with a widening gap between veteran

teachers and new ones. Anyone entering the classroom deserves the support and experience they need to thrive, in spite of those headwinds.

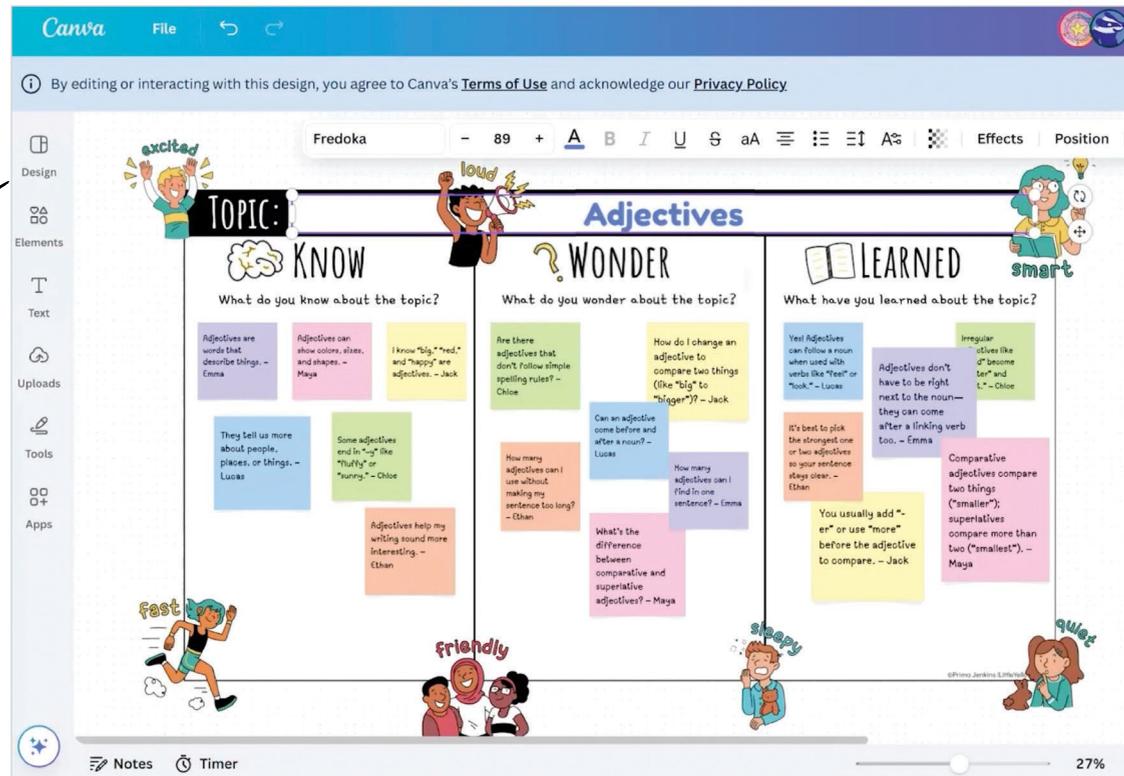
Bird-watching reminded me of our collective responsibility to support each other in this work, because no one gets better alone. Let's stop treating preparation as an afterthought. Instead, let's invest in our early career teachers so they have the skills to rebuild our profession and build long-term careers in the classroom.

THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED ON CHALKBEAT.ORG.



Ronak Shah teaches at Thomas Carr Howe Middle School, in Indianapolis.

TRY THIS technology



Students collaborate in real time on a virtual Canva whiteboard, adding notes, drawings, and ideas during class.

One project that I share with my students each year invites students to create flip-book-style animations using Google Slides or Microsoft 365. Once the students have chosen characters and themes for their stories, it's off to the races. Together, they are able to create a pretty impressive animated short story.

Create cohesion with a project hub

"Who was supposed to do that?" is the all-too-common refrain of group work. Technology can bring clarity and real-world project management skills to your classroom. Simple tools like Google Sites and Canva

websites, or even a well-structured Google Sheets or Notion dashboard, can serve as a central project hub. Here, students can break down large assignments into smaller tasks, assign roles and deadlines, and visually track their progress from "to do" to "in progress" to "complete."

This transparency demystifies the workflow, minimizes confusion, and empowers students to hold themselves and their peers accountable—just as they will in their future careers.

Foster innovation

Ultimately, these tools are simply a means to an end. The goal is to design learning experiences where collaboration is not just an option, but an authentic and essential part of the process. By thoughtfully integrating technology, we can build classrooms

that are more than just places of instruction—they become incubators for the next generation of innovators, thinkers, and team players.

Building these skills is a journey, and you don't have to do it alone. The conversation continues with educators who are putting these ideas into practice every day. To hear more in-depth strategies, discover new tools, and learn from fellow educators, I invite you to visit [TeacherCast.net](https://www.teachercast.net) for educational podcasts, resources, and a community dedicated to instructional technology.



Jeff Bradbury is an instructional technology teacher and coach, and the creator of the TeacherCast Educational Network.

HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN FOSTER COLLABORATION OVER ISOLATION

By Jeff Bradbury, technology teacher, Connecticut Education Association

Technology can sometimes create digital islands, isolating students behind their screens. But with intentional pedagogical design, technology can become a bridge that connects them. It's not about downloading the flashiest new app; it's about choosing tools that empower students to think, create, and learn together.

Skills like communication, creative problem-solving, and cooperation are no longer optional "soft skills"—they are the essential currency of the future.

The challenge and opportunity lie in the tools already at our fingertips. How can we leverage technology, not as a digital worksheet, but as a powerful catalyst for building a collaborative classroom culture? How do you transform your students from isolated learners into collaborative creators? Try these three strategies to enhance your curriculum with creative and collaborative inquisition:

Unlock every voice

The classic brainstorming session is often dominated by a few outspoken students. Digital canvases, such as Microsoft Whiteboard or Canva Whiteboard, can completely change this dynamic. Digital

devices democratize the ideation process through shared virtual spaces.

Every student—from the bold leader to the quiet reflector—can simultaneously contribute their thoughts with digital sticky notes, images, or drawings. What begins as a blank slate quickly becomes a vibrant mosaic of collective ideas, ensuring every voice is heard and seen.

Build a living document

Group projects often mean that one student does the work while others add their names. Collaborative platforms, such as Google Docs, Google Slides, or Microsoft 365, change the game by fostering true co-creation and shared ownership.

Instead of dividing and conquering, students can work within the same document in real time. The magic lies in features that promote teamwork. For example, you can use the comment function for constructive peer feedback; use track changes to see the group's thought process evolve; and assign specific sections to ensure equitable contribution. The final product isn't just a patchwork of individual efforts, but a cohesive piece crafted by a team.



Explore. Act. Tell.® Powered by Students

FREE Standards-Aligned Lessons and Resources

- For grades 6-12
- Civic engagement and leadership
- Project-Based Learning
- Implement a project and compete for grant funds



Annual Challenge Deadline: MAY 15, 2026

All projects automatically entered for chance to win grants from \$500 to \$5,000

Empower students to lead and serve their community by fighting food insecurity while using the program's Project-based learning lessons.



ExploreActTell.org/registration



DEAR TEACHERS:

YOU TAUGHT ME I BELONG HERE

These letters were written for *NEA Today* by Blue K. (right), a transgender high school student in Virginia. Blue shares how his teachers, counselors, librarians, and school staff have supported him, and how educators in his school and across the country can help transgender students feel welcome. To protect Blue's identity, only his first name and last initial are included in this article.



DEAR SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF,

I see you all making my school a nice place to be! You all are so friendly and kind to everyone, and I know you don't get enough recognition for it. School nurses, cafeteria staff, security, attendance office workers—all of you make school a place worth going to, not just the teachers.

I appreciate it when you smile at me and say good morning in the line to get in every day. I appreciate that you actually talk to people as you walk by in the hallway, and make us each feel seen in our own little ways.

To the one attendance lady I probably scared because I told her I might pass out on the way to my blood-drawing appointment: I'm sorry and I promise I'm fine.

Thank you each for doing what you do. Without you, the building wouldn't be the same place that I enjoy going to every day.

Appreciatively,
BLUE

DEAR TEACHERS,

Thank you for helping me see that I can be more than just my identity.

Yes, I am trans. I'm queer, and gender expansive, and generally not your average teenager. But I'm also a great writer, a great speaker, and a great stage manager for my theater group. I have interests in things outside the community, and you've helped nurture and guide the way to finding those things I love.

I've become a driving force in my journalism class, thanks to you. I'm an editor now, and no one there cares what my pronouns are. They do care if I know the Associated Press Stylebook front to back and that I will lay out their stories in a way that looks good. I write kickass essays, thanks to you, and I have the ability to help others with their writing. Grades for sure don't care how you identify. They are completely unbiased and will grade you harshly even if you're a cis white man. I am a trans man, and I get great grades that are supported by my work. That's not because I'm a trans man—that's because you taught me how to find my voice and my writing style.

No matter what your students are interested in, you've made sure those spaces exist—the spaces that show them they are so much more than just some trans kid, some queer kid. They can be anything they want, and they can be amazing at it.

Happily,
BLUE

DEAR LIBRARIANS,

Thank you for protecting the representation that is so needed for students of marginalized groups everywhere.

Throughout the country, you all are standing up to book bans and creating literature that shows the impacts and destructiveness of the laws and orders that have come through. It's so important that we keep books that show marginalized people, especially the LGBTQ+ community, thriving in whatever they do. You, librarians, are guardians of knowledge and a safe space for students like me. You always have been, and know that I see you and aspire to have your level of badassery someday.

See you in the local bookstore.
BLUE

DEAR COUNSELORS,

Thank you for helping me change my name on Schoology (Canvas, Google Classroom, etc.), even when I hadn't legally changed it.

It's such a small change, but having the name that I prefer on rosters, in discussion boards, on assignments I submit, and everything else that comes with a school name change, makes all the difference. I felt as if you were someone that I could talk to about that experience, and you made the transition as painless as possible.

Maybe it's a harder process for some students in other school districts. I have no doubt it is. But it's a process that is needed to affirm trans students. It may be a small difference for you and other students, but it's a huge difference—a needed difference—for us.

Thankfully,
BLUE

DEAR ADMINISTRATORS,

Please, for the love of Mother Earth, give me more gender-neutral bathrooms. My school has just two that are open for students, and half the time they are locked. We have so many bathrooms for everyone else. People like me who don't feel comfortable in either bathroom, girl's or boy's, need to pee, too. You'd be surprised how good I am at holding my bladder. Bladder of steel, am I right? But I shouldn't have to wait. Bathrooms should always be accessible; they should be a public right and resource. But since we cannot, should not, or will not go into the open bathrooms, every student like me gets far too good at it. Give us more bathrooms. Make it so that everyone can pee when they need to.

Holding it,
BLUE

**FOR
MORE**

Go to nea.org/BluesLetters to read more messages from Blue to his educators.

'ARE THEY COMING TO Take Us Away?'

By Brenda Álvarez

IMMIGRATION RAIDS ARE TRAUMATIZING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES, BUT COMMUNITIES ARE FIGHTING BACK

A mother waited anxiously outside a Texas elementary school. Her son didn't walk out with the rest of his fifth-grade class. "She panicked," says Maricruz Martínez, a second-grade teacher in San Antonio. "She was so upset, asking: 'Where is he? Who took him? Why is he not here?' You could tell where her mind was going."

Where did her son go? The child had simply stopped at the restroom.

The danger is real. Many elected officials are creating a climate of fear, encouraging immigration raids, abductions, and deportations, and intentionally terrorizing families and communities. For those living through it, the absence of a child, even for a few minutes, can feel like a nightmare come true.

The raids are becoming more common across the country, and the mere rumor of a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence is enough to keep children home from school—and inflict academic and emotional harm.

The pain felt by children and families

Current immigration enforcement practices are causing significant stress, fear, uncertainty,

anxiety, and even trauma for children, says Allison Bassett Ratto, a child clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C.

"What they see are their classmates, their family members, their neighbors often being apprehended in violent and confusing ways, while ... doing things like picking up their children from the bus stop or going to their jobs," she says. "This, for children, creates a sense that nowhere and no one is safe."

She adds: "What is particularly worrisome to me as a child psychologist is that the stress, the anxiety, and the trauma ... can become chronic, leading to both immediate and long-term damage to children's mental and physical health."

A classroom with a revolving door

A U.S. history teacher in Michigan, who teaches immigrant and refugee multilingual language learners from Central America, East Africa, and Afghanistan, sees the fear every day in his classroom.

"Some students stopped coming to school entirely or transferred to different schools in other parts of the country," says William, who asked that his last name and school remain



Maricruz Martínez, a second-grade teacher in Texas, assures her students that she will keep them safe.

"What they see are their classmates, their family members, their neighbors often being apprehended in violent and confusing ways. ... This, for children, creates a sense that nowhere and no one is safe."

—Allison Bassett Ratto, a clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C.

Communities Team Up to Protect Students

Across the country, parents, educators, and community members are organizing and stepping up in record numbers to make sure immigrant families feel supported. Their goal is to strengthen communities through care, mutual aid, and advocacy. Here are some of the ways they work together to keep students safe:

- **Carpools and safe school travel:** Parents volunteer to drive or walk groups of children to school, sometimes forming "walking buses" or "bike buses." Many ensure drivers have background checks, underscoring that this is about child safety, not immigration status.
- **Food and grocery support:** Mutual aid networks coordinate grocery deliveries and food boxes for families in need, ensuring children don't go without essentials.
- **Safe presence near schools:** Families take shifts walking near schools, creating a visible and reassuring presence during drop-off and pickup.
- **Public advocacy and policy change:** Parents and allies call city council members, mayors, and school officials to voice concerns about policies affecting students, focusing on safety, fairness, and student well-being. They also attend school board meetings and town halls to demand protections for students and accountability from harmful policies.
- **Support during detentions:** When a family member is detained, communities step in with fundraising drives, connections to legal aid, and access to social services.
- **Rapid response teams:** Community members organize to respond quickly when there are reports of immigration enforcement activity. These teams observe and document interactions, connect families to legal resources, and provide immediate support, such as helping families know their rights.

LEARN MORE

Help protect your students

You can help keep students safe from unlawful or harsh immigration enforcement. Find out how at [nea.org/SafeZones](https://www.nea.org/SafeZones).

'ARE THEY COMING TO Take Us Away?'

confidential to avoid drawing unwanted attention from ICE. "Other students' [families] ... decided to move back to their home countries because they didn't feel particularly safe."

One day, a student is present and engaged in class. The next, their seat is empty, with no explanation and many lingering questions.

"Our school has a lot of movement. People ... join us throughout the school year, but also leave. With the Trump administration, it's been scary," William says. He acknowledges that when a student disappears from one day to the next, it's "anxiety-inducing."

When fear enters the classroom

The effect of immigration raids stretches into every corner of the classroom. Educators report plummeting attendance, emotional withdrawal, and families disappearing overnight—all of which has been driven by the Department of Homeland Security's decision to rescind the "sensitive locations" memo, which once discouraged immigration raids in schools, churches, and hospitals.

Agustín Loredo, a longtime teacher and head soccer and cross-country coach in Baytown, Texas, recalls a student who told him quietly one day, "I live with my dad's friend. I just put him down as an uncle."

His father had been deported. His mother was in Honduras. The student was working full-time while trying to stay in school.

But toward the end of the 2024 – 2025 school year, the student stopped coming.

"It broke my heart, but I also understand. This kid has to eat," Loredo says.

Not an isolated story

Following Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2025, reports poured into NEA from educators who witnessed the fallout directly in their classrooms.

An educator in Arizona reported that their school experienced a "near 50 percent absence rate one day because of a random rumor that ICE showed up to a local elementary school."

"I live with my dad's friend. I just put him down as an uncle."

—Confided by a student to Texas teacher Agustín Loredo



Agustín Loredo



Martinez holds a red card informing immigrant families of their rights during unlawful stops.

A Michigan teacher shared how a seventh-grade student didn't show up to school for three weeks. "His mother was scared to send him to school, since ICE is rounding up Indigenous people," the teacher says. "He has only returned to school one or two days a week."

Another educator in Pennsylvania noted: "One student is very anxious that her mother will be taken while she is at school. She is afraid she will go home, and no one will be there."

Another reported terrified children clutching their passport cards in case they're stopped and asked for their citizenship status. Kindergartners are asking, "Are they coming to take us away?" shared a Minnesota educator.

What you can do to help

Educators have responded by distributing red cards—wallet-size cards with language to assert one's legal rights if approached by ICE agents. Many are taking "Know Your Rights" trainings to learn how to respond safely during encounters with ICE. Educators have also offered reassurances to immigrant families that they will continue to support them. Educators are most protected when actions like these occur off duty and not during the school day.

The district told us to stay out of it, Martínez says. "But we didn't. We made sure to share the red cards with all of our members and families. ... We're here for them." ❄️



Check out this video to learn how educators can help protect their communities. Scan the QR code to watch.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF AGUSTÍN LOREDO; MARK GREENBERG



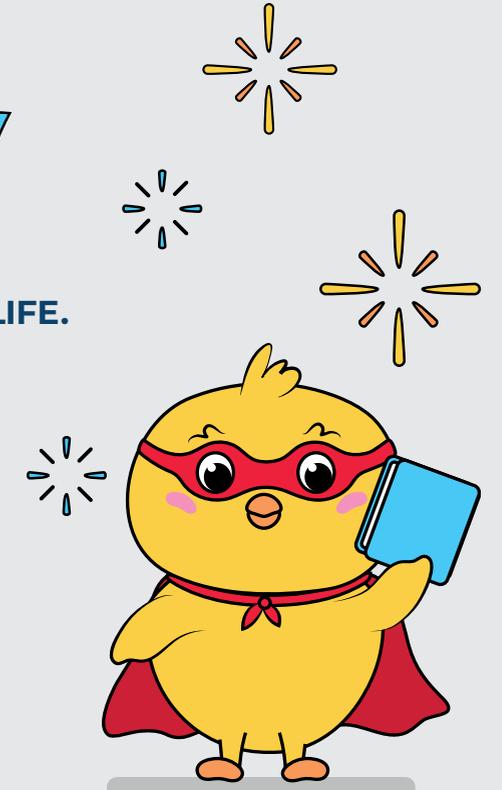
Powered by HEIFER INTERNATIONAL

NEW YEAR, NEW READING GOALS!

KICK OFF 2026 BY JOINING READ TO FEED®, WHERE EVERY PAGE YOUR STUDENTS TURN SUPPORTS FAMILIES STRIVING FOR A BETTER LIFE.

Read to Feed is Heifer International's unique program that empowers readers of all ages to make a positive impact on the world. Reading progress **unlocks donations**, which go directly to families in need.

Heifer is a global nonprofit dedicated to ending world hunger and poverty in a sustainable way. For more than 80 years, we have given families the resources, education and opportunity to thrive, helping them lift themselves out of poverty once and for all.



HOW IT WORKS



Download the Read to Feed app (grades K–6) or join the Heifer challenge on Beanstack (grades 6–12).



Encourage readers to track their books, earn badges and unlock donations by meeting reading milestones.



Use our additional online resources to supplement your program, including coloring pages, buttons, bookmarks and more.



FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO ORDER FREE RESOURCES, CALL 888.548.6437 OR VISIT [READTOFEED.ORG](https://readtofeed.org).

How to Help Students Value

DEMOCRACY

By Amanda Litvinov

GREAT SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSES ARE ESSENTIAL, BUT THEY'RE NOT THE ONLY PLACE STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Many young Americans have lost faith in democracy. That's the troubling finding of several surveys conducted over the past five years.

About half of the Gen Z participants (ages 18–25) said democracy “makes no difference,” according to a 2022 Penn State University survey, and nearly 30 percent said living under a dictatorship “could be good.”

Let that sink in.

A 2025 survey by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), at Tufts University, similarly found that a third of Americans ages 18–29 “do not buy into the value of democracy and show higher support for authoritarian governments.” Although the remaining two-thirds said they generally support democracy, they do little to engage in it.

The study found no major differences between the group that still values democracy and the group that does not in terms of age, gender, city-rural division, or even party affiliation.

So what does influence whether or not young people value our system of government?

“At the top of that list is education, access, and community support,” says Alberto Medina, a co-author of the CIRCLE report. “Of course, teachers are critically important to helping students understand and value democracy, but so are their peers,” he says.

When groups of students work together to understand how our government functions and even take on problems they care about, he says, it “can help show the deeply skeptical that there is something here worth saving.”

While great social studies courses are critical for students of all ages, a student's civic education is not limited to those classrooms. In fact, public schools—as institutions that welcome all students regardless of race, first language, family income, or abilities—can serve as living laboratories of democracy.

It's never too early to teach civic engagement

Here's one way to think about it, says Stephanie Serriere, a professor of social



Laura Ellis teaches students “the power of the pen” in an after-school club that advocates for institutions that serve the public good, like libraries and museums.

“If there's one thing I hope everyone leaves my class knowing, it's that we have a participatory form of government, and if we don't engage, we're letting other people frame the debate and make the decisions.”

—Lem Wheelles, government teacher, in Alaska

studies education at Indiana University Columbus: “Public schools are one of the first civic spaces our children enter, and it is up to you to purposefully teach the principles of democracy,” Serriere tells her classes of future educators.

That teaching, she says, should begin in kindergarten.

Serriere developed her theory of “carpet-time democracy” in her years as an elementary school teacher, when she observed her young students' natural interest in fairness and equity. There are many creative ways to harness those instincts, she says.

For example, when elementary-age students get to discuss and decide classroom rules, they become tiny framers of a founding document that applies equally to all and guides their experience in the classroom.

When older students identify things they wish they could change—as tweens and teens tend to do—educators can walk them through the process of inquiry. This may include polling their peers, gathering research, and using their findings to advocate for change.

Research shows that asking students to gather the perspectives of their peers—which is at the heart of many of these projects—can be the springboard to a lifetime of empathy, according to Serriere. That's a necessary component in a democracy, she adds.

What can you do to foster civic learning in the classroom and beyond? *NEA Today* asked several educators around the country for their advice.

Teach students how to build their case

Laura Ellis, library media specialist, Wheaton High School, Silver Spring, Maryland

Many students want to speak out. We can teach them how to make their voices heard by the right people.

Last year, when I heard the Trump administration was cutting funding for libraries and museums, I started writing to my elected leaders, asking them to fight those cuts. I quickly realized that this could be a service-learning opportunity for students.

As a lunchtime activity, I teach interested students how to write a

How to Help Students Value

DEMOCRACY

strong, fact-based letter, based on a visit to a local library, where they ask an employee questions about the resources and programming they offer to the community. The students learn not only what kinds of questions to ask, but also the etiquette of conducting an informational interview. We practice at school before the real interview so they feel confident.

After they gather information about the amazing programs the library has for kids, teens, adults, and seniors alike, the students write to our state's U.S. senators. I have a template for guidance, but encourage them to include a personal story that will make their letters unique.

This project teaches students to value community resources and learn how to advocate for them.

Emphasize respectful dialogue Lauren Hallgring, eighth-grade civics teacher, Neptune Middle School, Neptune, New Jersey

Our state passed a law a few years ago mandating at least one semester of civics instruction before students leave eighth grade. It's an incredible opportunity to introduce some finer points of the U.S. Constitution and to teach students to engage in productive dialogue.

Things can heat up in a middle school classroom very quickly, so I am very intentional at the beginning of the course in talking to students about respectful discourse. Yes, they need to learn to form an argument, but it's just as essential for them to actively listen.

Allowing students to bring up issues and talk about what they are seeing and hearing in their world is critical. They will begin to respond to each other—it's a beautiful thing to see—and the teacher's role is largely to monitor and moderate.

I never get on a soapbox or make my own political views known. Instead, I ask a lot of guiding questions and give students practice in finding evidence from primary sources.

Last year, for example, my students had a lot of concerns about immigration. So we went back and read the 14th Amendment to the Constitution before we started the conversation. This strategy helps students learn to support their arguments with evidence rather than emotion.

Channel students' passions into community building

Preya Krishna-Kennedy, history and geography teacher, Bethlehem High School, Delmar, New York

In my classes and in the after-school groups I co-advise, I always emphasize that in our democracy, we have the power to make change, even beyond the essential acts of voting and holding elected leaders accountable.

Students for Peace and Survival is a social justice group initially formed by students during the Vietnam War. I took on the role of co-advisor in my first year of teaching, and honestly, I credit this group with keeping me in the profession. This club attracts students who are so motivated to solve problems and help their community, it gave me a boost when I was an overwhelmed new teacher. Now I'm in my 29th year.

This group organizes events like a Pronouns Day celebration to start conversations and support students who have changed their pronouns. They do a coat drive for a refugee group in Albany, N.Y. They hold fundraisers to

address food insecurity in the area, and they've organized protests to ask the district to divest from fossil fuels.

Another group I advise, ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, and Native American), spearheads celebrations for Black History and Hispanic Heritage Months that include activities like reading books on those topics to elementary students.

When kids are this engaged in giving back to their community, they are exercising empathy and problem-solving—essential skills in a healthy democracy.

Preya Krishna-Kennedy

Connect historical lessons with the real world

Lem Wheelles, government teacher, Dimond High School, Anchorage, Alaska

In both my government and U.S. history classes, I host a debate set in the time period that the Constitution was being drafted. I assign roles—Federalist or Anti-Federalist—and give students some readings authored in 1788. Then, they debate whether or not to ratify the Constitution from the point of view they were assigned.

Sometimes when we're discussing contemporary issues or elections, students become hesitant or express disdain for how lawmakers are handling things. I keep asking questions like, "What can we do about it?" or "What needs to change?"

If there's one thing I hope everyone leaves my class knowing, it's that we have a participatory form of government, and if we don't engage,



we're letting other people frame the debate and make the decisions.

Last year, I saw just how well that message got through. I was at a school board budget meeting, and I was surprised to see several of my students walk in to speak out against cuts that would have increased class sizes and reduced electives and activities.

They were fired up about proposed cuts to middle school sports, which

wouldn't affect them since they were already in high school. The whole thing made me incredibly proud—they were well prepared and speaking up not only for themselves, but for others. That is how democracy thrives.

Don't be scared to cover elections—have fun with it instead!

Eric Fiske, political science professor, Hillsborough College, Tampa, Florida

The energy really builds in my classes when we talk about campaigns, elections, and voting.

We're living in politically charged times, and certainly in Florida there are vague and threatening policies that make educators think twice. But as a political science professor, teaching these topics is essential to my students' education.

In my honors American government class last year, I "ran for office" as a candidate from a fictional party and asked my students to be my campaign team.

Teacher Lauren Hallgring (far right) took her class on a field trip to New Jersey's Monmouth Battlefield State Park, as part of her state's middle school civics requirement.

They ran with it. The next thing you know, they are running social media platforms, having me sit for photo shoots, and polling their peers to determine my campaign priorities and slogans.

Once they were on a roll, I threw them some curveballs. When big things happened in the real world, I asked them how I, in my role as the candidate, should respond. I tell my students, "You can know everything there is to know about American government, but if you don't do anything with that knowledge, you're giving up your role in shaping the society you live in." 🗳️

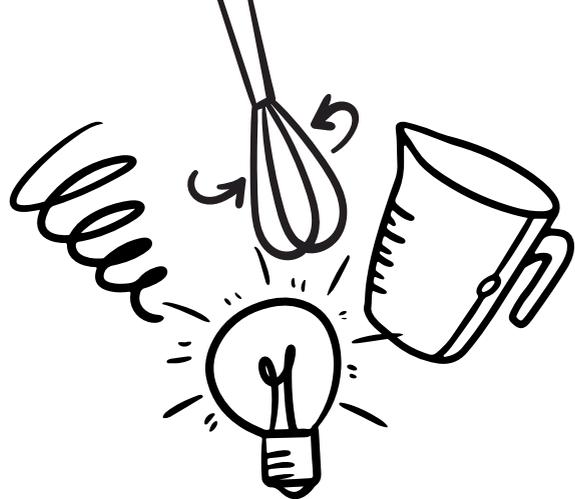
LEARN MORE

Go to nea.org/Civics for more ideas on promoting democracy throughout your school.



Florida professor Eric Fiske (middle row, far right), in New York, with his students at the National Model U.N. conference.

WHAT'S THE Recipe FOR REACHING Boys?



By Mary Ellen Flannery

STEP 1: STOP SEEING THEM AS PROBLEMS.

STEP 2: BUILD CONNECTION AND ENCOURAGE VULNERABILITY.

STEP 3: BLEND, AND REPEAT.

During kindergarten labs, Samuel grabs a bright red, toy ear scope. “Mr. Taylor! Mr. Taylor!” he says urgently. Dwayne Taylor sits, tilts his head obligingly for his exam, and Samuel peers into the brain of the meanest teacher in the school.

“Ha! That’s Mr. Taylor’s favorite joke!” says Owen Glynn, a third grader at Frank Layden Elementary School, in Frontenac, Kan., who had Taylor for kindergarten and still pops by to say hi. “Mr. Taylor always says he’s the meanest teacher in the school, but he’s really the nicest!”

By “nicest,” Owen means Taylor is a pro at cultivating connections with students. He tells his kindergartners he loves them. He talks about his own feelings: “I am so happy to see you,” or “I am feeling really frustrated right now.” And he helps his 5-year-olds find words for their feelings, too.

Taylor is aware of what pundits are calling the “boy crisis” in U.S. schools. Every day, he lays the foundation so

his little ones can climb higher. In his classroom, he models how to ask for help, how to be vulnerable, how to be a friend and work in teams, and how to succeed in school and life. “Oh hey, what do I say? Teamwork is ...” Taylor prompts. “Dream work!” his class sings back to him.

Quiz time!

Who are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, boys or girls? Answer: Boys. (It starts early: Preschool boys are five times more likely to be expelled than girls. According to federal data, Black boys account for half of all expulsions, even as they account for 20 percent of preschoolers.)

Who are less likely to take advanced placement classes? Boys. Less likely to go to college? Boys, by a mile, and the gap is getting wider.

More likely to suffer loneliness? Boys. (One in 4 say they have no close friends. That’s a five-fold increase since 1990, with higher rates of disconnect among

Black men and Black boys.) More likely to die by suicide? Teen boys. In fact, they are about three times more likely to die by suicide than teen girls.

The situation has become so dire that California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order a few months ago to address boy’s suicide rates, reduce stigma, and expand access to work and mentorship opportunities.

“It is a crisis of connection,” wrote Richard Reeves, founding president of the American Institute of Boys and Men, in a *New York Times* op-ed.

More male teachers would help, Reeves suggests, as would more apprenticeships and more male-friendly mental health services. “Doing more for boys does not mean doing less for girls,” he notes. “As all the politicians leading on this issue correctly insist, gender equality is not a zero-sum game. We can do two things at once. We can take better care of girls and boys.”

Back in Taylor’s kindergarten classroom, sous chef Bennett is eager to participate in today’s cooking lesson, cracking eggs like he’s on *Cake Boss*. Taylor’s boys laugh. They learn. They share. They care. And they giggle happily to learn that the largest muscle in the human body is ... the gluteus maximus!

Rethinking stereotypes

When Carlos Grant first became a high school principal in South Carolina six years ago, the student data that crossed his desk was alarming. “Our drop-out data, our discipline data, our college readiness data, all of it showed that our boys—all of our boys, but especially Black boys—weren’t keeping up,” he recalls.

His answer? “We began a concerted effort to talk about our relationships with boys, and it really changed the



Let’s talk about the letter C. Today, in Dwayne Taylor’s kindergarten classroom, C is for cooking confetti cupcakes! Above, Taylor’s sous chef, Bennett, nimbly cracks eggs.

trajectory for many of them,” he recalls. “We had to unlearn a mindset about boys.”

The first step to reversing “problems with boys” is to stop seeing them as problems, says Joseph Derrick Nelson, an associate professor of educational and Black studies at Swarthmore College. “Don’t see them as a problem to be managed but as a child with the same hopes and dreams as all youth.”

There are prevailing ways of thinking about boys, which sound old-fashioned, but persist today. “Boys don’t cry. Hold your head up. Be strong,” Grant reels them off. “Don’t show fear. Don’t show weakness.” In classrooms, this may translate to: Don’t ask for help. Be strong. Stay silent.

Most kindergartners haven’t internalized these messages yet, notes

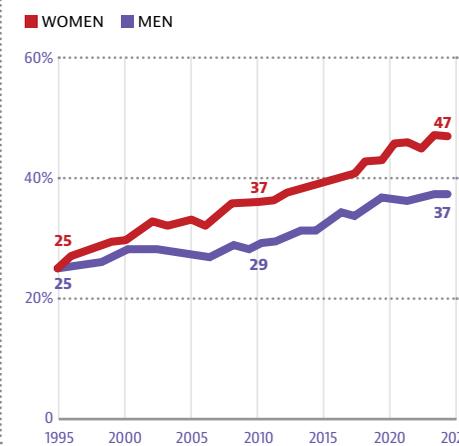


Carlos Grant

Missing Men on Campus?

There are now 2.4 million more women than men on U.S. college campuses, as the rate of boys attending college falls to record lows.

Percent of 25- to 34-year-olds with a bachelor’s degree:



WHAT'S THE Recipe FOR REACHING Boys?



Nelson. At young ages, boys are equally curious, joyful, relational, and warm. But by middle school and high school? "The older they get," he says, "the more they internalize these norms and the harder they are to undo."

Meanwhile, educators may have their own internal biases—boys are lazy, boys need discipline, and so on—that lead to unequal support and discipline, Grant notes.

"Boys aren't given grace. They're written up, they're labeled more quickly, and because of that, there's a self-narrative that exists. The more you tell somebody they're 'this way,' the more they're going to act 'that way,'" he says.

A key lesson for Grant and his colleagues: Stop backing boys into corners. "If I'm correcting a boy in my classroom and I'm doing it in a way that's embarrassing to him, that's devastating to him, and he decides to lash out to save face, to save his pride and dignity? Well, that's my fault, as an

adult," Grant says. "I put him into that corner. I made a bad situation worse."

It's also important to know that acting out can be a sign of mental health struggles, rather than "boys being boys," says New York school psychologist Peter Faustino. For example, he says, "With depression, you might see boys become aggressive. It's easy to misinterpret those symptoms."

become aggressive. It's easy to misinterpret those symptoms."

Teaching boys how to seek help

Outside Taylor's classroom door, he greets every kindergartner with a hug, high-five, handshake, or no contact. It's their choice, made by smacking a paper icon.

"Oh, you're coming in for the hug!" he says. His message to every child is clear: "CJ, I'm so glad you're here today. ... I'm super glad you're here today, Tytan. ... Come on in, dude, I'm so glad you're here today!"

After indoor recess, thanks to pouring rain, Taylor's kindergartners are a bundle

of chaos in the halls. There is mayhem by the water fountain. When they return to class, Taylor is frustrated and he tells them so, calmly but firmly.

"Am I going to let what happened ruin my day?" he asks. "Nooo," they tell him. "Can I do it myself?" "Nooo," they say. To turn around his day—to get back to the "green zone," as Taylor calls it—he tells them he needs their help.

In Grant's work with older students and mentees, he also models "help-seeking behavior," as Faustino calls it. "One of the struggles young men deal with is their reluctance to ask for help," Grant says. "You have to model vulnerability. You have to show what it's like not to be okay—and that that's OK."

Grant tells the teens in Alpha GENTS, his fraternity's mentoring program: "I might look like I have it together but, buddy, ... none of us have it all together!"

Taylor says, "I tell my kids every day: There's nothing you could do to make me stop loving you. You might make me lose the rest of my hair! But I will never stop loving you."

One in four men, ages 15-35, say they're lonely.

SOURCE: GALLUP, 2025

What Works: Relational Teaching With Boys

"Relationships are the very precondition through which learning happens," says Swarthmore College educational studies professor Joseph Derrick Nelson. "If students don't think you like them, they are going to resist!" Here are four steps to practicing relational teaching:

1) Reach out and go beyond. Boys want educators to see their "personhood" as more

important than school policies or practices. For example, during research interviews, boys talked to Nelson about teachers who kept snacks for kids or stayed after school to provide homework help.

2) Be a personal advocate. This is especially helpful for boys who are acting out or disengaging. "Maybe they play drums at church or they're in musical theater. Go see them in

a place where they're successful," Nelson says. "It may open your mind about a particular boy, and then you can use that knowledge to reengage them in class."

3) Establish common ground. Are you wearing the same Timberlands? Watching the same TV shows? Talk about that stuff.

4) Accommodate opposition. Often, educators react to missed homework, phone usage, etc., with



Joseph Derrick Nelson

stiff consequences. These lead to ruptures in relationships, cautions Nelson. Instead, ask questions about what's going on.

Create Community With Clubs

"Girls participate in everything compared to boys," says Johny Sozi, a Maryland computer science teacher. "You even see the difference at lunch—girls go in big groups!" One way to counter boys' isolation? Create clubs that provide community for them. (When possible, make sure to tap into salary bonuses negotiated by your union for club or team advisors!)

Go fishing! This fall, middle school teacher Jace Brescher had 86 students at his fishing club's interest meeting. "I was like, 'Oh man, how am I going to manage all these kids?'" recalls Brescher, who teaches in Jasper, Ind. Fortunately, parents help at the club's three-hour fishing events, which take place on two Saturdays in the fall and another two in the spring.

Typically, Brescher gets about 50 students at meetings and events. Of them, five or six are girls. The club is advertised to boys and girls alike, but Brescher notes, "It does attract more boys, and maybe what you'd call the 'troublemakers.' It's their outlet and they thrive out there."

Fishing equipment is donated. Prior experience isn't necessary. "We've got kids who are avid bass fishermen, flipping a jig around, and others who don't even know how to tie a hook on," he says. Everybody is happy when anybody catches anything!

Networking and interfacing

Sozi has about 65 students in the Computer Geeks club at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. About 8 in 10 are boys.

Thirty club members (26 boys) participate in CyberPatriot, a national



Clubs build needed community for boys today. (Left and below right) Jace Brescher's students catch fish and friendship. (Below left) Johny Sozi's "tech geeks" collaborate.



the only woman coach in her high school's division. Of her 17 "chessletes," 14 are boys. They practice twice a week and compete against other local high schools for about seven weeks in the fall.

"I tell the kids, it's not about the [match] points, it's about learning new strategies and meeting other kids," Lachowicz says.

Some of her kids are really high-level thinkers, playing several moves ahead. Others are just winning the snacks she gives them. "I provide cookies, candy, stuff like that. After school, they're hungry!"

competition that challenges students to secure virtual networks. It's a precursor to careers in cyber defense, Sozi notes. Another club group works on Python coding, while a third practices web design. All participate in what he calls an "incubator," where they float ideas and prototype products. Mostly, they meet during lunch.

"I find that male students generally have fewer friends. So, in a club like ours, they can connect through an area of common interest," Sozi says. "Many of these kids keep these connections for a long time. ... They become meaningful people to each other."

Checkmate!

Illinois paraeducator Kathy Lachowicz is the head coach of the chess team at Alan B. Shepard High School, in Palos Heights—and

READ THIS



Want to learn more about teaching boys? For recommended reading, scan this QR code or visit nea.org/Boys.

How AI is changing the way you teach

By Brenda Álvarez

EDUCATORS USE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO SUPPORT, NOT REPLACE, THE HUMAN CONNECTION IN LEARNING

"Artificial Intelligence (AI) is like having a personal assistant that wants to help you. It thinks the world of you. In fact, you *are* its world."

This is how computer science and media electives teacher Julie York explains artificial intelligence to her students at South Portland High School, in Maine. But, she continues, this is where it gets tricky:

So you have this biased assistant that thinks you can never be wrong or ask for something dangerous. Keep in mind this assistant only has a middle school education and lacks ethics, but is really fast at doing some things, but not all things. Sometimes, it will want to help you so much—just to make you happy—that it will lie to you.

Still under review

While proponents may promise that AI will revolutionize education, it's still being defined by humans.



Julie York

For some, AI is a trusted tool, a helper, a thought-partner, and a guide that amplifies creativity and saves time. For others, it's a shortcut that risks stripping away what matters most in learning: The human connection.

So how are educators using AI, and what's a boundary they would never cross?

Four educators—from California, Maine, Michigan, and Utah—are testing limits, setting expectations, and underscoring that the most important factor in using AI is the human one.

AI in elementary school

Two years ago, veteran high school educator Kecia Waddell switched to teaching elementary school. She was in unfamiliar territory.

Unsure if her teaching methods and style would transfer to second-grade students, Waddell turned to AI,

a tool she had used previously with her high school students.

"I leveraged AI to help teach me how to better engage with students," says Waddell, a special education teacher at Monfort Elementary School, in Shelby Township, Mich.

She has used the technology to personalize assignments as well as to analyze students' individualized education program goals and align them with skill standards outlined in the district's report card.

For example, Waddell used AI to connect language and student self-expression in a classroom coloring activity. Waddell had her students explain to her what kind of coloring sheet they wanted. She would prompt AI with their requests.

"I'm typing out the words, but [the students] have to use language ... and expand their vocabulary," Waddell says. "[AI] gives us superpowers for what we do for our young learners," she adds.

For her students, she says the technology builds on transferable

"AI is predictive technology. It's designed to give plausible answers, not factual. You always have to check what it's saying," says Kecia Waddell (right), a special education teacher in Michigan.



skills they need for socializing, expanding their vocabulary, and writing.

What doesn't Waddell do with AI? Give students unsupervised access to it or input data with identifying information. Human oversight is needed, she cautions.

"I want to have control over how I use it, and I don't want ... people misusing technology," she explains.

AI in middle school

Instructional coach Kristin van Brunt approaches AI as an extension of critical thinking. "It's a helper, not a replacement for thought," says van Brunt, who works at Mueller Park Junior High, in Davis County, Utah.

She explains that if students were reading *Animal Farm*, she would require them to think about some of the themes in the book before turning to technology. "They have to think about it first, come up with ideas, and then put those into AI, and ask which one would be a good topic to explore," van Brunt explains.

Another approach is to have students find connections between a book and their own lives.

"Instead of saying, analyze the themes in *Of Mice and Men*, I would say, compare the theme in [the book] to a time that someone you know faced a difficult decision," she says. "They could use AI to come up with a theme, but they have to tie it to themselves."

How is changing the way you teach

This kind of personalization, she believes, keeps students from having AI do all the work.

Throughout the years, van Brunt has used AI to prepare lesson plans and student activities, differentiate assignments to ensure students can engage with the material, and work one-on-one with other educators.

"It gives me a lot of time to do the other aspects of my job," she says. "I think AI gets a bad rap, but it can be so helpful."

What wouldn't she do with it? Force hesitant educators to use it. "But showing them ways [AI] has helped me ... might help some of them," she says.



Kristin van Brunt

Weighing the risks

In San Diego, Calif., sixth-grade teacher Thomas Courtney isn't quite convinced about AI being the world-changing force it's hyped up to be. He describes his approach to the technology as "very careful."

"I'm introducing it to students," Courtney says. "But I also feel it's being introduced to me."

Students are allowed to use the technology as a first step to help generate ideas or pictures. But they're also required to go beyond the screen.

Students must connect AI-generated work to the classroom by either talking or writing about what was produced, and what they want to do with the information.

"They're the last filter," Courtney says. "It helps them to understand that AI is not doing [the work] for them. It's a tool that they used, and they still make final decisions."

Courtney wants his students to understand pride and authorship and is concerned about what he calls the "fast and easy" mindset. He had one student who misused AI to generate and submit more than 40 poems.



"The ultimate goal of education is that kids learn something they didn't know before. ... But it takes the teacher to guide that process, and I just don't ever see an AI program doing that as effectively as a human in a classroom."

—Thomas Courtney (above), sixth-grade teacher, in California

"Some [students] are OK with their work being fast and easy, and I don't think that's a lesson I want students leaving my classroom with."

Courtney tries to avoid letting AI replace accountability. "If students are using AI, a good teacher holds them accountable for how they use it, ... because there's an explicit explanation of expectations."

What keeps Courtney grounded is the irreplaceable connection between educator and student.

"Kids need to be around other humans," he says. "Friendships matter. There's a physical thing that can't be quantified by seeing your teacher's lit-up face tell you that they're proud of you, in person."

That presence, he believes, is what makes learning real.

"The ultimate goal of education is that kids learn something they didn't know before, and a tool doesn't do that," Courtney says. "A tool helps you get there. ... But it takes the teacher to guide that process, and I just don't ever see an AI program doing that as effectively as a human in a classroom."

AI in high school

Back in Maine, York worked with a group of her students to learn scriptwriting and produce a short video. It was a Spanish soap opera (or telenovela) that, in true fashion, involved a crime scene. The script called for a corpse. York considered having a student play the part, but they didn't have time for all that. So she asked AI to create it.

"All of the bodies were breathing," York laughs. "I needed to use three models to just get a dead body horizontal with an ax to its head."

After multiple AI prompts that generated various interpretations, York gave up. The final version was a barely-breathing body lying on the floor with an ax coming out of the person's mouth like a flower.

"I was just like, you know what, we're good. ... This is the one we're using. I'm walking away," she says.

Turns out, AI can't make dead bodies. The AI models York used—Veo, Sora, and Kling—have built-in safeguards to prevent misuse or



Kellan Edwards, a junior at South Portland High School, in Maine, learns about AI's possibilities and limitations.

harmful behavior. But AI would never have told you.

'It's impossible to avoid'

York says she uses AI a lot, and she's been using it for a long time.

"AI has been a part of some [computer] programming for a long time," she says, pointing to Bluetooth and facial recognition as examples. "But then all of a sudden, these large language models came out, and I started seeing [it] in all my software. It is impossible to avoid."

AI is only getting better, York says, and compares it to the internet of yesteryear: "Using the internet meant your whole house couldn't have a phone or you had to wait 20 minutes for a website to load, and God forbid it had graphics! If you think about it as a tool, the internet now is almost ubiquitous."

She adds, "In five years, AI is going to look completely different, and ... the babies being born today won't know [anything different]."

York encourages educators to learn how to effectively use

AI, model it for students, and talk about the pros and cons. Follow your district's policy, if one exists, and don't ignore the tools' privacy policies.

"There are some AI programs that have really atrocious privacy settings," she says. "Pay attention to where the data is going."

Educators should not pretend AI doesn't exist, York advises.

"You want your students to be successful ... and be prepared to go on their own in the real world," she adds. "And we can't *not* talk about things because we think they're bad. ... Eventually, this is something they will have to face." ❗

Unions can lead the way on AI in schools

Propose NEA's sample school board resolution at your next board meeting, as well as NEA's sample school board policy to expand safe, inclusive, and future-focused learning environments.

Sample School Board Resolution

1. **Create** an educator-inclusive advisory committee to guide AI research, procurement, piloting, and evaluation.
2. **Assess** risks such as data privacy concerns, racial bias, misinformation, plagiarism, and threats to jobs.
3. **Require** districts to disclose what data AI tools collect and how it will be used, ensuring families and school staff are fully informed.

Sample School Board Policy

1. **Protect** educators with high-quality, multifaceted professional learning opportunities to help them increase their AI literacy and understand what specific AI tools are being used in their schools.
2. **Ensure** all students have equitable access to AI tools, including assistive AI technologies to support diverse learning needs.
3. **Call for** all vendors of AI tools and resources to meet district standards for transparency, equity, and ethical decision-making.

LEARN MORE

Find guidance, resources, and learning opportunities at nea.org/AI.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MEMBERS

WATCH THIS

Scan the QR code to watch how Julie York approaches AI.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JULIE YORK

DO SCHOOLS START Too Early?

By Tim Walker

STARTING SCHOOL LATER MAY HELP ADDRESS SLEEP DEPRIVATION IN TEENS—BUT ARE DISTRICTS THINKING THROUGH THE PITFALLS?

In 2023, Florida became the second state in the country, after California, to mandate later school start times. The law instructed every school district to implement a new schedule with start times no earlier than 8 a.m. for middle schools and 8:30 a.m. for high schools. The move was likely to impact more than 2 million of the state's public school students and their families.

These two states—along with many districts across the country with similar policies—were responding to a growing body of research showing the benefits of more sleep for teenagers.

In May 2025, however, Florida stepped on the brakes. Lawmakers repealed the policy before it even

took effect. Are the science and research wrong? Unlikely. Is the idea of later school start times a bad idea? Probably not, but that's not what is behind the misgivings.

The issue, says Gordan Longhofer, president of the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association, was that the mandate would have likely led to chaos.

"Such an undertaking has to be designed at the local level—with the input of educators and others who know the community, the needs, and feasibility," he continues.

"These are the stakeholders," Longhofer adds. "They should make this decision, too, not a lawmaker 400 miles away, saying 'do this or else.'"

8-10
The number of hours teenagers should sleep each night.

Teenagers need more sleep

The campaign to start school later began in earnest in 2014, soon after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued findings that laid out a stark and sobering picture of how sleep deprivation harms students, especially high schoolers. The research revealed that adolescents who don't get enough sleep have an increased risk of being overweight, suffering from depression, and struggling academically. According to most surveys, the average teenager logs about 7–8 hours of sleep each night, when they should be getting somewhere between 8–10 hours.

That same year, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle schools and high schools delay class start times from 8 to 8:30 a.m. or later to align with the

biological sleep rhythms of adolescents.

The idea has grown in popularity over the past decade as student mental health and wellness has become a front-and-center issue, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.

Do later start times help students?

No question, sleep deprivation among teens is a serious issue, says Joseph Buckhalt, a professor at Auburn University, in Alabama, who researches sleep, health, and adolescents. But the impact of later school start times is a bit overhyped, he cautions.

"One caveat is that we haven't waited long enough to see if there's really a positive effect," Buckhalt explains. "Are teenagers really sleeping longer due to later start times? Or are they just staying up later? Also, there are many other barriers

to getting good sleep that might overcome the benefits of a later start time."

Buckhalt co-wrote a 2023 study that looked at the health benefits of later school start times among different socioeconomic groups. They found that only higher-income students had fewer depression symptoms from later start times.

For other families, pressures such as financial insecurity, long commutes, and other challenges essentially negated any benefits.

Buckhalt says no one should view later school start times as some sort of cure-all. There are, after all, other variables that contribute to sleep deprivation in

adolescents—homework, too many extracurriculars, and, of course, the infamous "blue light" emitted from electronic screens as teens text and scroll through social media.

Still, early start times are not in sync with changing circadian rhythms. A teenager's internal clock moves to a different schedule, making students in that age group feel sleepy later at night than younger kids.

A domino effect

Despite the consensus around teenage sleep and health, the momentum behind later start times seems to have stalled.

Buckhalt calls the two state mandates "coercive," and believes advocates for the policies have erred by not involving education professionals and other stakeholders. In some cases, he says, they have also lacked transparency in the decision-making process.

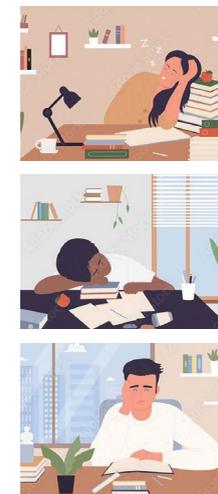


The Science Behind Sleep Deprivation

While adolescents' sleep can be impacted by many variables, research shows that a change in their bodies during puberty is a major factor.

When puberty begins, a natural shift in teenagers' circadian rhythms—or internal clock—makes them feel sleepy later at night than younger kids. This delays sleep for up to two hours, to around 10 p.m. or 11 p.m., making it difficult for teens to get the recommended 8–10 hours of sleep.

In 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that middle schools and high schools delay the start of class to 8:30 a.m. or later to align school schedules to these biological sleep rhythms.



DO SCHOOLS START Too Early?

When Florida lawmakers passed their state law, the Palm Beach County union began working with the local superintendent and school board about implementation in county schools.

"It was going to literally be a math problem," Longhofer recalls. "You're talking about the schedules of 180,000 students in state-funded schools and getting the times worked out so that kids get to school on time, and people can have ... a reasonable workday—whether they're teachers or parents. This was going to be a monumental task."

The same challenge faces every school district that has shifted schedules later. A shift of 30 minutes or even an hour later means that students will finish their day later than 3 p.m. That triggers a domino effect for everything from after-school activities and programs, parents' work schedules, child care arrangements, and after-school jobs.

Then there's the bus routes. For later school start times to work, districts usually have to remap bus routes and hire more drivers, even as they face existing driver shortages. Some districts implemented multiple new start times

without enough new routes and drivers. Buses couldn't get kids to school or home on time.

'Are we really thinking this through?'

Many districts have flipped bus schedules, so elementary schools start first—even as early as 7 a.m.

"The thinking is that since sleep deprivation is an issue for older students, the

[younger] children can handle starting

school much earlier and free up bus routes in the process," Buckhalt explains. So far, studies have shown that these earlier start

times have not had a discernible negative impact on elementary students.

But for Zach Fisher, a special education teacher in Louisville, Ky., too many lawmakers are not adequately weighing the disruptions of such a move. "Are we really thinking this through?" he asks.

Fisher says moving back the start times of elementary schools could hurt families at Churchill Park School, where he teaches. "We have a lot of working-class families, immigrant families. A lot of our parents are already financially strained and cannot find more day care if our elementary students start school early and therefore leave



Kentucky special education teacher Zach Fisher

earlier," Fisher explains. "Where are they supposed to go?"

Fisher also points out that lower-income parents often don't have the option to adjust work schedules to accommodate the new start times.

A complex issue

The Florida legislature's repeal of the state law (a move supported by the Florida Education Association), gave Palm Beach County and other large districts a reprieve from grappling with the costs and logistics of new start times in 2026.

"We once again have the flexibility, the local control, to address the issue," Longhofer says.

Educators unions across the country have similar

concerns, tackling the issue through legislative action and collective bargaining.

The message is the same: Sleep deprivation among teenagers is a serious issue, and later school start times may be an answer, but the voices of educators and parents must be heard.

"This is a complex issue with a lot of moving parts," Buckhalt says.

"However lawmakers and districts choose to address it, you have to get everyone on board."

Fisher believes in using research to support sound policies, but says lawmakers and the public need to understand the "real life ... consequences they may not know or care about. But it's our job to help make sure they are aware." 📖

23%

The percentage of high schoolers who got at least 8 hours of sleep in 2023.

28%

The percentage of public high schools that started at 8:30 a.m. or later in the 2020 – 2021 school year; 9 percent started before 7:30 a.m.

NEA SHOE COUNCIL

WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?

The *NEA Today* Shoe Council did some sole-searching. Learn what they recommend.

We know that happy feet mean healthy educators—and the right pair of shoes can save your ankles, knees, hips, and backs! That's why *NEA Today* put together its first-ever, 10-member Shoe Council. Over the past months, these educators have laced up, slipped into, and walked hundreds of miles on concrete classroom floors, gym floors, parade grounds, and playgrounds. Now, we are toe-tally excited to reveal the brands that worked best for them!

Amber Jirsa

High school English teacher, Batavia, Illinois

A typical wearer of booties and heels (yes, heels!), Jirsa slipped into a pair of Toms Goldie Wedge suede booties and wore them for a recent essay unit. This meant much circulating among desks and squatting to chat with students. Her verdict? "So comfortable! I am a fan of wedges, and these did not disappoint!" Surprisingly supportive and easily matched with various outfits, Jirsa says, "I think they are a great value for the price." **Cost:** \$100. **Hot tip:** Toms also provides a 15 percent discount for teachers.

You can try these shoes on, too!

Scan the code to use *NEA Today's* virtual reality technology and see what the Shoe Council's favorite kicks look like on your feet!



WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?



Michelle Merciadetz

Occupational therapist,
Ewing, New Jersey

"From the moment I left my house, these shoes probably endured 7,000 to 11,000 steps daily—over blacktop, hard linoleum floors, dirt, grass, playground mulch, and gravel," reports occupational therapist Michelle Merciadetz. Her favorite pair? The Vionic Uptown Loafer. These shoes combine a professional look with ample flexibility for Merciadetz to work through "developmental positions" with students, plus suitable stability for balance equipment. As for comfort, they felt "custom molded to my feet," she says. **Cost:** We snagged a pair for \$99 on sale, but they're typically around \$130. (Merciadetz's second pair of shoes, a Rykä sneaker, was also a winner. Find out why at nea.org/ShoeCouncil.)



Meera Ramchandran

Middle school science teacher,
Milpitas, California

Spending days in a science lab, rebounding between stations, and hopping around spills, Meera Ramchandran prefers an athletic shoe. She even does a unit on biomimetic shoes, which incorporate elements from nature. (Goat treads, anyone?) Her typical go-to are Brooks. For Shoe Council, Ramchandran tried the uber-popular On Cloudsurfer. Her report: "[They] felt springy and gave me a somewhat bouncy air, which helped me feel more energetic, even at the end of the day!" They also earned compliments from colleagues and students. **Cost:** From \$80–\$160, depending on color and retailer. The On brand also offers 15 percent off for teachers.



Madison Sharp

Fifth-grade teacher,
Georgetown, Kentucky

For years, Madison Sharp has been head over heels for Birkenstocks. Today, she is embracing a lesser-known German company, Stegmann, that boasts of gathering wool from the Tyrolean Alps, in Western Austria. "After trying the Stegmanns, I think I have a new favorite!" Sharp says. Her new Heidi Leather Sandals, she notes, "offer the same level comfort with a softer, cozier feel." They also look stylish and feel durable—even in her school garden! "Overall, they seem like a great value for the price," she adds. **Cost:** \$120, Stegmann offers a 12 percent discount for teachers on all of their shoes, including clogs, sandals, and more.



Bryan Stork

High school counselor, Grandview Heights, Ohio

Something a student actually said: "Love your shoes, Mr. Stork!" Bryan Stork's new pair of Merrell Wrapt Sneakers have a cool look, plus, he says, they "literally feel like they are wrapped around your foot. I thought I was putting on a slipper." But this counselor's favorite is the Allbirds Couriers—and, he jokes, "Not just because my name is Stork." (Ahem.) Their cushioning and durability were top-notch. "If I'm honest, I'm not sure I would have considered these shoes because of the price. Now that I've tried them and gotten a lot of steps in them, I would certainly say they are a good value!" **Cost:** Merrell Wraps (at left), \$120, with 20 percent off for teachers; Allbirds Couriers, \$98, with 15 percent off for public school teachers and staff.



Scan the code to try on these shoes with
NEA Today's virtual reality technology!

WHAT SHOES ARE BEST FOR EDUCATORS?

Daniel Derflinger

Middle school and high school band and music teacher, Weatherly, Pennsylvania

Top brand? For their flexibility, breathability, and “ample support,” the Kizik Irvine hit a high note with music teacher Daniel Derflinger. “We’ve been marching outside for weeks in preparation for upcoming parades. The Kiziks did quite well,” he says. Derflinger typically wears Clarks, which look more professional, but, he notes, also have a narrower toe box that can constrict after a long day in band rehearsals.

Hot tip: While this pair costs \$99, Kizik does offer 20 percent off to public K–12 and higher ed employees. (Derflinger also tried out a pair of barefoot-style Groundies. Find out if they worked at nea.org/ShoeCouncil.)



Amy Dingfield

Elementary paraprofessional, Renton, Washington

As a library assistant, cafeteria monitor, recess supervisor, reading instructor, and more, Amy Dingfield walks more than 5 miles a day, traipsing across concrete floors, hardwood courts, ceramic tiles, asphalt, and grass. She needs a comfortable shoe with serious arch support. “With the amount of walking and standing I do, any tipping or flattening of the arch will cause me a great deal of knee, leg, and back pain for days,” Dingfield says. Her new Reef Neptunes fit the bill. They’re lightweight, with adequate toe room and arch support—and a nifty ability to convert from clog to sneaker style. On a scale of 1–5, Dingfield gives the Reefs a 5, but they don’t beat her favorite Hokas.

“They have the best foot support,” she notes. **Cost:** The Reefs are \$80, not including a 20 percent discount for students, teachers, and recent grads.



Alicia Diozzi

Middle school social studies teacher, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Not only does Alicia Diozzi teach social studies, but she also works as a walking tour guide in “Witch City,” i.e., the storied town of Salem, Mass. For the Shoe Council, Diozzi tested a pair of suede Puma sneakers, designed to look like ballet flats. “The cushioning in the heel area is remarkable,” Diozzi notes. Roomy, cute, with a “generous toe box” and “light” arch support, she says, this pair was comfortable from the moment she unboxed them—and they even earned a few compliments from her middle schoolers. **Cost:** \$80, plus Puma offers 20 percent off to teachers. (Go to nea.org/ShoeCouncil to learn what Diozzi thought about the Dansko shoes she tried!)



Charmaine Emmanuel

Middle school classroom aide, Hollywood, Florida

“Shoes tell a story, not just of style, but of strength, movement, and service,” says classroom aide Charmaine Emmanuel. “What we wear can reflect who we are and what we stand for.” These Cariuma canvas sneakers in fire-engine red show Emmanuel’s passion for color and creativity—and match her high-energy approach to helping students and assisting teachers. “They not only look good, but also provide the right amount of support for being on my feet throughout the day,” Emmanuel notes. “Overall, they’re stylish, comfortable, and dependable—everything I look for in a good pair of shoes.” **Cost:** \$89.



Molly Peddycoart

Elementary special education teacher, Elk River, Minnesota

“I am literally moving all the time, including running after quick kiddos!” Molly Peddycoart says. Typically, her go-to shoes are Asics. We asked her to try Orthofeet, which boast of innovative, pain-relief technology. “I really liked the look of the Orthofeet Strolls. ... They’re a little dressier than a traditional tennis shoe, while still having comfort and stability,” she says. Orthofeet come with an optional orthotic insert, which Peddycoart needed to support her arches. From the start, they were comfortable, she says, but, “I will say, by the end of the day, my feet did feel a little tired.” **Cost:** Currently on sale for \$99, with a 10 percent discount for educators.



Scan the code to try on these shoes with NEA Today’s virtual reality technology!

National
Education
Association



2026

Leadership Summit



RESILIENCE. RESPECT. POWER.
Saving Public Education and Our Democracy

...apathetic
...want to
...rect action?



2026 NEA National Leadership Summit

March 13-15, 2026 | Hyatt Regency Chicago

Visit nea.org/leadershipsummit for more information

Great Teachers Never Stop Learning

At St. John's College, educators deepen their craft by studying the great books in community with peers that share your passion for teaching and learning. Our Graduate Institute was originally founded in 1967 as a space for educators and has since grown to offer four graduate programs:

Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

Master of Arts in Eastern Classics

Master of Arts in Middle Eastern Classics

Certificate in Liberal Education

We continue to recognize the important role educators play in society. To preserve a commitment to the education of teachers, we continue to offer programs and opportunities specific to educators. These include free seminars through the ****Teachers Institute, scholarships reserved for educators, and professional development partnerships.****

Our discussion-based method of learning is ideal for teachers looking to hone their craft, and with evening classes and enrollment options on campus in Annapolis, MD and Santa Fe NM, or online, there's never been a better time to join the conversation.



**ST JOHN'S
College**

GRADUATE INSTITUTE



sjc.edu

Enriching Lives and Classrooms Through the Great Books



A Flower From *Every Country*



The NEA® Auto & Home Insurance Program provides coverage that works for you – plus average auto savings of \$611.*

As an NEA member, you could get quotes with a member discount at any time, regardless of when your current policies are due to expire. Plus, you don't have to wait to switch – your coverage could go into effect the next day.



Other Benefits

- Multi-policy and good student discounts available.
- Round-the-clock service online, by phone, on MyTravelers.com or through the MyTravelers® mobile app.
- Convenient payment options.
- Access to quotes from other carriers through InsuraMatch, a Travelers agency.

Why Travelers?

In addition to offering great coverage and a savings advantage for NEA members, Travelers understands that a successful future starts in the classroom. We supported educational initiatives with over \$6 million in charitable giving in 2024.**

Get your free, no-obligation quote from Travelers online or call to speak to a licensed insurance representative.



Ready to see if you can save? Call 877-684-0602 or scan the QR code for a quote.



*Average savings is based on new auto policyholders countrywide who reported savings to the Travelers Call Center in 2024. Individual savings may vary. Savings are not guaranteed.

**Travelers 2024 Community Report (community-report.travelers.com)

NEA, NEA Member Benefits and the NEA Member Benefits logo are registered service marks of NEA Member Benefits. NEA has retained Members United Insurance Agency to manage Insurance Programs for its Members. Members United Insurance Agency is not affiliated with Travelers.

Coverages, discounts, special program rates or savings, billing options and other features are subject to availability and individual eligibility. Not all products, features or coverages available in all areas or states. Other terms, conditions or exclusions may apply.

Insurance is underwritten by The Travelers Indemnity Company or one of its property casualty affiliates, One Tower Square, Hartford, CT 06183. In TX: Automobile insurance is offered through Travelers Texas MGA, Inc. and underwritten by Consumers County Mutual Insurance Company (CCM). CCM is not a Travelers Company. Home insurance is underwritten by Travelers Personal Insurance Company. In CA: Automobile insurance is underwritten by Travelers Commercial Insurance Company, Certificate of Authority #6519, State of Domicile: CT; or Travelers Property Casualty Insurance Company, Certificate of Authority #6521, State of Domicile: CT. Homeowners insurance is underwritten by The Standard Fire Insurance Company, Certificate of Authority #3545, State of Domicile: CT. In WA: Automobile insurance is underwritten by The Standard Fire Insurance Company. Homeowners insurance is underwritten by Travelers Personal Insurance Company. All underwriting companies in CA and WA listed above are located at One Tower Square, Hartford, CT 06183.

© 2025 The Travelers Indemnity Company. All rights reserved. Travelers and the Travelers Umbrella logo are registered trademarks of The Travelers Indemnity Company in the U.S. and other countries. PL-19650 Rev. 6-25

This beautiful flower garden is always in bloom at John Adams Elementary school in Alexandria, Va. Painted by students, the mural shows vibrant flowers from the many countries represented in the school's population. It pops with color on the wall outside the cafeteria—where students see this celebration of diversity every day.

"Our students love it," says fifth-grade teacher Jeffrey Nattania. "They see that all different kinds of flowers can thrive so beautifully together and grow in community."

Students often tell Nattania, "I see my country's flower, and it feels like me," or, "I feel like I belong in the mix."

That's what school is about, he says, "Planting seeds that grow and bloom together toward a common goal of a thriving education."

Does your school have a mural that captures the culture of your learning community?

Please share it for an NEA Today digital slideshow! Send it to nea.org/Mural.



Sign up for *NEA Today's* biweekly e-newsletter at nea.org/signup.

For the latest education news, visit nea.org/NEAToday

Join the conversation

 NEAToday

 @neatoday.bsky.social

 @NEAToday

BUILD FUTURES BEYOND THE HORIZON

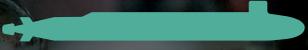
Manufacturing shapes our world, offering limitless opportunities for students to innovate, grow, and leave a lasting impact. From welding and machining to robotics and engineering, the variety of manufacturing careers is vast, each offering unique ways to make a difference. These careers seamlessly blend technical expertise with creativity, paving the way to stability and fulfillment.

Among these diverse options, maritime manufacturing stands out as an especially immersive field, providing opportunities for innovation and meaningful contributions. Empowering students to build the next generation of U.S. Navy submarines and surface ships – marvels of advanced technology and meticulous craftsmanship – can lead them to engage in groundbreaking projects that redefine what's possible.

Your encouragement can spark this journey. Inspire students to explore the endless possibilities within maritime manufacturing.

Learn more at BuildSubmarines.com/education or by scanning the code below.




BUILDSUBMARINES

