



A Union of Professionals

VOL. 46, NO. 4 | WINTER 2022-23  
aft.org/ae

# AMERICAN Educator

A JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, RESEARCH, AND IDEAS

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For AFT members & students

# A free media literacy tool



## NEWSGUARD'S NINE CRITERIA:

### CREDIBILITY

- Does not repeatedly publish false content
- Gathers and presents information responsibly
- Regularly corrects or clarifies errors
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## Accessing the reviews

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

## Using the extension

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

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



# Freeing Our Kids from Fear—and Helping Them Recover and Thrive

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

IN NOVEMBER'S ELECTIONS, Americans chose freedom and democracy over MAGA extremism and fear mongering. The results showed a deep well of support for the promise and potential of public education and for the sustained investment that parents want to help their kids thrive. Because of our votes, states like California, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and even Florida passed ballot measures and funding boosts. And governors who ran on these issues largely won.

Young people voted in historic numbers for their futures—for fixing the climate crisis, for freedom from gun violence and election deniers, for reproductive and LGBTQIA+ rights, and for economic security, including student debt relief. (By November, almost 26 million Americans had applied for student loan forgiveness.) In Florida, 25-year-old Maxwell Alejandro Frost ran on these issues and became the first Generation Z member elected to Congress.

Gun violence—this *American Educator's* cover story—was a key issue for young voters. In the United States, it's the leading cause of death for children and teens (unlike our peer countries, where vehicle accidents and cancer are to blame), with roughly 4,000 killed and more than 15,000 wounded every year.

While I had fire drills as a kid, children now go through active shooter drills. As I was visiting St. Louis's Central Visual and Performing Arts High School, where a teacher and student were gunned down by a former student, news broke of the shooting at the University of Virginia. That's two more schools—on top of at least 66 others this year—reeling from shootings.

The AFT has long fought for safe and welcoming schools; that starts by eradicating gun violence in our schools and communities. We're partnering with Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence, a grassroots group founded by three courageous AFT members, to win sensible gun reforms. That includes red flag laws, which

would have saved lives in St. Louis, where the shooter's mother asked police to take his gun away. We're also fighting for more community schools and more mental health care—like the Biden administration's \$1.7 billion federal investment in mental health supports for schools and communities—so troubled youth like the St. Louis shooter don't "slip through many cracks," as a teacher who knew him wrote.

We know what won't work: arming teachers. We need fewer guns in our schools, not more. As Everytown for Gun Safety writes (page 11), "Supportive and trusting school environments are the strongest way to prevent school violence." Voters want our country to come together around caring for our kids; that's why they elected progressive problem solvers.

In Michigan, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer made the largest investment in K-12 education in state history. She also created nearly 25,000 auto jobs, championed reproductive freedom, and supported secure gun storage and red flag laws. Her opponent—NRA- and Trump-endorsed/DeVos-funded Tudor Dixon—ran on culture wars (like excluding transgender athletes) and school vouchers. Dixon opposes abortion (even for rape or incest) and red flag laws. *Whitmer won.*

In Wisconsin, Gov. Tony Evers made historic investments in public education. A science teacher who became the state superintendent, Evers delivered the first special education funding increase in a decade. He also vetoed GOP bills to expand concealed-carry rights and is championing efforts to repeal Wisconsin's 1849 law criminalizing abortion. Evers's opponent, Trump-endorsed Tim Michels, called increasing school funding the "definition of insanity," opposes red flag laws, and is against reproductive freedom. *Evers won.*

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul made record investments in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and the environment. She won \$100 million to help schools

deal with pandemic fallout, including mental health services. She signed nation-leading pro-choice legislation and funded community-based gun violence interventions. Her opponent, NRA- and Trump-endorsed Lee Zeldin, wanted to restrict how race is taught in schools, supported education vouchers, and voted for defunding Planned Parenthood and against the Assault Weapons Ban. *Hochul won.*

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**There is a deep well of support for the promise and potential of public education.**

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In Arizona, Katie Hobbs, a former social worker serving as Arizona's secretary of state, focused on ensuring reproductive rights, preserving democracy, supporting public education (including more school counselors), and demanding common-sense gun safety. Opponent Kari Lake, a Trump-endorsed election denier, favors school vouchers, wants to end social and emotional learning, and rejects any restrictions on gun ownership. *Hobbs won.*

Our country remains deeply divided, and we didn't win all the races we hoped to win. But these expectation-defying midterms sent a message that Americans reject election deniers and extremists—and want pathways to a better life like public education and freedom, including freedom to make reproductive choices and freedom from violence. Now let's keep fighting for what kids and communities need to thrive. □



## OUR MISSION

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

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### *Why Teachers Are Unifying to End Gun Violence*

By Abbey Clements, Sarah Lerner, and Sari Beth Rosenberg

Teachers and school staff have had enough of the gun violence that has devastated so many of our communities. By sharing our stories and working together for meaningful change, we can help end gun violence and keep our students—and all of us—safe.

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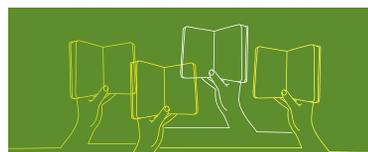
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AMERICAN EDUCATOR (ISSN 0148-432X print / ISSN 2770-4432 online, USPS 008-462) is published quarterly by the American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2079. Phone: 202-879-4400. [aft.org](https://aft.org)

Letters to the editor may be sent to the address above or to [ae@aft.org](mailto:ae@aft.org).

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AMERICAN EDUCATOR is mailed quarterly to AFT members in preK–12 education and biannually to members in higher education and other educational roles, as a benefit of membership. Subscriptions represent \$2.50 of annual dues. Non-AFT members may subscribe by mailing \$10 per year by check or money order to the address below.

**MEMBERS:** To change your address or subscription, notify your local union treasurer or visit [aft.org/members](https://aft.org/members).

**POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to American Educator, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2079.

Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices.

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Cover photo:  
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# Building Successful Community Schools

As schools collaborate with families and their communities, they can become valuable resource hubs that lead to greater student learning and well-being, healthier families, and stronger communities. The community schools approach integrates learning supports, social services, and other supports to meet students' and families' needs. When these schools are high quality and well implemented, they enhance students' academic, social, and emotional development and increase school attendance and motivation to learn.\*

The AFT has long prioritized development and support of community schools and is expanding its initiatives to add many more community schools nationwide. As part of this effort, Share My Lesson offers several resources in its Building Successful Community Schools collection to help educators learn how to develop the collaborative relationships needed to establish and sustain community schools.

## Launching a High-Quality Community School

Educators and school staff cannot create the learning conditions that students need alone. In community schools, educators and school staff partner with families, community members, and service providers to address barriers to learning and well-being—from Wi-Fi access to healthcare to help finding housing.

Educators can learn how to launch and fund a high-quality community school in the five webinars included in “Free Community Schools Webinars with the U.S. Department of Education.” One of these webinars is the Learning Policy Institute’s “Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Whole Child Approach to Education.” This resource reviews how community schools can best serve students as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and how all schools can adopt the same practices.

## Partnering with Families

Family engagement is a critical component of successful, sustainable community schools. When families are partners in

\*For an example of a thriving community school, plus a sidebar summarizing the research, see “Building Community with Community Schools” in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin](http://aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin).

education and the family-school relationship is characterized by trust and quality communication, families can better support students' learning at home.

The Share My Lesson collection includes a webinar series led by educators, parent advocates, and community school practitioners to address aspects of the family-school partnership. “Community Schools: Family Engagement, Social Justice and Equity” explores how the sustainable community schools initiative helps achieve racial, social, and educational justice. “Community Schools: Building Relationships in Classrooms Through Social Justice and Anti-Racist Curriculum” continues this discussion with an overview of the ways that community schools create safe spaces where students, caregivers, and communities all have a voice in students' learning.

Also included is practical guidance for engaging caregivers in students' learning. “Field Guide: Enhancing Parent Engagement for Student Success” highlights the importance of working with caregivers both in the classroom and at home to support students. Educators can build on this knowledge with “Essential Tech for Better Family-School Communication,” a resource by Share My Lesson partner National PTA, which considers how school communication strategies can better use technology to facilitate information sharing with families.

Finally, in “Cultivating Stories About Family Migrations,” Share My Lesson partner Re-Imagining Migration focuses on increasing family engagement by appreciating the richness of students' family histories. Part one of this resource is geared toward middle and high school students; through a family interview project, students better understand and communicate with their families, and educators gain meaningful insights into students' home lives. Part two, “Moving Stories at the Heart of Family Life,” is intended for students in preschool through primary grades. Caregivers and students read Junot Diaz's *Islandborn* and then caregivers share their own stories with students and document and reflect on the experience.

**K**ee monitoring this collection for new resources added through spring 2023 with more tools that can help educators build a successful and sustainable community school. And to learn more about the AFT's advocacy for community schools, including additional case studies and teachers' perspectives, visit [aft.org/position/community-schools/resources](http://aft.org/position/community-schools/resources).

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

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

## Recommended Resources

To access these free resources, visit [aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/sml](http://aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/sml).

Free Community Schools Webinars with the U.S. Department of Education

Community Schools: Family Engagement, Social Justice and Equity

Community Schools: Building Relationships in Classrooms Through Social Justice and Anti-Racist Curriculum

Field Guide: Enhancing Parent Engagement for Student Success

Essential Tech for Better Family-School Communication

Cultivating Stories About Family Migrations

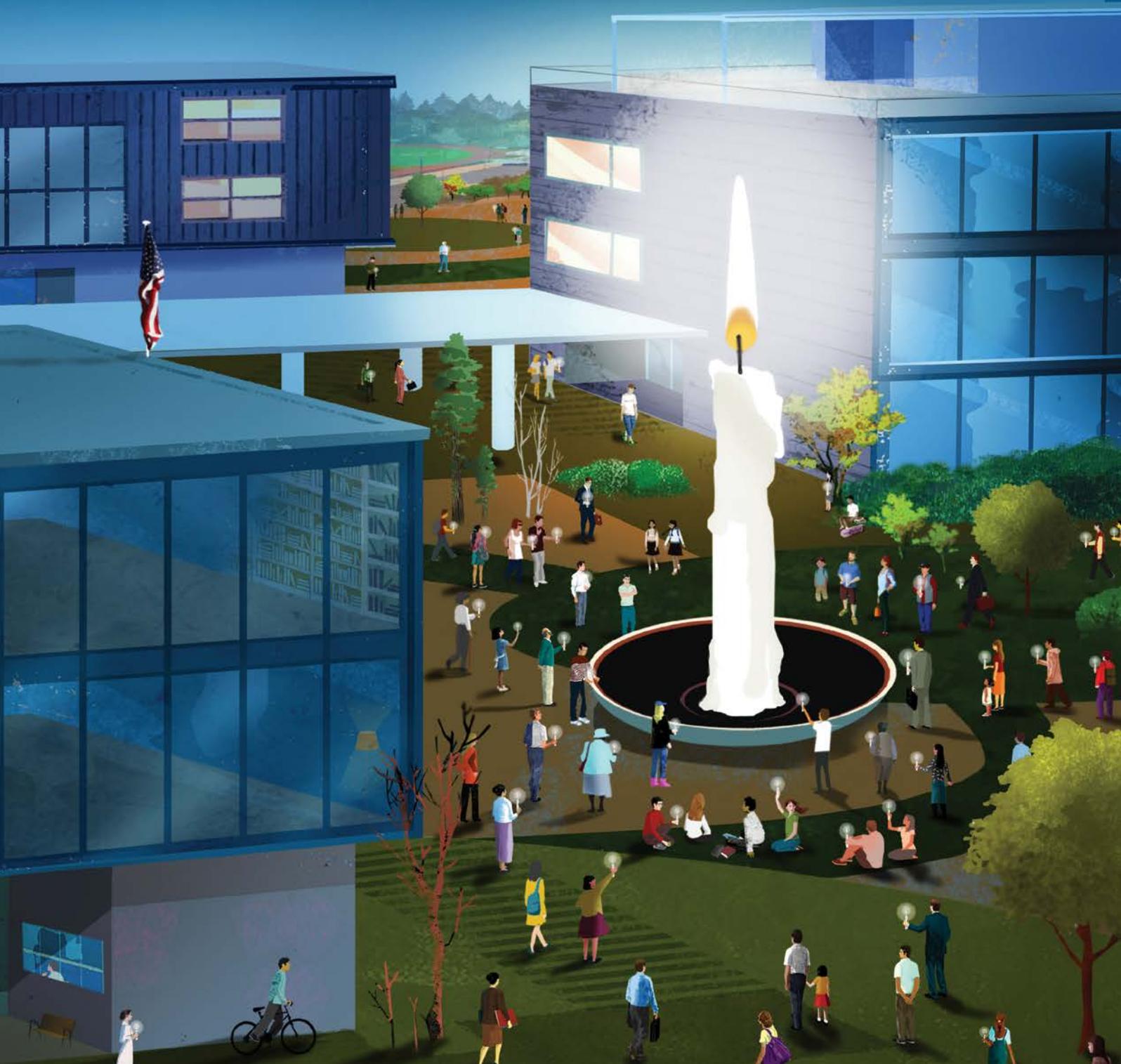
Moving Stories at the Heart of Family Life



# Too Many, Too Young

Why Teachers Are Unifying to End Gun Violence

By Abbey Clements, Sarah Lerner, and Sari Beth Rosenberg



In the wake of the Oxford High School shooting in Michigan on November 30, 2021, we checked in on one another in a group text. Like so many educators and school staff across the country, we were shocked, disgusted, distraught, angry, and heartbroken that this had happened yet again: another school shooting bringing death, injury, terror, and abject fear. As teachers, we—and our students—are on the frontlines of America’s gun violence epidemic. But rarely, if ever, does the public hear from those of us enduring these horrific school shootings, caring for kids impacted by shootings in their communities, and fearing that our loved ones or our students will be next.

The news cycle moves fast. Reporters sweep in and out, rarely capturing the authentic scope of trauma and grief, especially the long-term effects of loss and fear. And rarely captured is the everyday gun violence—the domestic violence, suicide by gun, unintentional shootings, and more—that also impacts school communities. At the end of our text thread that horrific day in November 2021, we decided to take action by launching a national organization for and by educators and school staff.

Two of us are school shooting survivors: Abbey, from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, and Sarah, from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018. Sari is a New York City high school history teacher who, like millions of educators across the country, endures countless challenging drills and conversations with her students about the fears and logistics of an active shooter on campus.

Abbey was teaching her second-graders on the day of the tragedy in 2012. Her surviving students are high school seniors now. They are watching. They are watching a country allow what happened to them and their friends and neighbors happen over and over again. Some of Abbey’s former students have become activists, like her, and some are still trying to process what happened in their childhood town. Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence is dedicated to listening to the voices of young people who have been left with this public health crisis at their feet. Partnering with them, following their lead, building a coalition of generations—this will force the change we need.

Sarah lives with the constant reminder of February 14, 2018. The 1200 building where students and staff were shot still stands. The fire alarm and lockdown drills still trigger her. It’s been a difficult road to navigate through trauma and PTSD. Some days Sarah is OK, and some days she’s not. She knows she has to stay strong for her husband, children, family, and students. She knows that some of her coworkers lean on her for strength. This is what happens when tragedy occurs; a person either finds strength they didn’t know they had or becomes stronger than they already were. This is how Sarah keeps going. She is strong and outspoken, which is why the founding of Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence means so much to her. She is able to use her voice, experience, and strength to help, encourage, and support others—just as those who came before her, like Abbey, did for her.

When Sari’s class went through their first active shooter drill of the school year last fall, she was horrified by the conversation that it generated. Students were discussing an escape route if there were actually an active shooter in the school and determined they would just jump out the window even though they were two stories above ground. Only later did the whole class realize how disturbing it was that they even had to think about how to survive a mass shooting. There’s an important lesson here: even when schools do not become the center of a mass shooting, the specter of the possibility is forever lingering, especially when participating in the drills.

We are union members who work closely with leaders to ensure the public and our elected officials know about these pervasive concerns about safety, fear, and anxiety among children, educators, and school staff. The mission of Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence is to elevate the narratives of current and former educators, school staff, administrators, and other stakeholders impacted by school and community shootings because gun violence leaves no one unaffected. Teachers Unify is expanding the conversation about gun violence by supporting, empowering, and leading with those on the frontlines. Every teacher and school staff member has a story to tell about gun violence and the fear of gun violence. It is imperative that these narratives are heard in order to change hearts, minds, and policies to make our schools and communities safer.

What do we mean by elevating narratives? Through this article, we’re sharing the stories of five educators—Alfred “Shivy” Brooks, Rori Abernethy, Jon Parker, Jean Darnell, and Kiki Leyba—whose experiences with gun violence in their schools and communities offer unique perspectives on why this crisis persists and how we can end it. Likewise, through our podcast (teachersunify.transistor.fm), people get to know many more voices and stories of gun violence and how it affects us physically, emotionally, in our relationships, at work, and at home. In addition, through collaboration and support—one-on-one, school- and district-wide, at education conferences, and on social media—we share anecdotes, resources, camaraderie, and tips on how to get a seat at the table to improve districts’ safety plans, how to talk to students appropriately about gun violence, and how to move forward in the aftermath of a school or community shooting.

We hope everyone connected to the education world, whether current or retired, will join us. So many teachers and school staff have decided that enough is enough. The public needs to hear from a coalition of voices speaking up for the safety and well-being of the school community, including those who work there. To become a part of Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence, complete our survey at [go.aft.org/szh](http://go.aft.org/szh).

*Abbey Clements is an elementary educator with over 30 years of experience. Since surviving the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, she has been a gun violence prevention activist working alongside survivors, advocates, and AFT leaders. Sarah Lerner, a survivor of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting in 2018, has 20 years of experience teaching. The editor of Parkland Speaks, her writing has appeared in several national publications. Sari Beth Rosenberg is an educator with over 20 years in the classroom, the host of the PBS NewsHour Classroom Educator Zoom Series, and a senior adviser for Voters of Tomorrow. Together, Clements, Lerner, and Rosenberg founded Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence.*

**We hope everyone connected to the education world, whether current or retired, will join us.**

## The Solutions Our Students Deserve

By Alfred “Shivy” Brooks

**W**hen I was 21 years old, an incident of gun violence changed my life. My friend and neighbor, Sonny, a senior at our local high school, was shot by another kid after a verbal conflict with other teens. I was an active and aspiring musician at the time, but Sonny’s passing changed that. I stopped listening to music for four years. I just couldn’t stop thinking about carrying my friend’s casket or having to plan for his tombstone. I decided to become a teacher and dedicate my life to making my world safer for Black kids.

One of the sad truths about being an urban educator is the number of students that we lose to interpersonal gun violence. I’ve been a certified teacher in the greater Atlanta region for five years, and I was a substitute for seven years before that. There’s never been a school year—in 12 years—that I have not lost a student to gun violence. Ever. What’s also sad is the number of firearms that we discover in kids’ backpacks or on their person. This year, I feel more unsafe than ever before because of the threat of gun violence in or around my school or at school events. And I don’t think we are having the conversations about gun violence that will produce actionable, sustainable solutions.

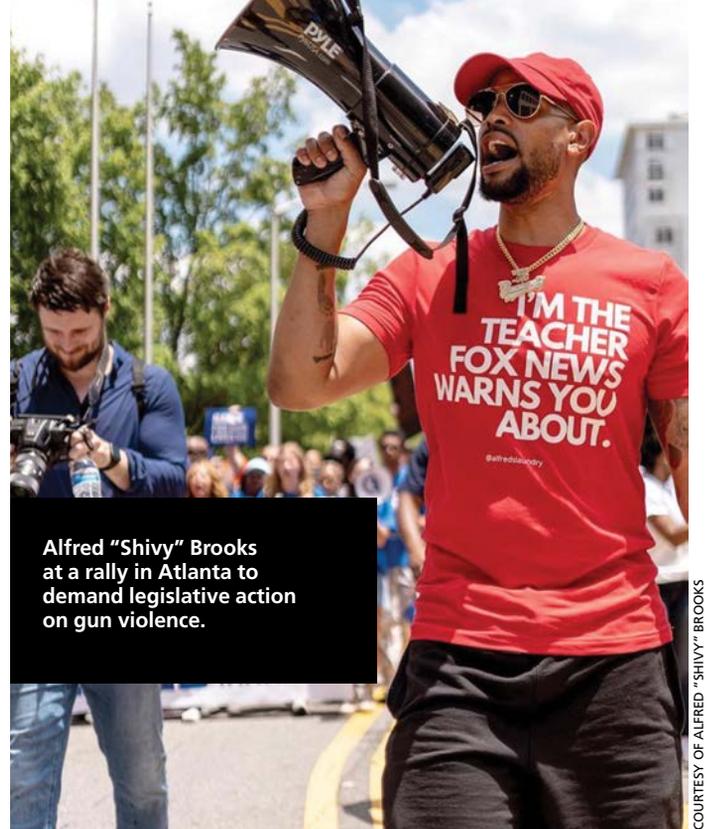
The solutions that our political leaders are presenting—adding school resource officers, arming teachers—won’t make us safer. In fact, they will only put students who look like me in more danger. Adding school resource officers means more Black and brown students being adjudicated and put into the justice system, many times just for being kids. And even though I am a gun owner, I believe arming teachers is just as problematic. What happens when a white female teacher is afraid of a Black male student and shoots him in the classroom?

Solving this crisis is going to require addressing the real problems underlying gun violence—which, for communities like mine, are poverty and lack of opportunity. We’ve forced poverty upon so many communities that it is ingrained in the experience of young people, especially Black youth. Street economies become the best option for many of them to provide for themselves and their families. If we want to stop interpersonal gun violence, we have to separate local taxes from how we fund our schools and invest more resources in serving our children and their neighborhoods. We have to make schools into hubs of hope for entire communities by providing adult literacy programs and solutions for food insecurity and unemployment so that our kids don’t have to look to the streets to meet their needs.

Moreover, solving the gun violence crisis means dealing with school climate and culture to ensure students have a sense of belonging. Our schools have become places where Black and brown kids are not empowered to be their authentic selves. They’re forced to code switch to feel welcome or worthy to be in that environment.\* And the act of changing how you walk, talk,

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*Alfred “Shivy” Brooks teaches economics, personal finance, and government at Charles Drew High School in Riverdale, Georgia. He is the chair of the Georgia NAACP Education Committee and founder of Teachers for Good Trouble, which advocates for the well-being of students, teachers, and learning communities.*



or dress—changing who you are—just to feel that you belong is exhausting. Some students skip or drop out of school to find other avenues of acceptance. They’re more likely to join a gang or find a job that undervalues their labor, which only perpetuates the cycle of poverty and struggle.

Instead, schools should center culturally responsive pedagogy and the soft skills our kids are really lacking. Now more than ever, kids need to be taught how to dream and reach those dreams, how to see the humanity in each other, and how to navigate conflict using empathy and intellect rather than weapons. We teachers are often told not to talk about politics or share with our students how we personally feel about the issues that our communities and our world are facing. But we’ve become so polarized, unable to disagree and still share space with each other, and that’s partly a consequence of not learning how to process conflict in classroom spaces where it should be safe.

Every time I’ve lost a student, I’ve been re-traumatized, taken back to the day I lost Sonny. He deserved to graduate high school and go to college. He deserved to become a father and leave his own legacy. He deserved to live. Neither Sonny’s death nor the deaths of my students over the last 12 years have made news headlines or prompted legislation to make widespread change. That’s why I use my voice and my relationships to impact the lives of as many kids as I possibly can.

As a teacher, I’ve made my classroom a space for kids to feel like they belong, and I work with colleagues across the country to advocate for learning spaces that are safe for Black and brown children. And I’m politically active in my community, not just in voting, but in pushing for legislation and for leaders that will fight for education and safer schools. I know that the changes I want have to come through me.

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\*To learn more about code switching and ensuring Black students feel that they belong, see “Lift Every Voice: Valuing Black Language and Culture in Classrooms” on page 14.

# Our Kids Are Not OK

By Rori Abernethy

I've taught middle and high school math in the Bay Area for 21 years—the first 13 in Oakland and the last 8 in San Francisco. My students and I have experienced the fear and trauma of gun violence in both cities. But it took an incident in San Francisco, in which no one was hurt, to cement for me the disparities in America's responses to gun violence.

In 2018, I was teaching at San Francisco's James Denman Middle School when a student from a nearby school went on the run after getting caught with a gun. The city's response was massive. Law enforcement combed the area on the ground and from helicopters; news reporters swarmed around, broadcasting the story to the region. All the neighboring schools were on lockdown for hours. I was shocked at first because in Oakland, the authorities could barely be bothered to show up.

My first teaching job was at a school deep in East Oakland, where the majority of Oakland's gun violence occurred. In my second week, multiple people were shot on our block. Months later, there was a shootout on the street right outside my classroom. My sixth-graders, who had grown up with gunfire, immediately dropped to the floor, scared but calmly calling their parents. The police strolled in a long while later to take a report, but there were no helicopters or news reporters.

A few years later, I transitioned to Oakland High. The school had wonderful kids and staff, but guns were everywhere. Every week, we found loaded guns in lockers, and we had so many lockdowns because of armed individuals on or near campus that I lost count. Worse, students were always wearing T-shirts with the faces of loved ones killed by gun violence.

*Rori Abernethy teaches math at James Denman Middle School in San Francisco. She is also an AFT Black Caucus regional organizer and serves on the Public Education Enrichment Fund Community Advisory Council for the San Francisco Unified School District.*



Rori Abernethy in her middle school classroom in San Francisco.

RUSS CURTIS

The longer I taught at Oakland High, the more heartbreaking stories I had. Stories of students like Xavier, a vibrant boy everyone knew and loved.<sup>†</sup> Hearing he'd been shot and killed devastated us all. There were almost 2,000 kids in our school, but the hallways were so quiet, it was like an all-school funeral.

Orlando sold weed because his family depended on him for survival. He was always worrying about how to pay their bills. One day in class, he showed his gun to a girl he was trying to impress, and it went off—thankfully, no one was hurt. He was terrified and so apologetic. The police took two hours to show up, and by that time Orlando had run and dumped the gun. Afterward, the community stayed in touch with him and made sure he finished high school. He didn't deserve to have his life ruined for a dumb decision.

When guns are allowed to proliferate in our communities, our kids pay the price. Kids like Terrence, one of many who sold weed or bought and sold guns when "flip that gun" was popular in Oakland—and figured they didn't need a high school diploma because they were entrepreneurs. I warned Terrence that this "business" would end up with him in jail, disabled, or dead. Two days later, he was shot in the head. He survived but is severely disabled.

Vu had been involved in gangs but was turning his life around. He became a straight-A student and a talented peer tutor. Vu wanted to be a police officer, and I remember the beautiful letter his dad wrote me, full of excitement about his son's future. One Halloween, Vu and his friends were in a park where a girl was shot and killed. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to life in prison—at 16 years old—but I believe he is innocent.

One summer, Joseph was in a course I taught for students who needed to pass the California High School Exit Exam. We were in the library when we heard gunfire. Another kid everyone knew was killed. When the grief counselors arrived, Joseph asked me to send them away. He'd lost so many people to gun violence that he couldn't process another shooting. He needed to pass the class, and he couldn't do that *and* focus on his mental health. "I already know I'm not going to be OK," he said.

I still cry over these stories. What if I'd asked Xavier or Vu to stay after school or had one more conversation with Terrence? What if we'd changed gun laws 20 years ago or invested in these kids and communities across America that nobody cares about?

The kid who shut down our schools that day in San Francisco had a better end to his story. People advocated for and supported him instead of just punishing him for his mistake. My students in Oakland deserved the same. What happens to the least of us eventually happens to all of us. We need to care enough about all our kids, no matter where they come from, to take meaningful action on gun violence. If we don't do something now, none of us will be OK.

<sup>†</sup>Students' names have been changed to protect their identities.

## More Than Names on a List

By Jon Parker

Late at night last Easter, I found myself unable to sleep. I was gripped by nervous anticipation, waiting for a list of names of victims from a mass shooting three miles from Perry High School in Pittsburgh, the school at which I had begun my high school teaching career 17 years prior. Over 90 shots had been fired into a party attended by hundreds of kids, mostly high school students. I was afraid some of my current students would be among the dead, and I was almost certain that others would be among the wounded. My mind raced, worrying about who might have been there and who I might never see again.

As is my tendency during times of worry, I started to make a list. Not a list of school tasks—papers to grade, parents to contact, meetings to attend—but a list of students I had lost to gun violence in my teaching career: Chaz, JoJo, Ricky, Jon Jon, Laffayette, Michael, Donangelo, Maurice.

Eight students in 17 years. One name on that list is too many. Eight is a number I cannot even comprehend.

I waited for the news the following day, desperately hoping my list wouldn't grow longer. After 17 years, I almost can't watch the news anymore, because every local story of gun violence could involve one of my kids. No one hurt that night was my student, and perhaps a little selfishly, I was glad for that. But they were someone's students. Other teachers were experiencing what I've experienced eight times.

That night wasn't the first time I had nervously awaited a list of names from a mass shooting. Three years prior, on a Sunday morning in October, I read the list of victims of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, which is a mile from my current school, Allderdice High School. I recognized a name: Irv, a man I had coached baseball with. A parent who had spent years volunteering to help our underfunded high school baseball program run a junior varsity team, Irv was also well known from our community's Little League program.

I had read about mass shootings in other parts of the country, much like I imagine most people do, and I was horrified—but they felt abstract and distant. This antisemitic hate crime was uniquely traumatizing for our school community. Allderdice serves a diverse range of students and families, but the neighborhood where the school is located is predominantly Jewish. Many of our students closely identify with the Jewish community here, and they were dramatically impacted by the targeting of that crime.

At the same time, my students and I were also struggling with the contrast between how our school, community, and nation reacted to this mass shooting—with outpourings of support—and the lack of response to “ordinary” gun violence that overshadows the lives of so many of my students. In addition to the Jewish community, we also serve many Black students and other students of color from historically segregated and under-resourced neighborhoods. Those are the students living with gun violence day to day—and the students on my list.

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*Jon Parker has been an English teacher in Pittsburgh Public Schools for 17 years. He currently teaches English and journalism and is an adviser to the student newspaper at Taylor Allderdice High School.*



ANTHONY PUTHENURACKAL

Jon Parker talking with community members about public education in Pittsburgh.

In the week following Tree of Life, I supported the students on our school paper as they created a tribute edition to the victims, and I was struck by their thoughtfulness as they wrestled with their new understanding of what far too many of their peers faced every day. We sat together in a circle and talked about honoring the victims while being sensitive to the trauma everyone was processing in their own ways. My students organized and attended vigils. Another teacher and I spent much of the week in the counseling suite with students. Because we knew these students well, some were more comfortable talking with us than other staff or grief counselors. At the end of the week, I collapsed on my couch and wept—utterly exhausted, unable to stop imagining the horrors that Irv and the other victims experienced.

No matter how long you teach, your students are your “kids.” You get to know them in a deeply personal way, and you remember them long after they're gone. I'm glad I remember Maurice's gentleness and Donangelo's wide, kind smile. I'm glad I remember a poignant letter Laffayette wrote to me at the start of his freshman year and Michael's firm handshake accompanied by a “Good morning, Mr. Parker,” every day. I'm glad I remember Jon Jon's toothy grin and Ricky's keen sense of humor. I'm glad I remember JoJo's passion and Chaz's smirk. And I'm glad I remember Irv coaching first base in his signature cutoff T-shirt. When gun violence affects those you love, lifting them up as real people rather than distant statistics or names on a list is one of the best ways to honor them.

# All I Can Do

By Jean Darnell

In December 2012, I was an English as a second language (ESL) teacher at North Shore Senior High School in my hometown of Houston. One of my students had just ended her relationship with another student, and he wasn't taking it well—he was becoming obsessive, making threats. One morning, she was visibly upset in class, and I overheard some unsettling things, so I reported the situation to our administration. They acted immediately, and police arrived to detain the young man. During my lunch duty a short time later, I watched from the cafeteria windows as he was discreetly led outside to a waiting patrol car.

Soon thereafter, I was headed to my truck for my lunch break when I heard two gunshots. Then the screaming started. I couldn't tell where the shots had come from, but everyone inside the school was running out. Kids were coming at me in the parking lot, and no one knew what was going on. Everyone was just trying to escape. I gathered as many kids as I could, and we sheltered in my truck.

We found out later that the shots were the young man attempting suicide with a gun he'd hidden in his shoes. Officers had patted him down and handcuffed him, but they never checked his shoes.

An incident like this changes your life. Since then, I have spent a lot of time thinking about safety. I think about how to protect students so they don't experience the fear of their school turning into a crime scene. Lately, though, I think about that young man who was so emotionally distraught.

As educators, we spend so much time on active shooter drills, but we're not doing everything we can for our kids' safety and well-being, especially if we're not giving them tools to handle

the ugliness of life. They need to know how to process extreme emotions and understand that even the worst feelings will pass. They are emotionally immature, and they make rash decisions because they don't have the tools to make better choices. Having transitioned from being a teacher to a middle school librarian, I see it all the time because students come to me when they need support. We need to teach emotional literacy as a preventive strategy beyond the primary school years so that kids know how to ground themselves, work through their feelings, and realize there are alternatives to harming themselves or others. Their mastery of those skills is just as important as their academics.

Many schools don't have the counseling resources to handle this training—and even if they do, some kids don't feel comfortable enough with their counselor to share what they're feeling and ask for help. But oftentimes they'll open up to the librarian, who they may see more often than their counselor. This year, I wanted to make it easier for that to happen. I've converted one of my tech rooms into a meditation space with books and activities that teach students how to self-soothe, how to recalibrate in moments of fear, anxiety, and rage to find a sense of calmness and healing. I call it the Zen Den.

I'm proud of this work, and I want to be here every day, making a difference for my kids and my community. But after 20 years in education and serving close to 3,000 students just as a librarian, I don't know if I can do it much longer. The increasing violence, decreasing resources—and now we are also expected to carry guns in the classroom as some Texas teachers are doing? It's asking too much.

I'm a Texas girl and love my home state. I was raised around weapons and I'm a responsible gun owner. But I'll quit before I bring a gun into a classroom. First, I'm a Black woman. If I'm ever armed in a situation where there is an active shooter on campus,

I don't want to be mistaken as the threat. I don't want somebody explaining to my mother that I was shot dead by friendly fire.

But I'm also an educator. My focus should be on keeping kids healthy, grounded, and learning. I should be asking, "Are my kids engaged today?," not "Is my weapon secure?" Live weapons in the classroom just increase potential threats—including from our own students or other adults who may spiral to the point of instigating violence. We don't want to believe that would happen, but we have to be realistic about the possibility.

Instead of arming teachers, I want to see our elected leaders doing more to get the most violent weapons off the streets. Instead of preparing our kids for violence, we need to show them how to give back something good to our community and the world and teach them what an emotionally healthy citizen looks like. That's what I want to leave behind as an educator, as a librarian, as an advocate. That's all I can do.

*Jean Darnell is a former English and history teacher and is currently a middle school librarian in Austin, Texas. She delivers professional development on literacy topics and shares diverse books and literacy resources on her blog at [awakenlibrarian.com](http://awakenlibrarian.com).*



SUSANNAH KAY

Jean Darnell reading *At the Mountain's Base* to middle school students in Austin.



COURTESY OF KIKI LEYBA

Kiki Leyba speaking at a rally in Washington, DC, to ban assault weapons.

their questions—it has been incredibly powerful to play a part in their healing processes.

But each year, our community of survivors grows larger as our country refuses to do what’s necessary to prevent gun violence. So, I learned I can do more than support survivors in the aftermath of tragedy; I can work to prevent gun violence as an activist. This work takes more than thoughts and prayers. It takes our collective voices united to demand change.

We need change in our under-resourced public schools so we are better equipped to care for the mental well-being of our students. Few schools have enough social workers and psychologists, and teachers are increasingly called on to fill in the gaps. But we also need trauma counseling and support services for teachers and school staff. If we’re not caring for ourselves and each other, who will care for our kids?

We need change in the way we care for our communities, which are often left to fend for themselves following incidents of gun violence. They need additional funding to provide afterschool programs for students, community outreach programs for students and families, and mental health services for students, families, teachers, and staff. And organizations like Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence need our support so that we can end gun violence, help our communities heal, and prevent future trauma.

We also need change in our leadership and legislation. Our political leaders must stop using rhetoric to avoid change and instead prioritize our lives and well-being. I volunteer with organizations that are pushing for the key legislation—like red flag and safe storage laws and a federal assault weapons ban—to end the epidemic of gun violence in America. We’ve protested, knocked on doors, and gone to Washington, DC, to take our message to the public and to Congress: We can no longer accept the unchecked availability of assault weapons in our communities. We can no longer accept the mythology that guns and freedom are inextricably intertwined. And we can no longer accept political leaders who refuse to represent the will of American voters on these issues.

The Biden administration’s Safer Communities Act, signed into law in June, felt like the first bit of positive change in over 20 years. But we need more. I urge you to use your vote and your voice. I know that being vocal about preventing gun violence in our current climate feels risky; there could be backlash. But the losses we all suffer because of gun violence require us to be brave and bold. It’s time to put the safety of children and schools first and to protect all citizens from gun violence.

I’m still teaching at Columbine, 23 years later. It has never occurred to me to leave because my job—taking care of my students—is unfinished. As educators, school staff, and community members, we all have unfinished work: fighting for change so that yet another student doesn’t have to endure years of trauma. Together, we can take back our power and make a difference for our kids and our future. □

## We Need Your Voice and Your Vote

By Kiki Leyba

**M**y family has survived two school shootings. In 1999, I was a first-year teacher at Columbine High School. I was meeting with my principal, excitedly accepting a continuing contract, on the April morning that two teenage gunmen began shooting. They murdered 13 of us and injured more than 20. In 2010, my family was traumatized again when a man opened fire at Deer Creek Middle School as school was dismissed, shooting two students before a teacher tackled him. My son, Lucas, was just feet from the gunman. A friend grabbed him, and they ran for safety. Their backpacks, left on the school’s front lawn, became part of the news coverage of the shooting.

When I heard there’d been a shooting at my son’s school, all I could think was, “How can this be happening again?” But it has happened so often over the last 23 years that our nation’s response to mass shootings has become predictable. We’re horrified. We hold memorials for the murdered and fundraise for their families. Politicians send thoughts and prayers. Then, we move on to the next big story. But the shattered survivors and their communities are just beginning their painful journey through the fog of trauma, enduring sleep loss, hypervigilance, depression, and other symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Trauma swallows everyone; it does not care who you are, what you do, or if you have a family.

How do we support students, families, and communities who live with trauma for years after the news cameras have gone? People commonly reach out to me and other Columbine survivors in the aftermath of tragedy. Over the years, I have dedicated myself to caring for survivors of shootings in Newtown, Uvalde, Las Vegas, and many other cities. I’ve sat with them in their grief, listened to their stories, and answered

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*Kiki Leyba has taught English at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, for 23 years. He is also a public speaker, mentor, and advocate committed to gun violence prevention and supporting communities that have experienced trauma. These opinions are his own and do not necessarily represent Columbine High School or Jeffco Public Schools.*

# Keeping Students Safe from Gun Violence

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

—EDITORS

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Recommendations

### Gun Safety Policies

#### 1. Enact and Enforce Secure Firearm Storage Laws

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



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

#### 2. Pass Extreme Risk Laws

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

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

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

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

### 3. Raise the Age to Purchase Semi-Automatic Firearms

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

### 4. Require Background Checks on All Gun Sales

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

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

### School-Based Interventions

#### 5. Foster a Safe and Trusting School Climate

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

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



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

#### 6. Build a Culture of Secure Gun Storage

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

#### 7. Create Trauma-Informed Crisis Intervention Practices in Schools

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



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

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

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

#### 8. Implement Access Control Measures and Door Locks

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

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

#### 9. Initiate Trauma-Informed Emergency Planning

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

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

#### 10. Avoid Practices That Can Cause Harm and Traumatize Students

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

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

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

For more on preventing school shootings, along with extensive endnotes, see [go.aft.org/9uh](http://go.aft.org/9uh).





# Lift Every Voice

## Valuing Black Language and Culture in Classrooms

By Anne H. Charity Hudley, Christine Mallinson, Rachel Samuels, and Kimberly Bigelow

Language is a central component of both culture and the educational process. The language that students bring to educational settings affects how they are treated and assessed in the classroom. Some students come to school already speaking the standardized variety of English that is valued and viewed as being the “most correct” in educational systems. Not surprisingly, these students are often more likely to succeed in school. Many other students come to school without already knowing the standardized variety, and as a result, they often face linguistic hurdles that can affect their opportunities for success in school.

We have been working throughout our careers as educators and researchers to create culturally sustaining pedagogy to ensure that all students in an increasingly diverse United States are educated in ways that enable them to achieve their highest potential. As a crucial part of doing so, we focus on variation within the English language and the relationship of that variation to cultural and racial identity.

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Multicultural and culturally sustaining approaches to education help educators act on two essential concepts: that each student is unique and that uniqueness is central to the academic and social development of every student.<sup>1</sup> Language is a key aspect of this uniqueness, and because language is integral to culture and identity, understanding language variation and diversity is critical to education equity. All educators need knowledge and tools to honor and value students' (and their families' and communities') language differences and variations, to understand and address any language-related challenges students may face, and to support students' academic, social, and emotional development.

Efforts to help all students achieve their highest potential are incomplete without an understanding that linguistic discrimination, inseparable from racial discrimination, has historically limited African Americans' access to opportunities afforded other citizens. Thus, we focus in this article on linguistic variations specific to African American English and ways educators can actively and creatively support Black students.

We write as two authors with lived experiences as African American educators in the United States (Charity Hudley and Bigelow) and two white educators who actively learn with African American educators and students (Mallinson and Samuels). We draw on our cumulative decades of experience to provide strategies and activities for educators and learners that support the success of Black students in educational environments from elementary school through college.

We take a three-pronged approach in this article, covering the value of Black language and culture; the relationships among race, culture, community, identity, and language; and the specific knowledge about language and race that is essential for educators. Each of these parts is accompanied by a webinar on Share My Lesson, plus other Share My Lesson resources full of practical strategies for effectively working with culturally and linguistically

diverse students. It is our hope that through this approach, educators will increase their knowledge about language and culture and use it in their classrooms to lift every voice in ways that advance educational equity.

## The Value of African American Language and Culture

Language varieties hold inherent value as markers of culture and identity. As a result, some speakers of African American English may feel—or may be made to feel—shame, insecurity, and embarrassment when they operate within a society that expects them to speak standardized English. Educators of students who use African American English, therefore, have a special role to play in understanding these students' personal and cultural experiences and helping them navigate comfortably across their linguistic diasporas, which may include African American English and standardized English as well as other languages and varieties.<sup>2</sup>

What do we mean by “African American English”? We use the term to refer to a culturally African American variety of English used in places where African Americans live or historically have lived. And yet, we fully acknowledge the variability and ambiguity that accompany any attempt to define how language is used along cultural or ethnic lines and the impossibility of attempting to put one name and one face on the range of those who identify as Black or African American.

African American English is both a product and a repository of African American culture, but it is not what makes a person Black or African American. (In this article, we use the terms “Black” and “African American” often interchangeably, while recognizing the variation across cultural identities and experiences.) African Americans are not a monolithic group, and neither are their languages, language varieties, and cultural practices. How a person uses language is shaped by the languages and language varieties of the communities that they are a part of as well as their individual experiences, including where they grew up, their friends and networks, personal styles, and more. A person's entire linguistic knowledge—the often multiple languages, varieties, and styles that they use or know to any degree—all make up their linguistic repertoire. For this reason, language variation occurs on a dynamic spectrum that varies culturally, locally, and individually.

### Attitudes and Beliefs About African American English

When students come to school using African American English, they are aware that many of their relatives, friends, and neighbors speak similarly to themselves.<sup>3</sup> They may also be mindful that many of their educators do not use African American English. The message that African American students may internalize from this situation is that educators expect them to learn a new way of communicating that may be at odds with their home language and culture. This creates a “push-pull” that many African American students face:<sup>4</sup> when they are pushed to assimilate to mainstream academic culture to succeed in school, they may feel forced to pull away from their home communities.<sup>5</sup> This affects students' linguistic and cultural identities, and over time, the burden takes an emotional toll. Many people would find it difficult to accept a message, even an indirect message, that they have to suppress part of their linguistic identity to operate within mainstream cul-

ture. African Americans, with their specific social and cultural history, often live this reality every day.

Negative perceptions about African American English have roots in racist ideologies that are apparent in early linguistic research. Scholars in 1924 described Black language as “infantile,” and similar perceptions drove language education programs for Black students following the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision in 1954.<sup>6</sup>

The first systematic study of attitudes toward African American English was published in 1969.<sup>7</sup> In analyzing evaluative judgments from 150 listeners, the researchers found that on a range of personal characteristics, listeners gave lower (more negative) ratings to the voices of speakers of African American English, especially on the characteristics of speech, education, talent, and intelligence. In contrast, they gave higher (more positive) ratings to the voices of speakers of other language varieties.

Since then, much additional research has found that educators of all backgrounds tend to rate students who use African American English as less intelligent, less confident, and less likely to succeed than students who speak in a more standardized way.<sup>8</sup> Many African American students report having heard their language use described as “broken,” as “uneducated,” or with other disparaging adjectives.<sup>9</sup> Consider the psychological and educational impacts on African American students when their language is framed as deficient. That's a raciolinguistic ideology at work, and it affects students' opportunities to succeed in school.

**Linguistic discrimination, inseparable from racial discrimination, has historically limited African Americans' access to opportunities.**

Studies find that classroom work containing features of African American English is often evaluated as inferior to otherwise equivalent work in which a student uses standardized English. One recent study found that the use of African American English negatively impacted community college students' grades on writing assignments because most educators in the study had little knowledge of this variety or its valid and well-established linguistic characteristics; even some who had that knowledge often saw African American English as “inappropriate” in academic writing.<sup>10</sup> The biases also extend to oral language: researchers have found that teachers are more likely to give lower evaluations to work presented orally by Black students, even when that work is equal in quality to work presented by white students.<sup>11</sup> And speaking and writing in African American English has been and continues to be a factor in Black students' disproportional placement in remedial classes and special education.<sup>12</sup>



### The Intersections of Language, Race, and Identity for African American Students

It is important for educators to understand that internalized linguistic racism and racialized ideologies about language can affect individual speakers, which is often characterized in research as *linguistic insecurity*.<sup>13</sup> For students who use African American English, linguistic insecurity can manifest when they perceive that their language is devalued and when they do not receive linguistically and culturally appropriate feedback from educators. If students perceive their language is devalued, they may also perceive that they, along with their culture, communities, family, and friends, are being devalued. In turn, they may become discouraged in school and lose confidence in their educators. They may even reject this devaluing by disengaging from the standardized English-dominant school culture altogether.

Other students who use African American English might go a different direction, accommodating as much as possible to standardized English. Much educational literature has been devoted to understanding the concept that has come to be known as “sounding white,” “talking white,” or “acting white,” which refers to the academic and cultural bind felt by some African American students who fear that any attempt to do well in school is seen by other individuals as trying to be something they are not.

The idea of sounding, talking, and acting white as a way of achieving educational success is complex. Carefully conducted research suggests that even though some Black students may sometimes reject what they perceive as white, middle-class styles of speech and behavior, most also understand that educational attainment leads to social mobility and that standardized English usage is often part of this process.<sup>14</sup> A Black student who uses standardized English and resists using African American English may be stigmatized by other African Americans who view the student’s linguistic choices as snubbing the local language variety and, in turn, snubbing their cultural background. At the same time, even if Black students do sound and act in ways that are interpreted as white, they may still not be accepted by white peers, whether due to prejudice or to a range of social factors.

Linguistic insecurity is not limited to students; African American educators may feel similar tensions and dueling expectations surrounding language and culture. Like students, some may avoid the use of African American English. Other African American educators switch linguistically and culturally between the language of their communities and the schools in which they teach. Studies have found that Black educators who employ features of African American English in their classroom teaching often effectively build rapport with their African American students.<sup>15</sup>

These complexities surrounding language and culture are tied to what W. E. B. Du Bois first described as the “double consciousness” that many African Americans may feel when they navigate the social and professional demands of American society.<sup>16</sup> Those who use African American English may feel compelled to shed their home linguistic patterns to succeed in a mainstream climate. At the same time, they may be highly invested in maintaining what they perceive to be their authentic African American speech and culture. In the film *Voices of North Carolina*, such sentiments are expressed by Richard Brown, an African American man from Durham:

Particularly in the African American community, there is this idea that yes, you know, you can speak in a much more relaxed, intimate Black speech in certain spaces. Then in other spaces, you have to speak a much more common English. And, for some people, there’s an internal struggle about should you really do that. Should you really be trying to talk like white folk? Or should you always, all the time, no matter what setting you are in speak the same way—speak the same way your mama taught you to speak?<sup>17</sup>

African American English is an important part of African American culture. Because language is familial, cultural, and personally meaningful, we encourage educators to take a strengths-based perspective that accurately reframes language variation as a valuable cultural and linguistic resource.

As a key element of a strengths-based perspective on language and culture, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar “Crafting Linguistic Autobiographies to Build Cultural Knowledge”: [sharemylesson.com/webinars/linguistic-autobiographies](https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/linguistic-autobiographies). The linguistic autobiography guides educators and students to think about the social context of language, culture, and identity. We demonstrate how to craft our linguistic autobiographies to build cultural and linguistic knowledge in our schools and communities and how to encourage others to share the linguistic and cultural richness they bring to our learning communities.

—A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

### Reclaiming Race: Culture, Community, Identity, and Language

Race is a social construct, and by extension, race can be seen as a myth. But to many people from racialized groups, race is the real-est thing we know. In particular, race affects where we live and attend school and who our classmates are. Teaching about race and culture to students matters, as the multicultural movement has been asserting for the past 50 years.

There is a clear need for educators to receive more resources, training, and support about race, culture, community, and identity in the classroom—and their intersections with language. Many educators want to more deeply understand what race and ethnicity are.<sup>18</sup> We must engage with Blackness to dismantle anti-Blackness, and language is a key part of these efforts.

### The Personal, Cultural, and Social Dimensions of Language Use

Recognizing these interrelationships across language, race, culture, community, and identity is particularly important due to the personal, cultural, and social dimensions of language. Not everyone has the linguistic ability to code switch—that is, to choose to speak in African American English or standardized English, depending on the context. But even if a person can code switch, it doesn't mean they always want or need to. Continually engaging in impression-management strategies by changing one's communication style can lead to stress and burnout.<sup>19</sup> Robinson Cook, a Black senior at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, shared that “Code-switching is exhausting.... Coming home at the end of the day feels like taking off a costume. When I'm out in the world, I'm constantly performing for everyone else. It's never a positive experience. Either I succeed, and I get to continue playing along, or I'm outed as an imposter and shunned.”<sup>20</sup> Other students have shared that being limited to standardized English in academic writing can feel like being locked in a box. Being forced to switch between African American English and standardized English can also take an academic toll because of the additional cognitive demand of maintaining a separation between the two linguistic systems, even in seemingly non-language-related coursework.<sup>21</sup> These academic inequities and psychological, cultural, and social burdens are a powerful argument in favor of students' right to use their own language.

Yet, beliefs about the use of African American English in educational settings vary. Some educators may wonder how best to teach students who use African American English so that they can succeed in mainstream environments while valuing their linguistic and cultural heritage. Others may believe it is inappropriate for students to use features of African American English in school contexts altogether. Some may feel that African American English is a substandard form of English that indicates a student's incapacity for linear thinking or logical analysis (although linguists strongly disagree).<sup>22</sup> Others may perceive students' use of African American English as a mark of defiance or as a signal of rejection of school culture.

Educators may also want their students to use standardized English because speaking and writing according to existing standards yields many tangible, real-world benefits. Educators know that students who are comfortable using standardized English are not only more likely to be told that they sound educated but also probably more likely to get ahead in their educational and professional pursuits and less likely to face discrimination based on their language use.<sup>23</sup> For example, in one experiment, six African American applicants were sent to interview for secretarial positions at 100 sites. Those applicants who spoke in standardized English rather than African American English were given longer interviews and were more likely to be offered a job.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, research found that Black workers whose speech was distinctly identified as “sounding Black” earned 10 percent lower salaries than white workers with comparable skills who did not “sound Black”; further, white workers with speech distinctly identified as “sounding Black” earned 6 percent lower salaries than their white peers who did not “sound Black.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, Black workers whose speech was not distinctly identified as “sounding Black” earned 2 percent less than comparably skilled white workers. As these results make clear, racial discrimination, linguistic discrimination, and the intersection of both persist in the labor market. (Nevertheless, it is also important to point out that simply using the language of school assessment does not guarantee suc-

## A strengths-based perspective helps reframe language variation as a valuable cultural and linguistic resource.

cess for African American students, who may face the realities of racism and discrimination regardless.)

Honoring the cultural and linguistic heritage of students who use African American English while also preparing them to live and work in a society where standardized English often dominates is thus a complex and multifaceted goal for educators (and students and families). In many other communities, including immigrant communities, students face pressure to assimilate to English to do well in school and life. While there are many school and community programs to aid students who speak a primary language other than English, few programs are in place to help students who use varieties of English, including African American English. Often, the general sentiment is that students who grow up speaking English should be able to produce standardized English forms no matter their background. However, as the author and progressive activist James Baldwin contended decades ago, succeeding at school should not require African American students to abandon their linguistic and cultural heritage: “A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be Black, and in which he knows that he can never become white.”<sup>26</sup>



Educators must therefore recognize the ways in which language and race are interrelated and intertwined with culture, community, and identity. By working to establish an equitable learning community, all students' cultural and linguistic heritages can be valued and included as part of their trajectory of academic success.

As a tangible strategy for creating an equitable learning community, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar "Affirming Students Through a Language and Literacy Equity Audit": [sharemylesson.com/webinars/language-and-literacy-equity](https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/language-and-literacy-equity). Much like an equity audit, the language and literacy audit actively seeks out the linguistic strengths of your learning community and is designed to be used with teachers, students, administrators, and community members. The audit will help you support literacy in its multiple definitions and learn with students as linguistic experts by valuing what they know about language. We suggest you view the linguistic autobiography webinar (see page 16) before viewing the language and literacy audit webinar.

—A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

## Essential Knowledge About Language and Race

Educators and students who come from different racial, ethnic, regional, and cultural backgrounds may feel unaware of, uncertain about, confused by, or even resistant to understanding each other's linguistic and cultural practices. Serious cultural and academic misunderstandings may arise between educators who use standardized English and students who use African American English—particularly when each person assumes that they understand and are understood by the other.

Yet, whereas students who use African American English are required to learn standardized English and its academic culture, educators are not often required to do the reverse—to learn about their students' local, culturally inflected linguistic variety. These inequalities contribute to cultural, social, and academic rifts and resentments, as well as unintentional misunderstandings, as educators and students alike may assume that the other is "operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions"<sup>27</sup> when, in fact, different norms may be in use.

For these reasons, it is critical for educators to understand the language patterns that students bring with them into the classroom to best help all students attain academic success. African American English is a complete linguistic system, and educators must have information about its specific features and understand how these features manifest in educational settings. Moreover, educators should keep in mind that language variation occurs on a dynamic spectrum that varies culturally, locally, and individually. In this section, we share some common characteristics of African American English, describe their variability, and discuss their educational implications.

### Grammatical and Sound-Related Variation

For students who use African American English, learning to speak and write using the grammar conventions of standardized English can be a complicated process.\* One major issue is that the gram-

matical system of African American English interacts with its sound system differently than the ways sound and grammar interact in standardized English. For example, a student who uses African American English may pronounce words such as *joined* and *marked* as *join* or *mark* and may also write "j-o-i-n" for *joined* and "m-a-r-k" for *marked*. As a result, this student may face additional challenges with recognizing and producing grammatical particles (including the *-ed* that marks the past tense) in standardized English. Educators may view students' use of words such as *mark* for *marked* on written homework and standardized tests as evidence of a significant grammatical error in standardized English despite it being a recognizable sound-related grammatical variant.

Past tense forms in standardized English that are spelled or sound exactly like present tense forms may be particularly difficult for students who use African American English. Research established long ago that students who spoke African American English were able to correctly pronounce the past tense form of *read* in the sentence, "Last month I read the sign," in which the phrase "last month" indicates the past tense. The sentence "When I passed by, I read the sign," however, posed much more difficulty. In this sentence, the students who spoke African American English tended to pronounce the verb *passed* as *pass*, and they subsequently pronounced the verb *read* in its present tense form (pronounced as "reed," not as "red").<sup>28</sup> These pronunciation differences indicated that the students who spoke African American English were comprehending the sentences as being in the present tense, not the past; that is, they interpreted the sentence as stating: "When I pass by, I read the sign." Therefore, it is important for educators to pay close attention to helping students learn the different pronunciations that accompany past and present tense verb forms in standardized English.

Other sound differences in African American English have similar grammatical implications. Speakers of African American English may demonstrate variation in the pronunciation of final consonants, which may make contracted future tense forms difficult to recognize. For example, "You'll go there" may sound similar to "You go there" due to the variability of the final *l* sound in *you'll*. Similarly, *I'll* can be difficult to distinguish from *I* for students who speak African American English and are decoding



\*To learn more, see "Teaching Reading to African American Children" in the Summer 2021 issue of *American Educator*: [aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington\\_seidenberg](https://aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington_seidenberg).

standardized English, as well as for speakers of standardized English who are decoding or listening to African American English. Therefore, it is important for educators to pay close attention to how students who use African American English are pronouncing and writing future tense forms in standardized English.

Knowledge of how and why specific language variations appear in students' oral reading and writing is invaluable when teaching and assessing students who speak African American English because features of this variety will often appear in students' speech, oral reading, and written work. It is critical, however, that educators avoid shaming students for their language variation or disproportionately penalizing them for the presence of language variants in their speech, oral reading, and written work.

When pointing out places where students' use of grammar diverges from the norms and conventions of standardized English, it is important to consider whether these grammatical "errors" might actually be rooted in students' use of a language pattern characteristic of African American English. If so, it is important to explain *both* linguistic patterns to the student. This entails guiding the student to recognize where and how their usage is influenced by African American English and, while acknowledging and appreciating this language variation, also comparing and contrasting it to standardized English.<sup>29</sup>

Above all, it is critical not to focus on standardized English grammatical usage in students' speech, oral reading, and writing to the point of overlooking the quality of the content, organization, or style of the student's work. Doing so over-penalizes students who use African American English and can lead to the educational frustrations discussed earlier in this article that many students unfortunately experience.<sup>30</sup>

### Impact on Learning Mathematics

Although some may believe that learning mathematics is simply a question of manipulating numbers, in reality, some of the challenges that students encounter are linguistic, such as when they are asked to solve math word problems.<sup>31</sup> Math word problems frequently employ existential constructions such as "There is," "There's," and "There are," as in statements such as "There are six apples in the bag." This may cause difficulty for students who use African American English because existential constructions vary; "It is" and "It's" are commonly used in place of "There is," "There's," and "There are" (e.g., "It's six apples in the bag"). These and other similar variations may affect how students who use African American English read and process word problems.<sup>32</sup>

One study of the relationship between the linguistic complexity of word problems and students' success in carrying out the computations offers further evidence of challenges that may face students who use African American English in math classwork.<sup>33</sup> Working with 75 African American second-graders, the researchers estimated how each student's test performance was affected by two features of African American English: the variability of -s in third person singular verb forms (as in "He talk a lot," compared to "He talks a lot") and in possessive constructions (as in "My mama house is big," compared to "My mama's house is big"). The researchers accounted for each student's overall ability and the difficulty of the math problem. They found that a core group of students—those who were highly affected by linguistic differences—would have

answered 9 percent more questions correctly, on average, if the linguistic feature in question had not been included in the word problem. The researchers explained their results by suggesting that some students who use African American English may face an added cognitive load on their working memory when they read and process math word problems due to language variation. Another study found an even stronger impact, estimating that US students who do not use standardized English may perform 10 to 30 percent worse on math word problems than on comparable problems presented in a numeric format.<sup>34</sup> These results indicate the importance of understanding the significant role that linguistic factors play, in addition to computational skills, in mathematics.

### Intonation and Classroom Meaning

The sounds of English involve intonation, pitch, rhythm, stress, and volume, or what linguists refer to as *prosody*, and they can vary between African American and standardized English. For example, in standardized English, especially as used in the classroom, questions are generally expected to rise in their intonation. In the sentence "Are you going to the store?," the word *store* will usually be said with a rising intonation. In contrast, in African Ameri-



## Students should not be shamed for language variation in their speech, oral reading, or written work.

can English, questions may also be formed with falling or flat intonation. The question "Are you going to the store?" may therefore be said with flat intonation, as in "Are you going to the store."<sup>35</sup>

Why does this matter? Differences in how questions are asked can be critical in how educators and peers perceive students who use African American English. It also might mean that educators who only speak standardized English might not immediately recognize that a Black student is asking them a question. Intonation matters in school and everyday interactions because it is directly tied to comprehension. It is also often implicitly tied to notions of politeness, friendliness, and enthusiasm that are embedded in school culture—and that are closely aligned to the cultural practices of a majority white and female educator population in the United States.

The lack of melodic variation in the voices of Black students, especially male students, is often misinterpreted in a negative light and may be infused with perceptions of emotions that students do not mean to convey. As a result, students who use African American English may be improperly evaluated academically, socially, and emotionally. In standardized English, the absence of a rise at the end of a question can be used to signal disengagement, disinterest, and disrespect. This is not the case in African American English, as speakers of this variety may equally produce questions with rising, flat, or falling intonation patterns. If a Black student says “Why am I taking this test” (with a flat or falling into-

including whether and how students are perceived to sound polite, enthusiastic, and respectful or bored, withdrawn, uncooperative, and angry. Educators should also be aware of intonational differences so that they can teach students about them, helping students better understand each other and build relationships. Intonation also plays an important role in reading comprehension, and sometimes intonation patterns are misinterpreted by students as part of this process. Variation in intonation may lead to students misinterpreting how a character feels or how the author intended the text to be read.

## The classroom must be a safe place to speak up, so that students are willing to have their voices heard.



nation) instead of “Why am I taking this test?” (with a rising intonation), an educator who is not familiar with this variety may interpret it as a signal of aggression, uncooperativeness, noncompliance, withdrawal, or disrespect, even though the student may not have intended to send such a message. Other intonation patterns that seem to signal negative emotions or behaviors, such as indifference or rudeness, interact with frequently misunderstood nonverbal behaviors, such as not making eye contact when listening to a speaker or shrugging one’s shoulders.<sup>36</sup> As a result, misimpressions of certain students may be intensified.

For these reasons, it is essential for educators to have knowledge of and respect for differences in students’ use of intonation. This is particularly critical when interpreting students’ emotional states,

### Conversational Differences

Conversational norms in African American English may also differ from standardized English and other varieties of English in key ways, such as in how individuals greet each other. Whereas white children and adults may often use each other’s first names to show friendship and familiarity, African American children and adults may prefer to use titles to show respect, both in situations in which there is a hierarchical difference between the speakers (e.g., doctor-patient or educator-student) and in situations that are more egalitarian.<sup>37</sup>

Conversational differences between standardized English and African American English may be easily misinterpreted. One important example surrounds styles of turn-taking. When speaking with others, Black students may communicate in interactive and energetic ways, and they may engage in more conversational overlap, such that more than one person is speaking at a time.<sup>38</sup> Overlapping with another speaker is often viewed as normal and comfortable in African American English (and in other varieties, such as Jewish American English<sup>39</sup>). In standardized English, however, overlap may be considered a form of interruption and may be offensive to the speaker. These differences can lead to miscommunication. In one study, when African American students used overlapping turns, educators perceived them to be boisterous, loud, and out of control.<sup>40</sup> It is important to be sensitive to variations in how students converse with each other and with educators. If the conversational norms of standardized English are expected, these conventions may need to be explicitly taught.

Forms of verbal play have also been well documented in research on African American English, including the ways that students who use African American English interact with peers. Verbal play is a vehicle through which the speakers make use of figurative language, draw on cultural and personal knowledge, and learn verbal and creative improvisation skills similar to those that are built when artists learn to “improv” in jazz music or “free-style” in rap and hip-hop music. Instigation, signifying, and other forms of playful teasing may be misinterpreted, however, which may segue into other forms of confrontation. Verbal confrontation at school can lead to conflict, which may cause a student to be reprimanded or punished. Knowledge of the rituals of verbal jousting may be important when assessing whether or not students are engaging in verbal play.

Another important difference surrounds giving commands. Indirect commands are common in standardized English, especially in educational settings. For example, students may be asked to form a line through indirect statements such as “Let’s get lined

up,” “I don’t see anyone standing in line yet,” or “I like the way some of you are standing in line.” In African American English, it is common to use direct commands, such as “I want you to line up now.” Therefore, students who use African American English may interpret indirect commands as preferences or suggestions, rather than commands. Educators may wish to explicitly teach awareness of the differing cultural norms of suggestions and commands. For example, educators may need to explain that “Let’s get lined up” and “I like the way you all are talking quietly” often carry the same meanings as “Line up now” and “Please talk quietly.” By the same token, it is important to be mindful that educators who issue more direct commands to their students, such as “I want you to line up now” or “Stop talking,” are not necessarily being harsh with their students but rather may be operating according to different cultural and linguistic norms.

### Not Too Loud or Too Quiet

Volume is another linguistic characteristic that can have implications for classroom interactions. Many stereotypes perpetuate the idea that African Americans speak more loudly and tend to shout more often than other racial or ethnic groups, and that African American students are more rambunctious than other students. At the same time, the paradoxical stereotype also exists that Black students are silent or withdrawn, which often leads them to be perceived as “having a wall up” or as being standoffish, sullen, and hard to get to know.

Black students who do not talk much at school may also be perceived to have limited language skills. For example, teachers thought a student named Zora had a learning disability because she refused to talk while she was at school. As a result, Zora was asked to repeat first grade. Later, when she was in middle school, Zora explained that she had often felt nervous and out of place in school, and she chose not to speak up in school settings, both as a coping mechanism and to avoid drawing attention to herself. Zora recalled that many teachers “thought I was slow, because I didn’t say nothing when they asked me a question.”<sup>41</sup>

Classroom observations reveal that students who are less secure in adhering to the conventions of standardized English and who feel less safe in academic contexts may retreat into various stages of quiet or what may be perceived as withdrawal. Other students may speak more loudly and behave in ways that are perceived as “acting out.” These students may also use more features of African American English, shifting the style of their speech from the standardized English that is generally expected in the school setting. Peers may even attempt to regulate or ridicule African American students’ loud verbal performances, labeling them as “ghetto.” In such situations, it is important not to assume that variation in students’ communication patterns signals low intelligence, uncooperativeness, or hostility. Students may be using features of African American English to assert their identity.

Students gain confidence and can enjoy academic and social success when they know standardized English and when they and their educators value the language patterns that the students bring with them to school. How educators react to language variation sends an important message to students about safety and acceptance; positive messages of inclusion help students view learning as an accessible and engaging process. Language differences can add to other school stressors; thus, the classroom must be a safe



As a way to actively understand and incorporate language variation in the classroom, we have created the Share My Lesson webinar “The Sound of Inclusion: Using Poetry to Teach Language Variation”: [sharemylesson.com/webinars/inclusion-poetry-language](https://sharemylesson.com/webinars/inclusion-poetry-language). This interactive workshop will bring out the poetry in your students and in you! We will use poetry study to build from the ground up with students and integrate the academic, social, and emotional aspects of learning language. We focus on sharing ideas about the concepts of dialect, language varieties, and translanguaging.

—A. H. C. H., C. M., R. S., and K. B.

place to take risks and speak up, so that students are willing to have their voices be heard.<sup>42</sup>

**W**ith the information presented in this article, educators are equipped to conceptualize and talk about the varied dimensions and shifting intersections of language, culture, race, and identity in all their complexity. Educators who are familiar with African American English as a linguistic system and who take a strengths-based perspective are also able to provide students with opportunities to draw upon the linguistic resources of their homes and communities in their academic work. Research reveals that this inclusive strategy is educationally effective,<sup>43</sup> and it offers the validation that students need to feel that they can show up as their whole selves in classrooms and schools.

Language is not just a theory or an idea; it requires dialogue and action. The actions that you take and the ways that you do language going forward matter—from the daily conversations you hold with students and families to the ways you advocate for linguistic justice in practice and assessment. As author and professor Toni Morrison said in her Nobel lecture after accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”<sup>44</sup> □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/hudley](https://aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/hudley).

# Recruiting the Talent Within

## Philadelphia's Paraprofessional-to-Teacher Pipeline



The long-simmering teacher shortage has become a crisis. Even before the pandemic, austerity budgets had been driving educators—and all school staff—into other careers. Long hours, high stress, lack of respect, and woefully inadequate resources: all of these challenges only grew once COVID-19 hit. Now, teachers are expected to do even more—accelerate learning while helping whole families heal—without the supports they and their students need. These conditions are driving many educators away. But there's one group who knows about all of these challenges and still wants to become teachers: our paraprofessionals. They are already in our classrooms educating and caring for our students.

To make it easier for paraprofessionals in Philadelphia to complete their coursework and student teaching, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) negotiated a new paraprofessional-to-teacher program with multiple pathways so that each paraprofessional would get the right level of support. Here, we learn from two instigators of that program: Gemayel Keyes, an experienced paraprofessional who highlighted the need for such a program and is now in it as a teacher resident, and LeShawna Coleman, a master teacher turned PFT staff representative who has been a key architect of the program.

—EDITORS

**EDITORS:** You are both passionate about ensuring paraprofessionals are valued and have opportunities to advance in their careers. Why is Philadelphia's new para-to-teacher program so important to you?

**LeShawna Coleman:** My mother was a paraprofessional; she just retired in June 2022. She would have loved to become a teacher

**Gemayel Keyes and LeShawna Coleman** outside Gilbert Spruance Elementary School, where Gemayel is now a teacher resident co-teaching special education in grades six through eight.

but could not afford to do so. She became a single parent when my father died—I was six years old and my sister was four. My mother had stayed home before he died, then suddenly she had to make sure she had an income and health insurance to take care of us. She always wanted to become a teacher, but I saw firsthand from her experience how difficult it can be for paraprofessionals to transition to teaching. And I also saw that many of our paraprofessionals have so much potential to do just that.

**Gemayel Keyes:** I started my career with the school district as a bus attendant and one-to-one classroom assistant. I was 22 and when I applied, it was just a job to me—a job with benefits. But I found my calling once I got here. I worked with a bunch of veteran teachers who saw something in me; the more they pointed it out, the more I saw it within myself. It's mainly the way I connected with the students, but also how I picked up on the veteran teachers' methods and made them my own.

I make it my duty to build some type of rapport with every kid who comes through the door in our special education department. Often, these are the children who don't necessarily get the attention that they need to thrive. I realized that I have a knack for breaking through to some of these kids and pushing them



to do more—sometimes even more than their doctors thought they were capable of doing.

Now it's time to make a move; I don't want to be a paraprofessional forever. The best use of my talents—building those bonds, pushing students to excel, and teaching them that their disability can be an ability—is as a teacher.

**EDITORS:** Gemayel, your advocacy was crucial for creating this program. Take us back several years and explain how it came about.

**Gemayel:** I went to college through a program the school district offered to parents; the district opened it to paraprofessionals for a very limited window. I was pushed into it by my special education liaison; she kept nudging me, showing up at my desk, and putting information in my mailbox. I got my associate degree at Harcum College and then my bachelor's in early childhood education at Eastern University.

But my dilemma was that to become a teacher, I had to student teach. As a paraprofessional, I was among the lowest paid union members, and when you student teach, you can't work—or more accurately,

you work for free, which I could not afford. I explained this roadblock to Jerry Jordan, the president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, at a union meeting to discuss proposals for our then-upcoming contract negotiations. Jerry asked LeShawna to take my information. And later that evening, I got a big surprise: Jerry called me. He wanted to make sure paraprofessionals like me could become teachers.

That conversation was about three and a half years ago. Jerry wanted to move quickly, but the pandemic started and the union extended the existing contract. Every PFT meeting I attended and every time I saw Jerry, I brought up the dilemma facing paraprofessionals. Jerry always assured me that he had something up his sleeve, and he stuck to his word the whole way. That's how we got to this program. To me, it's a step in the right direction for the school district of Philadelphia—we have so much expertise among our paraprofessionals, and we should be promoting from within. I thank the PFT for making sure that that happened.

**LeShawna:** I remember that meeting well. Gemayel expressed his desire as a Black male to be an elementary teacher and his frustration about not being able to student teach—and Jerry, who is also a Black male, was very concerned. We desperately need qualified teachers, especially Black men. The teaching population does not reflect the student population in Philadelphia or in most large urban school districts.

**Gemayel:** Unfortunately, we have very few Black male teachers, especially in the elementary grades, so I know I am needed.

**LeShawna:** Absolutely. So Gemayel was surprised when Jerry called, but I wasn't. Jerry is very good about following up on our members' concerns. After speaking with Gemayel, Jerry sent me a message that night saying we had to find a way to help.

As we got closer to our contract negotiations, which were delayed because of COVID-19, we were clear that creating a para-to-teacher pathway was a huge priority for us. Fortunately, the district agreed, so we moved quickly into how to make it work. We committed to making it successful so there would be a long-term impact on our members and our students.

With the entire country struggling with teacher recruitment, what better place to look than within? Who would make the best new teachers for our students? Our paraprofessionals. They're experienced, and they know and love our students. Most students see the paraprofessionals as teachers already; they don't differentiate between the assistant and the teacher. With this program, we'll increase the number of teachers of color, and we know that these are people who truly want to be in the classroom long term.

**Gemayel:** These kids need to see people who look like them, and they need to see that we care. They also need to see by our example what's possible for them—someone who shows them, "I came from where you came from and look at where I am now. I'm here for you." The same way that the PFT is helping us to rise through the ranks, I want to be the person who helps that kid who may be having a difficult time pull through. It means a lot to me because I've been that kid. I wasn't always the best student that I could be. Now I want to help my students avoid some of the mistakes I made.

Being able to connect with children on different levels is critical. I befriend my students, but I am still an authority figure to them. Fundamentally, I treat my students how I want to be treated. I give them the same respect that I want for myself. I give them grace, I let them be wrong, and I give them opportunities to apologize because I also make mistakes and need to apologize. I want them to feel like they matter and that they're important to me. That goes a long way, especially with the most challenging kids. When they see that you're humble enough to give them grace and respect, you get grace and respect back.

**EDITORS:** It's clear that helping paraprofessionals like Gemayel become teachers is a wise investment. LeShawna, please share more details about this new pipeline you've helped create.

**LeShawna:** Urban schools have long struggled with recruiting teachers, largely because of tough working conditions like run-down facilities and overcrowded classrooms, and recruiting has gotten much harder with the pandemic. Unlike new teachers, our paraprofessionals know about the working conditions and still want to be here, which is crucial to retention. As the union, we decided that we needed to pursue para-to-teacher pathways.

We started with a survey to ask our paraprofessionals about the roadblocks to becoming teachers. Financial barriers predominated. Like Gemayel, many were not able to afford a whole semester off to student teach. Others couldn't afford tuition, sometimes because they had gone to college previously and had student debt—and they didn't make enough as paraprofessionals to pay the loans.



**Who would make the best new teachers for our students?  
Our paraprofessionals.**

**—LeShawna Coleman**

The union decided that both raising paraprofessionals' salaries and starting this para-to-teacher program would be priorities. We understood that with the current state of education budgets, we would not be able to get them the amount of money they deserve, but we could make improvements and find a path forward for their careers.

During our most recent negotiations, the district knew our priorities. Negotiations can sometimes be adversarial, but in this case, the district understood the value of retaining our paraprofessionals and of helping them become teachers. We agreed early on that we wanted to include as many paraprofessionals as possible.

Together, the union and district sent the paraprofessionals another survey to learn how to make this para-to-teacher program work for them. It was clear that we had to cover all tuition and provide guidance on transitioning back to school (which was especially critical for our experienced paraprofessionals who had been out of school for many years). We also negotiated to establish a committee (which I am on) with eight members—four from the district and four from the union—that meets twice a month to ensure this program works well. We started meeting in late fall of 2021 and set a March 2022 deadline for beginning enrollment. It was hard, but I had promised Gemayel we would make that deadline, and we did it.

From our joint union-district survey, we learned that our paraprofessionals are at different points in their educational

careers. Some, like Gemayel, already had bachelor's degrees with the minimum 3.0 GPA that the state requires to enter a teacher certification graduate program. Creating a pathway for these paraprofessionals would be relatively easy. But others graduated with a GPA below 3.0, took some college courses without completing a degree, or had not started college. We didn't want to leave anyone behind, so we formed several different ways to enter our para-to-teacher pipeline.

Paraprofessionals with a bachelor's degree and a 3.0 GPA can attend one of our partner universities to complete a certification program—and possibly a master's degree—while doing a paid, yearlong teacher residency under the guidance of a mentor teacher. Those with a bachelor's but a GPA below 3.0 can apply to La Salle University to complete courses needed to raise their GPAs and then earn their certification.

For paraprofessionals who have not started college or have fewer than 45 credits, we have an extremely supportive option. College Unbound is offering experience credit and allowing paraprofessionals who are parents to bring their children to class when they need to. While this pathway is less structured, it is also far more nurturing and individualized. Paraprofessionals can earn a bachelor's through College Unbound and start teaching with emergency credentials, but then they will have to do another program for full certification. We wanted to give this option because College Unbound wraps their arms around their students, and that's what some of our paraprofessionals need. For those with at least 45 college credits, Cheyney University also offers a highly supportive program—and as a historically Black college, Cheyney is a wonderful partner because many of our paraprofessionals are Black women.

This year, Gemayel is a teacher resident; he's working under a master teacher and completing his master's degree at Temple University. His salary and tuition are covered by the district, and he is receiving support for books and other related costs. And he's thriving.

**Gemayel:** I tell as many of my colleagues as I can about the program because I believe they'll thrive as well. I feel like most educators should be paraprofessionals before they become teachers. I've been working in the school district of Philadelphia in the special education department for 16 years. I've worked with at least 12 special education teachers over the course of my career. At this point, I'm the most experienced person in the special education department among the classroom assistants and teachers. I'm the go-to person for pretty much the whole department, even for my administrator.

You learn a lot in teacher preparation, but experience has been the best teacher for me. Because of my experience, I know how to put what I learned in the books into practice—and I know when to differ from what I learned in my courses. Working in an urban public school is challenging; it isn't for everyone. Some teachers only last a week, and others last 40 years and don't want to retire. A lot of the teachers I worked with earlier in my career stuck it out for decades, and I thank them because I learned from them. Now I'm passing their teachings on, even as I continue to learn.

Going through this residency program gives me a chance to be the teacher while being guided by a mentor, and it's more in-depth than typical student teaching. It gives me the opportunity to tinker with things, see what works, and make it my own.

**EDITORS: All of this sounds great, but how will you know if this program is successful?**

**LeShawna:** Success will be at least 90 percent of our paraprofessionals completing the program and being prepared to teach. They must commit to teach in Philadelphia for two years after completing the program, so we know that they'll be here with us for a bit. But we are fully confident that many will stay long term because we have a lot of candidates like Gemayel who have already been here for many years. He and his peers will have a lasting impact on our students and our community.

Right now, we're putting a lot of emergency certified people into classrooms who don't understand what teaching is. They don't understand children or the dynamics of a school. About 45 percent of new teachers resign within their first five years in Philadelphia. We're looking to reduce that tremendously.

**Gemayel:** I feel that the PFT actually getting this done is itself a success. Jerry stuck to his word. That just goes to show the makeup of our union and how dedicated they are to the membership. As adults, going back to school can be a challenge. Having the support of your union and your employer—knowing they have faith in you—goes a long way.

**LeShawna:** I appreciate you saying that. Our members entrust us to create better lives for them because that's what unions do. We negotiate wages and benefits, obviously, but we also want to negotiate programs that allow them to excel and move forward in their careers, especially when those programs ensure our students benefit from well-prepared, diverse staff.

Because we—the union and the district—wanted to open this program to as many of our 2,500 paraprofessionals as possible, we set basic criteria: no disciplinary record in the past 18 months and no more than 18 occurrences of absences in the past three years. There were a few people with extenuating circumstances who didn't meet these criteria; the union pressured the district to take a second look at them, and ultimately they were approved.

Then, we steered eligible paraprofessionals toward the path that suited their educational preparation, and they applied to one of our partner universities. Each university has its own selection criteria, but our university partners understand that most of our paraprofessionals are mid-career. They don't have to take the SAT, and we removed the application fees. But they do have to demonstrate their commitment through things like writing a short essay about why they want to become teachers. I'm thrilled that we now have 150 paraprofessionals in our first cohort.

**EDITORS: Do you have a plan for recruiting paraprofessionals since so many are now becoming teachers?**

**LeShawna:** In our most recent contract, we increased paraprofessionals' salaries, so we're hoping that will help with recruiting. The district is also working with our high schools to recruit students who don't intend to go to college right away. Like Gemayel mentioned, he didn't think when he started that he would be doing this 16 years later, but here he is. And he truly is one of our best and brightest. If we can do the same thing for our graduating high school seniors, that will have a huge impact on our district. These

are our students, so they reflect the diversity of our student population—and they are likely to stay in education in Philadelphia.

Offering all of these pathways will certainly mean that we have to replace paraprofessionals who transition, but the goal is to help people not be stagnant in their careers. And this program will make paraprofessional recruiting stronger because they'll know that there's a pathway to becoming a teacher.

We may also be able to draw experienced paraprofessionals from other districts because we pay our paraprofessionals better and offer better benefits than the surrounding districts do. The PFT negotiates benefits for teachers and paraprofessionals together; they have the same exact benefits. This program is one additional thing to propel them to a higher salary and keep them in our district.

We're really excited about this. It's costing over \$4 million, which the district is covering with federal stimulus funds, but if you want to know what someone values, look where they spend their money. We pushed the district to spend its money on getting more teachers of color in classrooms and retaining people who truly want to be in front of our students. And this program is definitely going to do that. □

**You learn a lot in teacher preparation, but experience has been the best teacher for me.**

**—Gemayel Keyes**



# The Teachers Our Students Need

## Cultivating Dedicated Professionals



SOLSTOCK/E+/GETTY IMAGES

Long before the pandemic, teachers were exhausted. Depleted by long hours, minimal resources, and rampant disrespect for their expertise, many teachers were already leaving the profession. Now, the educator shortage is a crisis. To meet that crisis with practical, experience-based, and research-based strategies, the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force worked for months, combining guidance from AFT members and nationally recognized researchers. The result is *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? What America Must Do to Attract and Retain the Educators and School Staff Our Students Need*. This wide-ranging report (which is available at [go.aft.org/lrfa](http://go.aft.org/lrfa)) addresses working and learning conditions as well as compensation and benefits. Here, we share excerpts from the section on revitalizing the educator and school staff pipeline. As you'll see, the paraprofessional-to-teacher pathways negotiated by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers combine many of the effective practices recommended by the task force.

—EDITORS

### BY THE AFT TEACHER AND SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGE TASK FORCE

Every child, regardless of circumstance or background, deserves to have qualified, trained, and knowledgeable people working in their school to support their success. Teachers and educators not only help students learn facts and critical-thinking skills, they also help mold and shape them as human beings; they instill democratic values and promote self-agency and a sense of community as they build the future generation of this country. It is essential for the success of our public school system and our children that we make systemwide changes that will help attract and keep people in these positions.

A majority of states report teacher shortages in math, science, career and technical education, special education, and bilingual education. Yet another area of shortage is in the diversity of educators. The teaching workforce is overwhelmingly white and growing less representative of the students they teach, a majority of whom are now students of color.

A critical step to improving shortages is to address the challenges in the educator and school staff pipeline. In recent years, there have been fewer candidates taking school support jobs and attending teacher preparation programs. Of course, the following suggestions do not stand alone; recruiting teachers and school staff will be easier when other aspects of those professions are improved. (See the full task force report for ways to address long-standing concerns regarding disrespect and deprofessionalization, stress and lack of support, low pay relative to other professions, and daunting workloads.)

Here are some ways that have proven effective in improving recruitment and entry into education professions:

### Early and Ongoing Identification and Recruiting of Educators and Support Staff

Teachers and school staff can be identified or targeted into the profession well before they enter preparation programs. Career and technical education (CTE) programs are one way to create career pathways for students in high school or earlier, but students who are not in dedicated CTE programs should also have opportunities to learn about teaching and school staff positions—for example, through informational sessions, clubs, or other similar school

programs, or from their schools' career services departments.

School systems can also improve teacher and school staff recruitment through grow-your-own (GYO) programs. These are locally based programs that target candidates, often paraprofessionals, and assist them with the funding and mentoring they need to complete the requirements to become teachers. Students benefit from having teachers who already have had experience in their schools, who know the area, and who are committed to a career in education. GYO programs can take many forms, but overall, the goal is to educate, train, and increase pathways into various education professions. GYO programs also recruit teachers to high-need schools, provide strong content and clinical preparation with mentoring, and offer financial incentives to complete the program and become a teacher of record.

Another way stakeholders can recruit more intentionally is through outreach to communities of color. Research indicates that only a third of districts recruit teachers from colleges and organizations that serve primarily students and candidates of color. School districts should adjust their recruitment strategies to have more intentional measures to attract a more diverse teaching population that more closely aligns with the US student population.

### High-Quality Preparation Programs and Residencies

To strengthen the teacher and school staff pipeline, prospective workers need access to high-quality preparation programs. Teacher preparation programs vary in myriad ways, but what should be consistent is providing teacher candidates with a strong foundation in subject-area content along with instruction in relevant, dynamic, and differentiated pedagogical practices. Programs should provide candidates with extensive clinical experiences that offer practice alongside a skilled practitioner over a significant period, ideally an entire school year. Candidates need to experience the rigors of the profession in an authentic classroom environment. They should start with setting up their classroom and meeting students on the first day, and they need to be with those students throughout the different experiences of the whole school year.

Preparation programs require candidates to pay to receive on-the-job training, but one way to provide candidates with thorough, paid classroom experience is through yearlong educator residencies. Teachers who successfully complete well-designed and well-implemented programs

tend to remain in the classroom longer than their peers. Similar to a medical residency, teacher residents get experience alongside an expert veteran teacher while also receiving coursework and a living stipend. After this experience, the candidate commits to teaching in the district for several years, ensuring that experience stays in the local schools.

## Support New Employees Through Induction and Mentoring Programs

High levels of teacher and school staff turnover can result in high costs for schools—both financially and through the loss of experienced staff. Research suggests that support for new teachers through mentoring and induction has a positive impact on teacher retention, teacher instructional practices, and student achievement.

The AFT spoke to many new teachers who said they had experienced weak or ineffective induction and mentoring programs, with a mentor who visited sparingly or who only focused on ensuring the teacher passed the Praxis. Others had mentors in different schools, which meant they did not have regular meetings or access to the person who was supposed to be their support. Teachers and support staff said they needed help with curriculum along with help adjusting to the building, their colleagues, and administrative logistics. They wanted more help with their workload and planning from master teachers and staff.

Induction programs are typically reserved for beginning teachers and can provide support as teachers move from pre-service training into the profession. Because there are no uniform standards for all university preparation programs, and some teachers come from alternative certification programs, induction is extremely important to ensure new teachers have the guidance they need as they enter the workforce.

As much as possible, mentors need to be in the same grade/subject area as their mentees. Further, teachers of color have indicated that having the opportunity to have a mentor who shares their cultural or ethnic background would be helpful for them to learn from the unique experiences they might encounter.

## Ensure Students Are Taught and Supported by a Diverse Workforce

Research indicates that increasing diversity in the educator workforce can positively impact students' academic growth and social-emotional development. Students of color demonstrate greater academic gains and social-emotional development when

their teacher identifies as a person of color and has the same ethno-racial background.

Increasing the diversity of our education workforce is a benefit not only to students but also to the entire profession. Teachers of color can serve as ambassadors of the profession for students in teacher academy programs. This is an opportunity for interested teachers of color to take on leadership roles. It would also serve as a potential retention strategy; many teachers of color cite lack of autonomy and professional growth opportunities as a reason for leaving the classroom. To achieve this end, barriers to licensure, hiring, and retention of teachers of color must be closely examined.

## Implementation Strategies

*The full report includes strategies for the federal government and state governments, which we encourage educators to review to see how to increase their advocacy efforts. —EDITORS*

### School districts should:

- **Partner with higher education institutions**—Seek partnerships with local colleges and universities to implement residency programs. By doing so, districts are investing in their future staff and are likely to mitigate high teacher turnover.
- **Provide support for staff to transition into teaching roles**—Offer time within the workday or paid leave and financial support for education costs to school support staff who want to transition into a teaching role.
- **Increase diversity and equity**—Ensure there are diverse members on hiring committees, as well as teachers of color on leadership teams involved in interviews. A diverse selection committee will not only create a more equitable hiring process but also help candidates to learn about the school culture from different perspectives. Hiring committees should reflect the intended makeup of the school and district workforce.
- **Create structures to help new teachers learn and thrive**—Create schedules that provide new teachers with a lighter class load to allow time to observe and receive support from expert teachers. Also, new teachers should not be placed in the most demanding classrooms and should have a network of colleagues to support them as they develop.
- **Create organizational cultures that help all educators and staff thrive**—District leaders must make sure all schools have strong organizational conditions and strong leadership to ensure that all new educators are placed in schools where they can thrive.

### Unions should:

- **Work collaboratively with all stakeholders**—Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels—and with leaders and members—to advocate for the best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working; stakeholders should use creative ways to address obstacles.
- **Support residency programs**—Work with the university and district to support residency programs with professional development for supporting teachers and candidates.
- **Provide technical assistance**—Partner with stakeholders to provide technical assistance for program development and implementation at all levels, including teacher academies, paraprofessional-to-teacher pathways, or residency programs.



- **Inform and support prospective teachers and support staff**—Attend career or recruitment fairs to be involved in the process, to be visible, and to help provide prospective teachers and support staff with information and resources about the union and about the teaching profession. This is also a great way to get the union and district to work together and create a collaborative relationship that can be useful in other situations.
- **Negotiate career pathways**—Negotiate career pathways with specific financial and other supports for current employees to transition into other roles within the district (e.g., paraprofessional-to-teacher programs).
- **Negotiate mentoring programs**—Negotiate with districts to establish effective mentoring programs. This includes clearly defined peer mentor/coach selection and review processes, training for peer mentors/coaches, timelines and structures for the mentoring process, and oversight of intervention programs. □

# Reclaiming the Promise

## Union Advocacy for Paraprofessional-to-Teacher Pathways



By Nick Juravich

Last February, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the School District of Philadelphia announced a new paraprofessional career development program. With over \$4 million in funding, the program offers several new tuition-free pathways for paraprofessional educators in Philadelphia to become certified classroom teachers. PFT President Jerry Jordan called the program a “historic step towards equity and justice,” noting, “the majority of paraprofessionals in our district are Black and brown women, and it should be lost on no one that they are some of the lowest paid workers in the system.”<sup>1</sup> Jordan added that “teacher diversity is sorely lacking” in the district, as demonstrated by a report that showed Philadelphia currently employs 1,200 fewer Black teachers than it did two decades ago.<sup>2</sup>

Across the country, paraprofessionals in cities are primarily Black and Latina women, and they are far more likely than teachers to live in the district and even the school zone where they work. As for teachers, a 2015 Albert Shanker Institute study showed that the percentages of Black teachers in major city school districts across the nation have declined, sometimes drastically, while the

percentages of census-designated Hispanic teachers have broadly held constant.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, many of these districts have served a majority of Black and Latinx students since the 1960s, when educators, policymakers, and teachers unions first began building and fighting for para-to-teacher pathways.

This is a strategy with a long history and tremendous potential for developing a more diverse teacher corps and connecting teachers and their unions with the communities they serve. Perhaps most importantly, paraprofessionals have long sought opportunities to become teachers. Teaching jobs have offered paths to economic stability to working people for over a century, but beyond the economics, paraprofessionals are *already* educators. They have intimate, firsthand knowledge of what makes a classroom successful and every reason to believe they could succeed as teachers. This is why Philadelphia’s program is one of several that AFT locals have fought for and won in recent years, including new or expanded programs in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh.<sup>4</sup>

I am a historian of paraprofessional jobs and organizing during the formative years of the 1960s and 1970s. In those years, AFT organizers and their allies spoke of a “paraprofessional movement” that would seize upon the massive demand for these workers—half a million paraprofessionals were hired across the United States from 1965 to 1975—to make public education and paths to teaching more open, diverse, and democratic. That paraprofessionals would make excellent teachers was a core belief of the policymakers, civil rights activists, and teacher unionists who organized to create programs of local hiring and advancement.

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Paraprofessionals, who were members of the United Federation of Teachers, taking a high school equivalency exam in Manhattan in 1970.

programs in relation to the needs of all paraprofessionals. Then as now, paraprofessionals regularly fought for living wages and basic equipment at work, and some wondered whether career ladders were the best use of union power and resources.

## Paraprofessionals are *already* educators with intimate, firsthand knowledge of what makes a classroom successful.

Second, paras and researchers questioned how career ladder programs shaped, and were shaped by, the relationship between paraprofessionals and teachers. The rhetoric and organization of early training programs ranged widely. Some programs asserted shared interests and partner status between paraprofessionals and teachers as a precondition for building these pipelines, while others affirmed a professional hierarchy in which paraprofessionals were not yet worthy of the same respect and voice that teachers enjoyed in schools and unions.

As we (re)build para-to-teacher pipelines, this history has much to offer. There is a strong case for their revitalization, one that the AFT and its locals should celebrate. The challenges and critiques of the 1970s are equally essential. They can help us envision paths for advancement that are not steep, narrow, and hierarchical, but wide, welcoming, and empowering.

### The Fight for Advancement

To understand the drive to create para-to-teacher pathways, it helps to start with the origins of paraprofessional jobs amid the post-World War II baby boom. As the US school-going population nearly doubled between 1949 and 1969, demand for educators exploded. Much as in our own time, administrators and politicians scrambled for quick fixes: suspending licensure requirements, running schools on double sessions, and deploying new technologies to reach more students. For their part, teachers and their unions argued that higher wages and better working conditions would best attract more teachers.

One solution advanced by the Ford Foundation caught on because it promised both to staff classrooms quickly and to improve teachers' working conditions: hiring "teacher aides." As imagined by Ford, mothers picked for their "natural" nurturing abilities would be paid a pittance to help manage overcrowded classrooms and do "non-teaching chores," including paperwork and maintenance. Ford ran a pilot program in Bay City, Michigan, from 1952 to 1957 that drew national attention and inspired the hiring of aides around the country.<sup>5</sup> According to a 1955 newspaper article, "more than half the 'aides' want[ed] to become regular teachers."<sup>6</sup> Writing from Bay City in 1956, Lucille Carroll, a past president of the National Education Association (NEA)

The promise of a "career ladder" was why many paraprofessionals—then as now, primarily working-class Black and Latina women—applied for these jobs. When training did not materialize, the struggle for opportunities was a key reason paraprofessionals organized with AFT locals in the late 1960s and the 1970s. By 1975, pipeline programs had been established through AFT advocacy and bargaining in cities across the nation.

So, why don't we have robust para-to-teacher programs throughout the United States today? The quick answer is the crises of the 1970s. Myriad external pressures in the latter half of that decade—municipal fiscal crises that spawned devastating austerity budgets, waning federal support for antipoverty programs, and a conservative turn in US politics—undermined public schools, public sector bargaining, and the public universities that provided teacher training for paraprofessionals. As the first para-to-teacher programs collapsed in the late 1970s, critical assessments of their structures and underlying assumptions emerged. These came both from the paraprofessionals who experienced them and, later, from scholars studying them. Both groups focused on two core issues.

First, even under favorable conditions, only a small percentage of paraprofessionals became classroom teachers. Focusing on this percentage vastly understates the impact of para-to-teacher pipelines. However, it does raise questions for paraprofessionals and their unions about the meaning and impact of pipeline



Teachers and paraprofessionals engaged in small-group instruction at a school in New York City in 1970.

Department of Classroom Teachers, saw their potential, noting that “the teacher aide program could be regarded as a long-range recruitment plan.”<sup>7</sup> It would take 15 years for this idea to become a union-driven reality, but the spark was there from the start.

Skeptical at first, leaders in both the NEA and AFT soon embraced aide hiring, provided that school districts included clear language to keep aides from replacing teachers. The New York City Teachers Guild, a forerunner of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT, AFT Local 2), petitioned the city to hire teacher aides in 1955, and other locals soon followed. Provisions to provide aides to classroom teachers appeared in both the UFT’s and the Chicago Teachers Union’s (CTU, AFT Local 1) first contracts in 1962 and 1967, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

Ford made no plan to advance teacher aides, and neither did administrators who hired them. However, in the early 1960s, civil rights activists, policy scholars, and teacher unionists in New York City began to articulate an expanded vision for aide work to meet the needs of children in urban schools.<sup>9</sup> In 1963, Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), an antipoverty organization funded by the Kennedy administration, partnered with Harlem teacher and AFT Vice President Richard Parrish. They launched a program that hired 400 “especially trained” aides to work alongside 200 teachers serving 2,800 students in afterschool programs.<sup>10</sup>

These aides assisted teachers, just as in Bay City, but they also took on new roles. They brought local knowledge—and, in many cases, languages—into their work with students, and they shared key information about school policies with parents. Parrish believed hiring local residents as educators would help students “identify and associate with adequate role models on a more personal level,” and he hoped to develop paths for the aides to become teachers.<sup>11</sup>

The following year, HARYOU published a report that called for “parent aides” with expanded roles—distinct from the aides already at work—to be hired in public schools.<sup>12</sup> “It is HARYOU’s belief,” the report read, “that the use of persons only ‘one step removed’ from the client will improve the giving of service as well as provide useful and meaningful employment for Harlem’s residents.”<sup>13</sup> Their timing was excellent: President Lyndon Johnson had just declared the “War on Poverty” and empowered his administrators to focus on community action. Organizers and scholars—including Frank Riessman, a New York University professor who worked closely with HARYOU—moved quickly to shape the legislation that followed.

In 1965, Riessman published a book with Arthur Pearl of the University of Oregon titled *New Careers for the Poor: The Non-professional in Human Service*.<sup>14</sup> Pearl and Riessman argued that hiring “Indigenous nonprofessionals” (HARYOU’s term, which they cited) in education, healthcare, and social work would have a triple effect: improving service delivery, forging links between institutions and those they served, and creating jobs that would diversify the human service workforce. In addition to this massive program of hiring, Riessman and Pearl argued for the creation of career ladders that would train aides to become fully licensed teachers, nurses, and social workers. The book caught the attention of Congress and the Johnson administration, which wrote provisions for the hiring and training of aides into legislation and program guidelines.<sup>15</sup> In these policy documents, “paraprofessional” began to replace “aide,” suggesting the possibility of future professional status.

At this juncture, AFT leaders moved from bargaining *for* aides to organizing *with* paraprofessionals. In 1964, UFT President Albert Shanker had replied to a letter from school aides seeking to unionize by referring them to District Council 37 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).<sup>16</sup> By 1966, Shanker had joined civil rights activists and policy scholars in pushing the New York City Board of Education to hire paraprofessionals, and he asserted that the UFT would seek to organize these “pedagogical employees.”<sup>17</sup> New York City hired its first paraprofessional educators in 1967, explaining that these new programs would “improve communications with communities, improve instruction in the kindergartens, and *provide opportunities for residents in disadvantaged communities, who possess the ability, to develop into teachers*” [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup> Opportunities for training, however, remained limited until paraprofessionals organized to secure them.

When the UFT launched its campaign to unionize paras in January 1968, organizers quickly learned that many paraprofessionals hoped to become teachers. Reporting on a survey of 230 paraprofessionals and 200 teachers conducted in May 1968, field organizer Gladys Roth made paraprofessionals’ desire for advancement a central theme. She quoted three representative paraprofessionals: one said, “I always wanted to go back to school; now I can”; another felt “income while learning” was “marvelous for low-income families”; and a third called career advancement the “opportunity of a lifetime.”<sup>19</sup> However, the survey indicated that programs of training were difficult to access, and Roth noted that her organizing work regularly included “requests from classroom teachers to provide service for their assistants who were not paid promptly or who were closed out of community college

courses.”<sup>20</sup> The solution was clear: as one para explained, “We need a union to help get better things for us.”<sup>21</sup>

Roth’s report was overshadowed by the escalating conflict between the UFT and the community-controlled school district in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn. While the initial fight was about due process—the district’s governing board had unilaterally dismissed 19 teachers (forcing them to transfer to different schools), in violation of the UFT’s contract—the substantive issue behind these transfers was the question of what made a successful teacher. The UFT argued that the transferred educators had certifications, experience, and tenure that demonstrated their competence, while the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board argued that the teachers’ insufficient investment in the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican community, and its experiment in school governance, rendered them unfit to teach. Unable to resolve the conflict—and with the city’s political leaders abdicating responsibility for adjudicating the issue—the UFT called three successive strikes in the fall of 1968.<sup>22</sup>

There is far more to say about paraprofessional educators’ experience of this citywide conflict, but suffice to say that they found themselves in the middle of the maelstrom. Some crossed picket lines at the request of community organizations, while others stayed out in solidarity with teachers. Paraprofessionals had been hired from surrounding neighborhoods to better connect schools with communities, which some believed validated the governing board’s position. However, many also hoped to become certified teachers and stood with the union.

As for teachers, while Roth’s report had shown teacher support for paraprofessionals, letters to the UFT offices, as well as paraprofessionals’ own remembrances, revealed that other teachers feared and opposed the presence of paraprofessionals in their classrooms.<sup>23</sup> Some believed paraprofessionals would act as spies or agitators in schools. The strike—and the willingness of some paraprofessionals to cross picket lines—confirmed their fears.

Other teachers felt the presence of paraprofessionals threatened their own hard-won professionalism. Even before the strike, one Lower East Side teacher wrote to complain both of paraprofessional hiring and of proposed teacher training, claiming that the process subverted “open, competitive examinations.”<sup>24</sup> As the question of teacher competence—what defined it and who got to decide—became a central issue during the 1968 strikes, there was no guarantee that teachers would support an alternative training pathway for community-based paraprofessionals.

After the strikes, Albert Shanker recruited Velma Murphy Hill, an experienced civil rights organizer, to revive the paraprofessional campaign. Hill met with paraprofessionals all over the city who regularly told her of their desire to become teachers. In union materials throughout the campaign, the UFT asserted that the “school union” could guarantee these paths to teaching.<sup>25</sup> When nearly 4,000 New York City paraprofessional educators went to the polls in June 1969, they chose the UFT over AFSCME District Council 37. The UFT then spent a year organizing to bring the city to the bargaining table, with Shanker conducting “one of the most intensive internal education campaigns”<sup>26</sup> in the local’s history to convince teachers to support paraprofessionals; Shanker famously threatened to resign if they did not.<sup>27</sup> Teachers eventually voted to support a paraprofessional strike in June 1970.

While UFT organizers pounded pavement in New York City, AFT President David Selden exchanged letters with Frank Riessman. Their correspondence would help to shape both the UFT and the overall AFT approach to paraprofessional unionism, with career training for paraprofessionals at the center of the process. Selden had written to Riessman in 1968 to say he favored the hiring of paraprofessionals and “the development of career lines which would permit such personnel to advance ... until teacher status has been achieved.”<sup>28</sup> He also shared his concerns that teachers might oppose the use of union resources to develop these career ladders.

In February 1969, Selden thanked Riessman for making “a very cogent point, one which I had not thought of so far as teachers are concerned. Reducing the number of teachers in the educational enterprise would have the effect of reducing career opportunities for aides and assistants. Therefore, teachers should not view such personnel as being in competition with them.”<sup>29</sup> The key idea for Selden was that paraprofessionals could be understood as teachers in training. This framing simultaneously promised advancement to paraprofessionals and assuaged teachers’ anxieties by defining paraprofessionals as apprentices. As Albert Shanker explained to an interviewer in 1985, “The way to think about this [program] is, this is going to be a generation of Black teachers in the future.”<sup>30</sup>

**In the early 1960s, civil rights activists, policy scholars, and teacher unionists in New York City began to articulate an expanded vision for aide work to meet the needs of children.**

Writing to Riessman in December 1969, Selden asserted that “the AFT will be able to do a great deal to help the new paraprofessionals,” but “there will be a certain amount of subversion of your original concept. Most teachers are not interested in revolutionizing the nature of this service [education].”<sup>31</sup> Selden’s vision both opened the door for para-to-teacher pipelines and asserted a hierarchical relationship between teachers and paraprofessionals.

Nonetheless, Selden was clear that AFT locals seeking to unionize paraprofessionals should commit to supporting career ladders. In the summer of 1970, as UFT paraprofessionals bargained their first contract, the AFT’s executive committee resolved that “all locals ask their school boards for paraprofessional programs” built on five principles: no educational restrictions for entry, pay increases based on education and experience, release time to pursue college coursework, college

unit equivalencies for on-the-job training, and encouragement for “persons who are successful in such a program ... to work toward the goal of entering the teaching profession.”<sup>32</sup> In New York City, UFT paraprofessionals put all of this into their landmark first contract.

### Free Training and Stipends for All

Velma Murphy Hill, who chaired the UFT’s paraprofessional bargaining committee, recalled that the New York City Board of Education’s representatives were incredulous of para-to-teacher pathways, telling her, “You know, they don’t want to go to school. These are women with families.”<sup>33</sup> The board also feared the cost of developing a training program at such a scale, which had never been done before. Nonetheless, the UFT insisted, and the final contract promised that the Paraprofessional-Teacher Education Program (PTEP) at the City University of New York (CUNY) would expand dramatically to offer a place to every paraprofessional who sought one in the spring of 1971.<sup>34</sup> Paraprofessionals would receive not only free education at the point of service—CUNY, at this time, was both free and open-admission—but also stipends and time off to support their education.

**Para-to-teacher pipelines were not simply a new form of teacher training and recruitment. They were a program of racial and economic justice.**

Hill still gets overwhelmed when she remembers the way New York City paraprofessionals responded. Early in 1971, thousands of paraprofessionals packed UFT offices in all five boroughs, jammed phone lines, and lined up around the block to sign up on the very first day they could. Hill spent the day driving across New York City to help overworked union staffers with tears in her eyes.<sup>35</sup> “It was so beautiful to see them, you know, registering for school,” she recalled in 2011.<sup>36</sup>

By 1974, over 3,500 paraprofessionals—approximately one-fourth of the paraprofessionals employed in New York City—were taking classes at CUNY.<sup>37</sup> In addition, approximately 400 paraprofessionals were earning high school diplomas each summer, over 3,000 had earned some form of postsecondary degree, and 400 were working as teachers in New York City.<sup>38</sup> By 1978, over 1,500 paraprofessionals had become teachers, and one had become a New York State Assembly member.<sup>39</sup> By 1984, the UFT reported that over 5,000 paraprofessionals had earned their bachelor’s degrees and 2,000 had become certified teachers through PTEP.<sup>40</sup>

Shelvy Young-Abrams, who started as a paraprofessional in 1968 and today is the chair of the UFT Paraprofessional Chapter and an AFT vice president, noted in 2015, “One of the things that struck everybody was the fact that we were given the opportunity to go to school. We were given an opportunity to make our life better.... You’d be surprised how many of us became teachers.”<sup>41</sup> Beyond any single data point, the fact that *all* paraprofessionals had access to PTEP demonstrated that the UFT and city considered paraprofessionals to be capable educators and invested significant funds and energy in the possibility of their advancement.

As Velma Murphy Hill wrote in 1971, more than any other part of the UFT’s contract, PTEP defined paraprofessional work as “a profession with promise.” The contract was “more than a story of growth or of some improvement in New York City’s public schools. It’s also a story of economic justice.”<sup>42</sup> Joseph Monserrat, a longtime Puerto Rican community organizer who chaired the New York City Board of Education in these years, agreed. At the creation of PTEP in 1971, Monserrat told his fellow board members, “Never has this need [to promote teachers from Black and Hispanic communities] been greater than it is now. Never have the stakes been as high: the continued existence of public education.”<sup>43</sup> Monserrat’s urgent statement echoed Hill’s assertion in the same year: para-to-teacher pipelines were not simply a new form of teacher training and recruitment. They were a program of racial and economic justice to sustain public education in cities facing grave challenges in these years.

### Para-to-Teacher Pathways Nationwide

New York City’s training program benefited from both the size of the UFT and the existence of CUNY, a massive free and open system of urban higher education. However, as paraprofessional educators joined AFT locals across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the union wrote career ladders for paraprofessionals into contracts nationwide. The AFT also partnered with Frank Riessman and his team of “New Careerists,” who had become influential in the US Office of Education and particularly in its new Bureau of Education Professions Development (BEPD). Legislation drafted by one of Riessman’s collaborators, Alan Gartner, had established this bureau in 1968, and in 1970 the BEPD launched the Career Opportunities Program, or COP, to fund programs of paraprofessional hiring and para-to-teacher pathways.<sup>44</sup>

The COP directly funded the employment of nearly 15,000 paraprofessional educators in its seven years, serving hundreds of thousands of students in 132 districts across the nation.<sup>45</sup> COP officials explained that the program’s goal was to generate a “precedent-setting arrangement” that would “spillover” into everyday operations at schools and universities.<sup>46</sup> AFT locals proved instrumental in effecting this spillover, as they bargained the continuation of pilot pipeline programs. Hill became the chair of the AFT’s National Paraprofessional Steering Committee, traveling the country to support this work.

Implementing new training programs required site-by-site coordination and planning, and each city was different. In the most successful sites, such as Minneapolis, the COP worked with city, university, and union leaders and activists to build networks of opportunity. Minneapolis paraprofessionals took classes at several local community and technical colleges and

could ultimately matriculate to the flagship campus of the University of Minnesota.<sup>47</sup> The COP's national publications regularly celebrated success in Minneapolis. Not only did many paraprofessionals become teachers, but by the late 1970s, unionized paraprofessionals earned the inflation-adjusted wage of about \$35,000, the equivalent of what the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and Educational Support Professionals struck for, and won, in March 2022.<sup>48</sup>

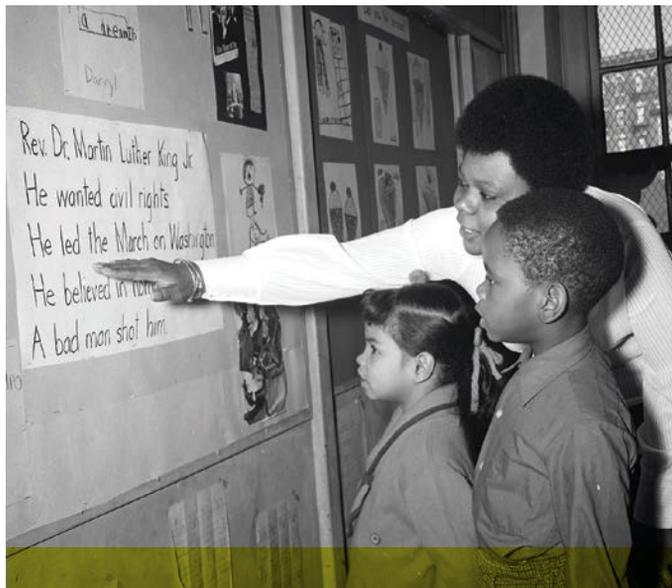
Not all cities had a flagship state university willing to host para-to-teacher training programs, but COP funds could still transform institutions of higher education, making them more welcoming to new kinds of students and programs. COP researchers reported that Shepherd College, a public institution in Shepherdstown, WV, moved from initial skepticism of the COP's model to incorporating aide-type work into much of its elementary teacher training.<sup>49</sup> In Pikeville, KY, Pikeville College—a “quiet, 71-year-old, church-affiliated college”—likewise developed a “heavy commitment to new clients, new forms, and, without compromising its academic reputation, new educational values.”<sup>50</sup> This was the transformation advocates of career ladders hoped to effect: new models for teacher training, beyond any one program.

Across the country, AFT locals and the COP worked effectively together. The Baltimore Teachers Union negotiated career training for paraprofessionals in their first contract in 1970, much of which took place through the COP's Baltimore program, COPE (Career Opportunities Program in Education).<sup>51</sup> By September 1975, 93 percent of COPE graduates held teaching positions in the Baltimore City Public Schools.<sup>52</sup> Kansas City Federation of Teachers & School-Related Personnel (KCFT) President Truman Holman partnered with the COP after paraprofessionals joined the KCFT in 1971. Detailing the union's rationale for “a program of teacher development that elevates paraprofessionals,” Holman wrote in 1973, “these newly certified teachers are well trained, already possess several years of classroom and teaching-related work experience and are knowledgeable of [school district] procedures.”<sup>53</sup> Every member of the first COP graduating class in Kansas City was hired by the school system.<sup>54</sup> In Chicago, 118 of 142 degree-earning paraprofessionals became Chicago Public Schools teachers and CTU members, all placed in district-designated “target area” schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students. Finally, in 1975, the Oakland Federation of Teachers joined the COP in pushing for the expansion of the COP's existing career ladder program. The union's intervention won training opportunities for all of Oakland's paraprofessionals.<sup>55</sup>

In firsthand accounts and formal studies, paraprofessional educators who became teachers earned high marks. “There is wide acclaim for the teaching ability of Follow Through paraprofessionals who have graduated and become certified,” declared the Bank Street College of Education's Garda Bowman in 1977.<sup>56</sup> In July 1974, the New Careers Training Laboratory at Queens College, CUNY (run by Frank Riessman, who had moved to CUNY in 1971), launched an evaluation of new COP graduates teaching within their local school districts. Its findings, reported in 1976, revealed “whatever the method of assessment ... or the location of the survey, the outcome has been consistent: the COP-trained teacher is performing at least as well as [or] ... better than her (or his) non-COP peers.”<sup>57</sup>

## Reclaiming a Lost Legacy

Despite their success, both the Paraprofessional-Teacher Education Program at CUNY and the Career Opportunities Program fell victim to budget cuts and shifting political winds. After New York City's brush with bankruptcy in 1975, CUNY began charging tuition and the Board of Education stopped paying for PTEP's stipends for paraprofessionals. The UFT sued, but to no avail. UFT paraprofessionals continued to enjoy contractual access to career advancement—and do so to this day—but the walls around public higher education have risen precipitously. To exercise these contract rights, paraprofessionals must now navigate the labyrinth of application and university fees, financial aid, and regulations governing both the number of courses taken and course completion to guarantee reimbursement. These challenges are neither specific to the UFT contract nor the union's fault; rather, they result from the transformation of public higher education over the last four decades from a system that was inexpensive and easily accessible to one that requires much more intensive individual commitment. Paraprofessionals in PTEP were part of the opening of the public university in the early 1970s; today, they contend with its limits in the age of austerity.<sup>58</sup>



Doris Hunter, a paraprofessional, teaching a lesson about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at PS 25 in Brooklyn in 1970.

The Career Opportunities Program, for all its success, was barely known in Washington, DC.<sup>59</sup> As an increasingly conservative Congress rolled back antipoverty commitments, the COP was shuttered by the federal government in 1977. The final report of the program explained that “Teacher unions were involved in urban COP matters, to the considerable satisfaction of the participants, who felt themselves protected in the bureaucratic jungle and found union backing of career lattice arrangements to be a powerful weapon in their arsenal.”<sup>60</sup> Para-to-teacher provisions persisted in the contracts of many AFT locals around the country, but without federal funding, programs proved harder to maintain.



The AFT's National Paraprofessional Committee convening in 1979. Pictured from the left are Velma Murphy Hill (New York City), Lorretta Johnson (Baltimore), Dorothea Bell (Philadelphia), Ernestine Brown (Chicago), Linda Cook (San Francisco), and Nina Marchand (New Orleans).

The twilight of these early programs in the waning years of the 1970s highlighted the internal contradictions and challenges they faced. Even in New York, climbing the career ladder took a long time; the path for those who started without high school diplomas took six or more years, which led one paraprofessional to worry aloud that she didn't "want to go to my teaching assignment in a wheelchair."<sup>61</sup> A study of PTEP published in 1977 noted, "Considering the obstacles, the motivation of most paraprofessionals must be great and be based on more than tangible monetary rewards.... Seven to ten years is a long time to hold three jobs (home, school, and college), jobs that do not end on the hour."<sup>62</sup>

New York City's numbers present something of a paradox: the 1,500 paraprofessionals placed in teaching positions in less than a decade represented the largest single influx of Black and Latinx teachers to New York City public schools up to that point in history. Civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, Velma Murphy Hill, and the AFT rightly lauded PTEP as a program of what Hill called "affirmative action without quotas."<sup>63</sup> At the same time, these numbers represented less than 3 percent of the teaching corps of 50,000 (in 1978) and only 10 percent of New York City's paraprofessional educators. Most paraprofessionals did not succeed in becoming teachers—or they chose not to do so. The long-running teacher shortages precipitated by the baby boom faded in the 1970s, which, combined with budget cuts, further limited the possibility of paraprofessionals finding teaching jobs.<sup>64</sup>

Some scholars have argued that these low numbers contradicted the union's assertion that para-to-teacher pathways would benefit most paraprofessionals or desegregate the teaching corps, which is 75,000 strong in New York City today.<sup>65</sup> However, focusing only on paraprofessionals who became teachers understates the impact of pipeline programs. Thousands of paraprofessionals earned degrees in the 1970s, which not only meant better wages

in their jobs as paraprofessionals but also gave them valuable credentials to carry into many types of future employment.<sup>66</sup> And in a 1985 survey, just over half of UFT paraprofessionals reported that they wanted to become teachers (the same proportion as teacher aides reported in 1955), which suggests that para-to-teacher pipelines still mattered deeply to UFT paraprofessionals, even though far fewer than half would become teachers.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, this steep climb, and the limited numbers of those who made it, proved problematic when training programs came to stand in for real contract gains for paraprofessionals in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Clarence Taylor, today a renowned historian of education, started his career as a special education paraprofessional in 1975 in New York City, the same year PTEP stopped being free and easy to access. In his recollection, "many of the paraprofessionals, in reality, didn't take those classes," and while the program was valuable, it also contributed to a larger "system of exploitation."<sup>68</sup> Pressed to improve working conditions for paraprofessionals, he recalls union leaders telling him that the best way to secure better wages was to become a teacher—a response that both ignored the real challenges of that process and devalued paraprofessionals' existing educational labor. Herein lay the problem lurking in the vision David Selden articulated years earlier: considering paraprofessionals as apprentices in a hierarchical system, rather than partners in a robust vision for public education, meant holding up exceptional individuals as examples rather than supporting the entire workforce.

For decades after this first generation of para-to-teacher programs faded away, national policy discussions focused on the need to recruit ever-more-elite individuals to the teaching profession. From *A Nation at Risk* to *Teach for America*, arguments abounded that what the profession needed was more graduates of highly selective colleges. Unsurprisingly, paraprofessionals were absent from these discussions despite continuing to provide essential educational services in US schools.

Today, however, unionized educators are reasserting bold visions for the future of public education that are grounded in organizing with the diverse communities they serve. Pathways for paraprofessional educators to become teachers can and should be part of these efforts. However, programs for advancement should not be dangled as distant carrots in front of today's hardworking paraprofessionals. Rather, as COP staff argued, they should serve as opportunities to empower paraprofessionals in schools and unions by highlighting all the essential ways that paraprofessionals contribute to public schooling right now in their current roles. As AFT Secretary-Treasurer Emerita and longtime paraprofessional Lorretta Johnson wrote in *American Educator* in 2016, "not all paraprofessionals want to become teachers, and that's OK."<sup>69</sup>

Paraprofessionals are not apprentices. They are educators of one kind, who, if they so choose, will excel in other educational roles. Para-to-teacher pipelines are not just about individual advancement. They are programs of racial and economic justice that can transform relationships between schools, communities, universities, and our unions as we bargain for the common good to reinvigorate public education. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/juravich](https://aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/juravich).

# Does Developing a Growth Mindset Help Students Learn?



How does the mind work—and especially, how does it learn? Teachers’ instructional decisions are based on a mix of theories learned in teacher education, trial and error, craft knowledge, and gut instinct. Such knowledge often serves us well, but is there anything sturdier to rely on?

Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary field of researchers from psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and anthropology who seek to understand the mind. In this regular *American Educator* column, we consider findings from this field that are strong and clear enough to merit classroom application.

By Daniel T. Willingham

**QUESTION:** Growth mindset has become a wildly popular theory in the last 15 years, due not only to a book that has sold more than 2 million copies<sup>1</sup> and a TED Talk that’s been viewed more than 14 million times<sup>2</sup> but also to countless professional development sessions, Pinterest boards, and blog posts. It’s no wonder that in

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a 2016 survey of American teachers, just 4 percent said they were “completely unfamiliar” with mindset theory.<sup>3</sup>

Is there any substance behind the hype?

**ANSWER:** In this article, I’ll review research suggesting that there’s good evidence for the psychological validity of the theory and that the theory can be used to help students. But the theory is highly focused, and its target is broad. While mindset theory addresses one aspect of student motivation (which is affected by many other things), student success is determined not just by motivation, but by other factors as well. Hence, even if we develop an intervention that increases growth mindset, we should expect that these other factors—the school or classroom context, for example—will influence both the size of that increase and the impact it has on students’ learning. In short, increasing children’s growth mindsets may be beneficial, but it’s not a silver bullet solution to motivation, and the challenge of changing mindsets should not be underestimated.

From the 1910s until about 1960, American psychologists did not include mental life in their theories; they focused on behavior that could be observed because that was deemed to guarantee objectivity and rigor.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that researchers considered motivation, they thought of it as a response to rewards and punishments in

the classroom, or as an internal “drive” that a student either had or didn’t have. But theoretical developments and data gathered in the 1950s made it increasingly obvious that some aspects of people’s behavior were difficult to explain without including their thoughts.<sup>5</sup>

Mindset theory grew out of this perspective. In the early 1970s, psychology professor Carol Dweck suggested that your persistence on a task is not determined solely by your success or failure, but by how you interpret setbacks,<sup>6</sup> which in turn is shaped by your beliefs about intelligence.<sup>7</sup> If you believe intelligence is fixed—you’re born with an amount of smarts that can’t really be changed—then how well you do on intellectual tasks shows how much you have of that fixed quality. But that’s not true if you believe intelligence can be developed. If you can get smarter by working harder or using new strategies, poor performance on a task doesn’t mean you’re less intelligent; it just means you haven’t learned that particular content or skill yet.

The theory suggests that your belief about intelligence predicts not only how you interpret setbacks, but also the types of tasks you’re likely to select. If you think intelligence is fixed and task performance reveals your intelligence, then you’re motivated to select easy tasks so that you’ll look smart. But if you think intelligence can be developed and task performance reveals your level of mastery, then you’re more likely to select challenging tasks that allow you to learn something new. Thus, we might expect people with a growth mindset to show greater academic achievement than those with a fixed mindset because they more often take on challenging tasks, and because they are more likely to persist in those tasks when they fail.

### Early Research

In the 1980s and 1990s, Dweck and her collaborators conducted research to test these predictions, and the results were encouraging. In one study, researchers told children that it was important to succeed in a task.<sup>8</sup> Some children were led to believe that they were not very good at the task, and they essentially stopped trying. They thought that their mistakes meant they couldn’t succeed. Other children were told that they were doing the task well; the researcher told these children that they must have had a lot of ability for the task. These children worked hard—they wanted to maintain their success—but they also passed up the opportunity to learn more. Given a choice between easy or more challenging

versions of the task, they picked the easy version to be sure that they continued to succeed.

A third group of children was told that the main purpose of the task was to learn rather than to perform well. For them, it didn’t matter whether they thought their current level of skill was high or low. They persisted, and given a choice, they opted for more challenging versions of the task; they wanted to learn from their mistakes.

Other work from Dweck’s team explored why children might pick a goal—to learn or to perform well—when the experimenter

hadn’t explicitly guided them toward one.<sup>9</sup> In one experiment, fifth-graders worked a set of 10 problems and all were told they had done well. In addition, some were praised for their intelligence (“You must be smart at these problems”), whereas others were praised for their effort (“You must have tried hard on these problems”). Yet others were given no further feedback. The children were then given the chance to select problems that were described as easy (and which they’d probably get right), or problems they’d learn a lot from (even if they would not “look so smart”).

The results were striking: children praised for their intelligence chose easy problems—they wanted to succeed and worried about looking unintelligent. Children praised for their effort chose difficult tasks because they wanted to learn. And when given a choice between discovering how other children performed on the problems or learning new strategies for solving the problems, the children praised for their intelligence wanted to know how others performed. Children praised for effort, in contrast, wanted to learn new strategies.

What’s behind this effect? Dweck and her research team thought that different types of praise can carry different messages

to children about intelligence. Being “smart at these problems” implies that “smart” is an intrinsic characteristic of the child—thus, working hard has little effect. Also implied is that because smart people just do well at things, the way to show that you’re smart is through success. “You must have worked hard at these problems,” in contrast, implies that success is due to what the child *does*, not what the child *is*—thus, children get smarter by working hard.

In other experiments, Dweck and her colleagues showed that the different types of praise did indeed change children’s view of intelligence, which was measured by their agreement with



A growth mindset prompts you to select challenging work, learn from mistakes, and persist in the face of difficulty.

statements like, “You have a certain amount of intelligence and really can’t do much to change it.”

It seems obvious that if a growth mindset prompts you to select challenging work, to learn from your mistakes, and to persist in the face of difficulty, you’ll do better in school with a growth mindset than with a fixed mindset. That prediction was examined in a group of 373 New York City middle schoolers and was supported.<sup>10</sup> The math grades of those with a growth mindset improved during seventh and eighth grades, whereas the grades of those with a fixed mindset stayed flat.

But that’s a correlation, of course, and we know that correlation is not causation; we need to *change* students from a fixed to a growth mindset to properly test the theory. This last piece of the puzzle seemed to fall into place neatly. In one experiment, college students participated in a pen pal program for struggling middle school students.<sup>11</sup> Some were told to write to students about “what research is revealing about human intelligence.” In fact, this was the intervention aimed to prompt a growth mindset in the college students. And indeed, end-of-year grades were higher for students in whom a growth mindset had been prompted than in students who were not exposed to the intervention.

While growth mindset may impact academic achievement, many other factors also influence student outcomes.

## Conflicting Data

You probably know what happened next: in the late aughts, growth mindset exploded in popularity among educators. Today, searching “growth mindset” on Amazon yields over 2,000 hits, with products like workbooks for children, bulletin board displays, growth mindset journals, DVD training courses, motivational wall art, children’s books, and more. That popularity seems to have been matched in schools, as more than 90 percent of American teachers know about the theory.

But while the growth mindset juggernaut gathered momentum, researchers continued to test the predictions, and the data concerned them. Some researchers who sought to develop growth mindsets in students did observe the predicted outcomes,<sup>12</sup> but others did not. One team of researchers sought to replicate the Dweck study described above, in which fifth-graders chose between performing well and learning more; although they used a large sample and tried to match the original method, they obtained mixed results.<sup>13</sup> Other researchers did too.<sup>14</sup> Large-scale growth mindset interventions in England<sup>15</sup> and Argentina<sup>16</sup> reported no effects, but an intervention in Peru<sup>17</sup> did seem effective.

One might suggest that the theory is right, but some of the interventions were just not carried out properly. For example, in the Argentinian study, the researchers adapted a multisession intervention designed for American seventh-graders and administered it to Argentinian 12th-graders in a single session. There’s little information about the changes made, but the researchers

reported that student attitudes were unaffected, so it’s no surprise that outcomes such as grades were also unaffected.

Still, you don’t need to induce a growth mindset to test whether people who already have a growth mindset (for whatever reason) have higher academic achievement, and that’s usually observed. True, one study showed no association between growth mindset and performance on a Czech college entrance exam in 5,653 students.<sup>18</sup> But another study<sup>19</sup> reported a positive relationship between a growth mindset and academic achievement in a nationally representative sample of US ninth-graders, as did a study that examined Chilean 10th-graders’ scores on national standardized assessments in language and math.<sup>20</sup> And in another study of 221,840 fourth- through seventh-grade students in California, growth mindset predicted achievement gains after controlling for student background, previous achievement, and other social-emotional skills.<sup>21</sup>

Why does a growth mindset only appear beneficial in some studies? A possibility suggested by some researchers is that the theory is just wrong, and the studies that seem to support it are flukes<sup>22</sup>—but the expected correlational finding (increased achievement) has usually been observed, which indicates this is not the case.

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A second possibility is that the theory is right, but *changing* growth mindset isn’t easy. Many researchers have not been careful to follow successful methods used by others and have instead created their own interventions based on their reading of the theory. Here’s an incomplete list of the methods researchers have used:

- Sending an informational pamphlet home with students<sup>23</sup>
- Sending a letter to parents<sup>24</sup>
- Developing an online intervention for students<sup>25</sup>
- Asking students to read about growth mindset and write a letter to someone else about it<sup>26</sup>
- Having students read articles about “brain science”<sup>27</sup>
- Having students read about Einstein (because of his reputation as a genius) or Edison (because of his reputation as a hard worker)<sup>28</sup>

Like these researchers, some teachers seem to not realize how much effort creating a growth mindset requires. Dweck, in a 2015 op-ed, expressed concern that attempts to bring a growth mindset to classrooms emphasized effort but excluded the other components of the theory.<sup>29</sup> In short, students were praised so long as they tried. She pointed out that a growth mindset is a strategy for dealing with setbacks; it calls for gathering feedback about what went wrong, carefully considering that feedback, and developing new strategies for the failed task. Praising the effort of a child who just failed (without emphasizing feedback and strategies) may carry the perverse implicit message that the

praise is offered as a consolation prize because the adult believes that child cannot succeed.

A third reason the effect of a growth mindset may seem to come and go is that lots of other factors influence student outcomes. Mindset and achievement may be related, but the effect might appear large, small, or absent depending on those other factors.

This interpretation is supported by the largest study to examine growth mindset and achievement, conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as part of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing program.<sup>30</sup> About 500,000 15-year-old students were asked how much they agreed with the statement “Your intelligence is something about you that you can’t change very much.” Those who agreed (and thus have a fixed mindset) scored, on average, 32 points lower on the reading portion of the PISA than those who disagreed (after statistically accounting for the socioeconomic profiles of students and schools). Holding a growth mindset was positively associated with students setting higher learning goals, students’ motivation to master tasks, and students perceiving value in going to school—and as growth mindset increased, fear of failure decreased.

But breaking the data down by country revealed enormous variability in these findings. In some countries, the effects were large, and in others, nonexistent. No wonder, then, that studies of a few hundred or even a few thousand children in one location or another sometimes show a strong relationship between growth mindset and academic achievement and other times do not. The size of this relationship must depend on other factors.

### Refining the Intervention

The last five years has seen an attempt to address both problems: to develop a growth mindset intervention that is carefully constructed to maximize its effectiveness and to explore the effects of other factors that interact with growth mindset in the hopes of developing an intervention that is effective in many contexts.<sup>31</sup>

Researchers first set out to develop an intervention that stood the best chance of working consistently at scale—that is, one that could be administered to thousands of students in a school district or university. Many of the successful interventions had used trained instructors, but that method is prohibitively expensive at scale. An online intervention seemed the best way to reach many students.

The strategy to develop the online intervention was painstaking. Rather than simply creating what they hoped would be an effective intervention and then conducting their experiment, researchers used an iterative process. They started with an intervention that had been successful<sup>32</sup> and then interviewed students to get feedback on what they found engaging or boring, clear or confusing, and so on.<sup>33</sup> These interviews inspired changes to the existing intervention, whereupon researchers compared the new version with the old to see which had the greater effect on growth mindset. Researchers then interviewed

students about their reactions to the new intervention, which was then further refined as necessary.

When researchers had an online version they thought was effective, they administered it to 7,335 students entering a public university. Not only did the intervention increase growth mindset, but by year’s end the dropout rate among socially and economically disadvantaged students was lower for those in the intervention group compared to the control group.<sup>34</sup>

The effectiveness of the intervention was replicated in a study involving nearly all the high schools in two counties in Norway, a total of 6,451 students.<sup>35</sup> There, too, the intervention increased growth mindset, and it prompted students to enroll in more difficult math classes the following year.

### The Role of Context

These data showed the value of continued refinement of an intervention, but they did not address questions about other factors that impact whether (or to what extent) developing a growth mindset is beneficial. That issue was tackled in a 2019 study that tested the effectiveness of the online intervention in a nationally representative sample of 12,490

ninth-graders attending 65 schools.<sup>36</sup> The

researchers adjusted the intervention to match the concerns (and reading levels) of ninth-graders; as before, they interviewed students and conducted small-scale studies to be sure that the new materials were effective in creating a growth mindset. They employed independent contractors to recruit the schools, administer the intervention, and collect the data to eliminate any possibility that the researchers would unwittingly influence the results.

As in previous studies, the intervention increased students’ growth mindset, and it increased the GPA of lower-achieving students by an average of 0.10 grade points (on a 4.0 scale)



It’s not enough to believe “all students can learn.” Teachers must act in ways consistent with that belief.

in core classes, a substantial increase in the context of educational interventions. The researchers sought to determine why the intervention had a larger or smaller impact at different schools—for instance, why the impact on grades was smaller at schools with high average achievement. They speculated that these schools typically enjoy such ample resources that the growth mindset intervention just couldn't add much to grades. But students in those schools were more likely to take more advanced math classes the following year—an effect that was not as strong at the schools with lower average achievement.

The researchers also examined the effect of peers—specifically, the extent to which peers think it's acceptable or a good idea to ask challenging questions in school. This was measured by having students construct a math worksheet from a selection of problems that they were told varied in difficulty. The growth mindset intervention had a bigger impact on individuals whose peers tended (on average) to pick difficult questions for the math worksheet. Why? Having a growth mindset means asking hard questions, so being surrounded by people who do the same makes it easier to act on a growth mindset. (Consider how hard it would be to maintain a growth mindset if your requests for more challenging work were met by your peers' scorn.)

Another analysis of this dataset examined whether the teacher's mindset had an impact on the relationship of growth mindset and math grades.<sup>37</sup> The results showed that prompting a growth mindset in students did *not* affect their grades if their teacher had a fixed mindset. But if the teacher had a growth mindset, student math grades increased by an average of 0.11 grade points (on a 4.0 scale). It's not hard to imagine teacher behaviors that could amplify or crush the effect of a student growth mindset. Teachers with a growth mindset might convey to students the attitude that mistakes are opportunities for learning, and they might use assignments that explicitly reward continual improvement. Teachers with a fixed mindset, in contrast, might convey harmful messages like “some of us are math people and others just aren't.”

The study of Norwegian high school students examined another potential context effect of growth mindset.<sup>38</sup> Some students had already selected their classes for the following year when they completed the online intervention, whereas others had not. Recall that a growth mindset is predicted to make students more likely to select challenging work. But if a student had already selected classes for the following year, then selecting more challenging work might require going through the bureaucratic hassle of changing their course registration. As predicted, the growth mindset intervention was more likely to prompt students to take more difficult math courses in schools where students had not yet picked classes for the following year. There was still an impact of the intervention if

they had already registered for the next year's classes, but the effect was smaller.

## What Does This Mean for Educators?

Is it worth trying to promote a growth mindset in students? Yes. The effect may seem small, but it's in the range of *lots* of education effects. We know there aren't any silver bullets. We have to take many small steps with the expectation that each will make a small contribution to greater student success.

What's more, we should not accept or reject steps solely based on the expected effect size.

We also need to consider the cost to students and to educators, and that is where growth mindset is a real bargain. The web-based intervention that has been the most consistently successful requires little time from teachers and just two 25-minute sessions from students. (Dweck and her colleagues have created free materials for teachers and families; visit [mindsetkit.org](http://mindsetkit.org).)

There's another way that growth mindset research can influence education. It is inevitable that students will have setbacks and that educators will talk with students about them. Research on growth mindset offers a useful set of principles to guide such conversations. It's not enough to believe “all students can learn.”

Teachers must act in ways that are consistent with that belief, especially when it comes to the behaviors they encourage and praise.

Growth mindset suggests three concrete steps for educators when a student suffers an academic setback:

1. Encourage students to seek feedback about what went wrong.
2. Encourage students to analyze these errors and use them as opportunities for learning.
3. Encourage students to think of ways they might do things differently when they try again.

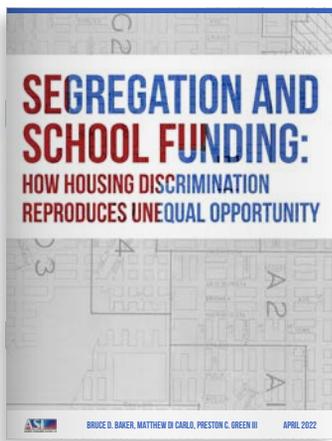
The context effects reviewed here also provide helpful guidance—or, more likely, a reminder for educators to engage in practices they already know to be beneficial. A growth mindset has a larger impact when peers think it is appropriate to engage in challenging work. It also has a bigger impact when the environment makes it easier to act on a growth mindset—for example, when it is easier to take on challenging coursework. And students' growth mindsets may have no impact at all if their teachers have fixed mindsets.

Over the last decade, I've talked to many teachers who feel that they've been harangued on the subject of growth mindset, and they are tired of it. But students' beliefs—and *your* beliefs—about intelligence do have an impact, and the question of how to deal with student failure comes up in every classroom. There's good reason for you to put the research to work. □

For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/willingham](http://aft.org/ae/winter2022-2023/willingham).

The effect of growth mindset may seem small, but many small steps contribute to greater student success.

## The Enduring Impact of Housing Segregation on School Funding



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

—EDITORS

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

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

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

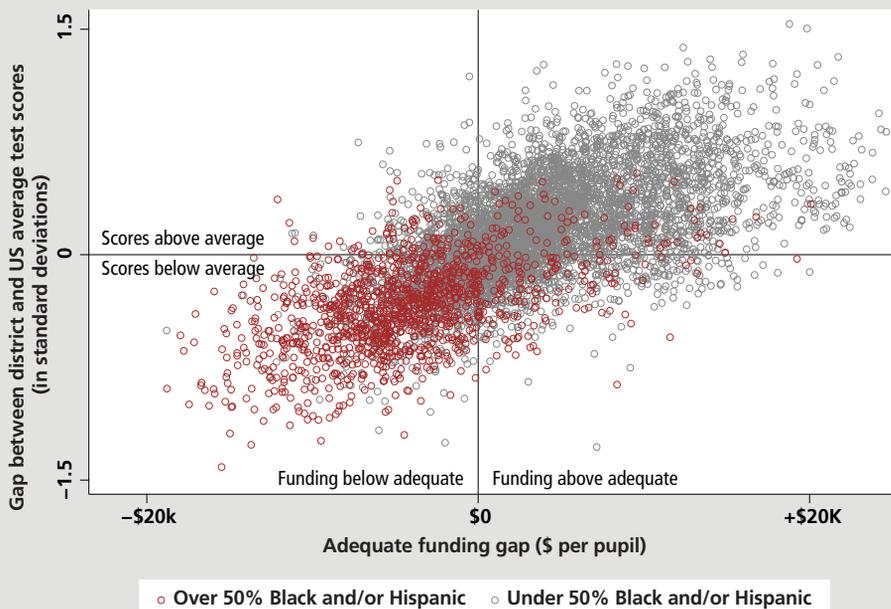
In the United States, school districts rely heavily on local property tax revenue, which means where one lives—particularly in which district—in no small part determines how well one's neighborhood's schools are funded. The mutually dependent relationship between economic and racial/ethnic segregation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

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

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

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

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



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

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