

Real Solutions for Kids and Communities

Addressing Loneliness, Learning Loss, and Literacy



By Randi Weingarten

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Host a Watch Party!

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

—EDITORS



Five Essential Solutions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reading

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Helping kids recover and thrive is our priority.

Experiential Learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

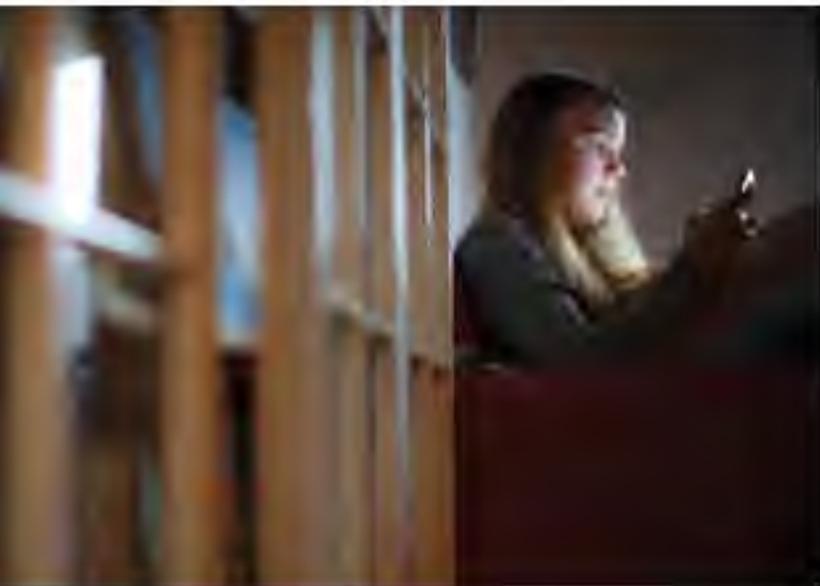
In June, the AFT's CTE committee visited Lynn Vocational and Technical High School in Massachusetts. Students in the culinary program catered a delicious sit-down breakfast for our group of 40 visitors. We saw beautiful porch swings and sheds handcrafted by carpentry students. Students demonstrated their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

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

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

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





UTE GRABOVSKY / GETTY IMAGES

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

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

Community Schools

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mental Health and Well-Being

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Educators, Staff, and Resources

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

Together, These Real Solutions Will Succeed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Are you with me?

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

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

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

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

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