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Teachers Unions: From Academics to Activists

*How Teachers Unions
Reward Insiders,
Promote Political Activism,
and Push a Divisive Agenda*

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Key Findings

No U.S institution has been affected more by current events than the K-12 education system. The COVID pandemic wreaked havoc on the mechanics of delivering education, while the social justice movement sparked a debate over what should be taught in the classroom. The convergence of these two issues turned traditionally mundane school board meetings into a platform for frustrated parents and often pitted these parents against administrators and teachers.

While parents voiced their concerns about COVID policies, critical race theory, and gender issues to their local schools, the powerful teachers unions pressed a national campaign to stake out positions on these same controversial issues. The actions taken by the unions go far beyond their traditional mission of bargaining for better pay, benefits, and improved working conditions for teachers.

For example, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) passed resolutions that supported Democratic presidential candidates and advocated for liberal positions on politically divisive issues. The leader of the National Education Association (NEA) admitted that the union's mission had been expanded to include social activism. Expenditures by both unions reflected these priorities, going exclusively to support progressive causes and candidates.

To understand the effects of this expanded role of teachers unions, GAI analyzed almost two years of resolutions by the AFT. We also researched the backgrounds and the public statements made by the influential leaders of both the AFT and the NEA.

This is what we found:

- Randi Weingarten, the leader of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) since 2008, dramatically increased the union's political spending since taking office.¹ According to the Government Accountability Institute's analysis of campaign finance records, AFT campaign contributions spiked from \$3.7 million in 2008 to \$20 million during the 2020 election cycle.
- Lily Eskelsen Garcia, the leader of the National Education Association (NEA), confirmed to *Education Week* that the "core business" of the NEA is no longer pensions and health insurance, but social activism and political lobbying.



- Eskelsen Garcia stated that leadership changes at her union have allowed it to focus on broader social issues like immigration policy and racial justice. She justifies this expansion of union activism because it reflects the leadership's deeply held personal and political beliefs.²


The Union Dues of Teachers Now Fund Radical Social Justice Groups that Don't Reflect Mainstream American Values

- Data from the US Department of Labor reveal that between 2006 and 2020, AFT and NEA donated approximately \$726,200 to GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network). GLSEN bills itself as a “leading national organization working to guarantee LGBTQ+ students safe and affirming education.”³
- Research indicates that over the last three years, the AFT and NEA have donated approximately \$3 million to passthrough groups that then fund Black Lives Matters.

GAI Analysis Reveals Union Leadership Focuses on Electing Democrats and Advocating for Left-Wing Issues

- GAI's analysis of AFT resolutions shows the most frequent topics discussed in AFT resolutions in 2020 and 2021 were COVID-19, elections, race, violence, and criminal justice, followed by education.
- In 2020 alone, there were 227 separate mentions of “elections” contained in fourteen different resolutions that were published on the AFT website. Likewise, there were 165 separate mentions of “COVID-19” in twenty-one different resolutions; 111 mentions of “violence” in fourteen different resolutions; 93 mentions of “race” (excluding discussions of racial discrimination, which add a further 32 separate mentions) in 16 different resolutions; and 49 separate mentions of “police” and “criminal justice” across eight different resolutions. In 2020, a total of thirty-four resolutions were published by the AFT.
- When COVID-19 is mentioned in AFT resolutions, it is often mentioned in advocacy for policies that expand the role of the federal government in public education and implement broad reforms in US education.





During the Covid Pandemic, Teachers Unions Seized an Opportunity to Change Education

- America's two largest teachers unions used the Covid-19 pandemic as the pretext to push for radical changes to public education and exploited the crisis to financially benefit powerful elites with close ties to their leadership.
- AFT and NEA both adopted the leftist trope of "Reimagining Education" to frame their wide-ranging demands for school transformation. According to internal union leadership communication, unions began advocating for global pandemic solutions that require harvesting and sharing vast amounts of personal data on students and increasing the number of "wrap-around services" provided through schools.
- AFT President Randi Weingarten wasted a million dollars of union funds on counterfeit Covid supplies from China, and funneled loads of cash to her cronies in New York.

Unions Now Direct Schools to Promote and Advocate Controversial Issues

- Teachers unions disseminate radical curricula to teachers and schools, creating new professional standards that encourage controversy among teachers and families. Union initiatives encouraging activism in the classroom tie the hands of those teachers who wish to remain neutral and objective among their colleagues, their students, and their community.
- Despite the persistent argument that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is not taught in schools below the college level, many of the educational programs addressing racial equity and racial justice in public schools push such narratives. Primarily, students are being taught that the United States is inherently racist and that skin color determines the institutional hierarchy of oppressed and oppressor in which people are placed.
- Teachers unions encouraged teachers to intervene in the sexual and gender identities of students, especially during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. These interventions include establishing private online communications with students, then concealing these communications from parents and other family members in the home. For many teachers, this could expose them to conflict with parents, a betrayal of the family's trust, and even legal liability.



- Advancing radical gender politics in the classroom has harmed teachers, raising tension between teachers and their communities that spills over into lawsuits and public shouting matches. Teachers unions continue to push for the expansion of teacher responsibility in the life of the child, alienating parents and making the real work of education more difficult.

Unions Want to Expand the Influence of Liberal Policies Through “Community School” Programs

- The idea of Community Schools has been around for over three decades in the US, but under the Biden Administration financial support for this alternative schooling model has increased nearly fourteen-fold, from \$30 million to more than \$400 million per year. A bill called the Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2021 in Congress seeks to spend \$3.65 billion over the next five years on community schools.
- The major reason for this expansion is the teachers unions, which advocate for community schools using three primary tactics: 1) lobbying federal and local governments, 2) partnering with union insiders to provide wraparound services, and 3) “bargaining for the common good.”
- The most dangerous component of the community school model is the unprecedented amount and array of personal data collected from our nation’s most vulnerable and needy students through wraparound services. For example, Kneomedia Limited is a digital edutainment company that partners with New York City schools. One of Kneomedia’s crucial features is data capture and analysis, which provides immediate measurable results for schools, teachers, and parents to track students’ progress. This data harvesting also produces highly detailed biometric data on students that was not previously available.



Teachers Union Leadership

An organization's leadership sets the tone and agenda for its activities. Leadership provides personality and a face to the organizational mission. For teachers unions, recent leadership has consisted of big personalities like Randi Weingarten (President of the AFT), Lily Eskelsen Garcia (former President of the NEA [2014-2020]), and Rebecca Pringle (current President of the NEA).

These women style themselves as trailblazers, activists, and guardians of education. They use their public face to speak to and for educators across the country. Their beliefs and words move and inspire the members of their unions. Are they doing their best to serve American educators? Do they prioritize the original mission of their organizations? Do they positively contribute to American education?

Randi Weingarten

AFT President was born and raised in the New York area.⁴ Rhonda “Randi” Weingarten is an attorney who began her union career representing the President of the New York City’s United Federation of Teachers affiliate from 1986 to 1998. From there, she rose to become president of the American Federation of Teachers in 2008.

According to her profile on the AFT website, education reform has been central to her work as the national union’s president. These reforms include drastic changes to teacher evaluations and a sharp increase in federal funds and involvement in public education.⁵ Reflecting Weingarten’s aggressive push for more federal involvement in public schools, AFT has transformed into a more aggressive political fundraiser.

Influence Watch, a project of the conservative-leaning Capital Research Center, has reported that under Randi Weingarten’s leadership, political spending by the American Federation of Teachers rose dramatically.⁶ AFT affiliates — such as the AFT Solidarity PAC — increased their political campaign contributions from a collective \$3.7 million when Weingarten took office in 2008, to nearly \$20 million in 2020. More than 99 percent of this money is diverted to Democratic campaigns and political organizations, according to OpenSecrets.⁷

Much of the politics and many of the policies pushed by Randi Weingarten detract from the original purpose of the union, which was to bargain collectively to increase the pay and protect the rights of workers in education and other public services. Rather than focus on pension issues and protection against mistreatment, Randi Weingarten’s agenda has emphasized radical changes in education that do not serve students or teachers.

Her focus on promoting politically charged curricula often brings teachers and parents into conflict. It may even have cost Democratic candidates in critical elections. In Virginia’s gubernatorial election in 2021, many observers attributed the victory of Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin, a political newcomer, over previous incumbent Democrat Terry McAuliffe to the divisive and sometimes dishonest messaging Weingarten and other teachers union leaders pushed. After months of denying on Twitter



her role in keeping the schools closed and denigrating the role of parents in the classroom, her public stumping for Terry McAuliffe may have been the last straw for frustrated Virginia parents.⁸

By focusing so heavily on political messaging, Weingarten has shifted the AFT from teachers' working conditions and towards unpopular policies that voters do not support. Thus, even for the teachers who support the Democratic push to expand federal funding of schools, Weingarten's broad involvement in social politics has begun to sabotage their efforts to vote friendly candidates into office, even after earlier success in the 2020 presidential campaign.

Weingarten also brings controversy on herself. For example, according to a lawsuit filed by the Mississippi chapter of the AFT against Randi Weingarten and the national AFT, Weingarten covered for her close friend Akemi Stout, the corrupt head of its Jackson-based local. Stout mismanaged the local's finances and paid union money to a business he owned, the lawsuit alleges. Weingarten assailed the lawsuit as a "personality conflict," and accused the local affiliate of wasting dues money.⁹

Furthermore, Weingarten and her politically connected wife, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, have been outspoken in support of New York City political candidates who are pro-union, but who have also faced multiple, credible accusations of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and misconduct. Most recently, Influence Watch reported that Weingarten was widely panned online for her support of Alphonso David, the former president of the Human Rights Campaign. David was fired from his job after a report by the New York State Attorney General, Letitia James, revealed he had helped Andrew Cuomo and his office attempt to discredit one of Cuomo's accusers in the sexual harassment probe against the then-Governor of New York.¹⁰ That report led to Cuomo's resignation from office.

This was just months after Kleinbaum wrote an opinion piece in the New York Daily News that encouraged readers to believe women who make claims that they have been sexually mistreated – except for those made against Scott Stringer (AFT's preferred and endorsed NYC mayoral candidate). Kleinbaum's article spends more time explaining what an altruistic politician Scott Stringer is than discussing the accusations against him, or explaining why those accusations lack credibility.¹¹

As leader of an organization whose primary mission is advocacy against injustice and inequality for workers, Randi Weingarten seems unafraid to compromise on moral propriety and to permit hypocrisy and injustice when it suits her political ends.

Weingarten also oversaw the development of Share My Lesson, a database where teachers can share their curriculum material and lesson plans.¹² The database features a large collection of lessons that focus on the politically charged topics of race, gender, and equity.¹³ Some of the most recent featured collections include "Indigenous People Lesson Plans and Resources," which discusses how to celebrate indigenous people's day instead of Columbus Day; "Teaching about Race and Racism: Lesson Plans and Resources," which includes teaching resources such as "What Does It Mean to 'Defund the Police'?"; "Talking About Race and Privilege Lesson Plan for Middle and High School Students;" and "Anti-Racism Resources for Racial Literacy," which includes lesson plans drawn directly from Ibram X. Kendi's book, *Stamped*.¹⁴

While there is nothing wrong with helping teachers share and obtain lesson plans for their classrooms,



hijacking such a service to instead promote left-wing politics does nothing but raise tensions between public schools and the families they are meant to serve.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia

The politicization of teaching is not limited to Randi Weingarten and the AFT. Lily Eskelsen Garcia, then the president of the National Education Association, told *Education Week* in 2020 just before her term ended: “It’s the first time we’ve had three women [in the leadership team]. We’ve never had three women, we’ve never had three people of color. Now, we have two African Americans, and I’m Latina. I think it makes it so that even when we have members or affiliate leaders saying, ‘Our core business is really advocating for our members and negotiating contracts and your sick leave and your health care and protecting pensions,’ you have Becky and Princess [Moss] and me saying, ‘Here’s why we care about DACA. Here’s why we care about the fact that we were able to talk about this,’ in response to questions about incoming leadership at the NEA.”¹⁵

Eskelsen Garcia’s observation shows there has been a push under recent leadership to move away from the traditional mission of a teachers union and to pick political fights that go beyond protecting and improving the working conditions and pay of teachers. Her comments also suggest that within the NEA, there is concern or outright opposition to this expansion of political activities from within the union. Union leadership disregards these voices, which come from dues-paying members.

This politicization of their mission has led to conflict between NEA members and leadership. Prior to the 2016 presidential elections, Eskelsen Garcia was widely criticized for endorsing former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s candidacy before Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) was able to establish himself in the primary race. Eskelsen Garcia cited the necessity of choosing a candidate early, so “education’s voice” has the opportunity to influence the campaign.¹⁶

This was a problem for the NEA under the Obama administration, which looked more favorably on policies to improve teacher evaluation, offer merit pay and school choice than the NEA supported.¹⁷ Eskelsen Garcia’s prioritization of political influence over the standard operations of her union led the organization to disenfranchise thousands of its own members in the endorsement process, and to endorse a candidate who ultimately lost to the Republican nominee, Donald Trump.

Eskelsen Garcia is also on the record making derogatory statements about students who require extra support in the classroom. Referring to the duties of teachers to adapt to student needs, she described some students as “chronically tarded [sic] and medically annoying.” Although Eskelsen Garcia issued an apology for the statement and explained that she meant to say, “chronically tardy,” and that medically annoying was a failed attempt to humorously describe children who take their emotions out on teachers by behaving poorly, some were still upset with the sentiment expressed.¹⁸

As the *Washington Post* reported, some parents of children with special needs felt that the message of Eskelsen Garcia’s speech, even after she issued corrections, expressed a misplaced frustration with disabled and special needs children who are simply seeking an education and support from their



community.¹⁹ Many educators go into the profession for the purpose of serving the young and the vulnerable, and would surely resent the implication that teachers resent working with special-needs children.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia expressed “grave concerns” with having armed police officers acting as “school resource officers” in schools, despite acknowledging that she knows many parents who believe their children are protected from in-school violence by these officers.²⁰ While this may not be true for all parents, the influence of teachers unions creates means the messages they push carry more political weight than that of parents, since families have no union to represent them. Thus, when the social activism of the day demands removing resource officers from the classroom, closing down schools for COVID, or teaching controversial and subjective curriculum to young students, the needs of parents and students sink beneath the lobbying influence of an organization like the NEA.

This expansion of political spending and influence cultivation also benefits those in the leadership positions of the movement. When her term as president of the NEA ended, Eskelsen-Garcia began a campaign to become Education Secretary under President Biden. Though this unofficial campaign failed, she was believed to be one of the top candidates for Secretary of Education and had extensive support in Congress and in the press.²¹

Likewise, Randi Weingarten’s family has benefitted from her role as a union leader. Weingarten’s wife, Sharon Kleinbaum, was repeatedly nominated to serve on the Commission of Religious Freedom, first by Senator Chuck Schumer in 2020, and then in 2021 by President Joe Biden.²²

Rebecca Pringle, Lily Eskelsen Garcia’s successor as president of the NEA, has put her own stamp on the political activity of the nation’s largest teachers union. During the 2020 election, Pringle oversaw the union’s endorsement of Joe Biden and a massive mobilization campaign to put hundreds of thousands of union members to work canvassing and knocking doors for Biden’s campaign.

Pringle’s endorsement of Biden came after teachers unions began to clash with the Trump administration over the reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, Pringle worked to prevent the reopening of public schools in the United States. When it came to light that she had played a role in setting the federal guidelines for school reopening so that they were especially restrictive, she downplayed concerns about the influence of teachers unions on policymakers and the negative effects school closures have had on students, especially vulnerable students that the unions claim to prioritize in their work. Pringle shrugged it off with a single-sentence tweet: “It’s no secret we want to keep our students and schools safe.”²³

Teachers union leadership has benefitted from the expansion of political spending and influence. It keeps their jobs and their names relevant and leads to personal enrichment and the advancement of their own agendas. Many of the current criticisms levied at teachers unions are embodied in the controversies which surround leaders like Weingarten and Eskelsen Garcia, both of whom are pushing for an evolution of the role their organizations play in classroom politics, despite objections from parents and teachers who face mounting pressure to pick a side.



Union Leadership Stakes Out Positions

To understand the role that teachers unions have played in the current fraught educational environment, it is important to understand the vernacular they use to describe themselves and their activities. Through an analysis of this language, certain priorities and connections with pertinent ideas begin to emerge. Combined with the expansion of the unions' political spending, these priorities and associations define an agenda that teachers unions seek to advance at the local, state and federal level.

By analyzing key vocabulary used in the American Federation of Teacher's yearly resolutions, it is possible to lay out an approximate framework for this agenda and to understand why and how these unions are distributing money and political influence.

Not surprisingly, education was one of the most mentioned topics in AFT resolutions, both in 2020 and 2021. Of the fifty-four combined resolutions published on the AFT website in 2020 and 2021, forty-four mention education, learning, schools, classrooms, teachers or students. Of those forty-four resolutions, twenty-seven were published in 2020 and 17 were published in 2021. The minority of AFT resolutions which do not mention education at all deal primarily with union business (such as union elections and conventions) and labor issues, with a few exceptions (such as the resolution passed in 2021 condemning the Uighur genocide in China).

However, what is surprising is the focus of these resolutions on issues *not* related directly to education, and on the positions taken on divisive social issues.

Elections, Trump, & Biden

One of the topics discussed most in 2020 after education was “elections,” with a handful of mentions in 2021 as well. In 2020, elections and related vocabulary (vote, poll, polling place, campaign, voter, candidate, etc.) appeared in the resolutions 183 times, across fourteen of the thirty-four resolutions.

Forty-two percent of the 2020 AFT resolutions were related to elections.

Frequently, when elections were discussed in 2020, it was to express support for presidential candidate Joe Biden (five out of fourteen resolutions); to argue that the integrity of the election or democracy itself is in peril (four out of fourteen resolutions); or to call for election related reforms such as expanded vote-by-mail and automatic voter registration (three of fourteen resolutions).

In most of the resolutions addressing elections, a direct or indirect connection was drawn between the election and criticism of then-President Donald Trump (eleven out of fourteen resolutions). Other language that appears frequently in the same 2020 resolutions pertains to COVID-19 (ten out of fourteen resolutions), violence and authoritarianism (eight out of fourteen resolutions), education (ten out of fourteen resolutions), and race (eight out of fourteen resolutions).

Overall, the discussions regard the conduct of a presidential election during the COVID-19 pandemic,



the necessity of securing the election against the undermining efforts of Donald Trump and his supporters, the importance of voting reform to increase voter access, and the responsibility of the union and its members to support Joe Biden in his bid to defeat President Trump.

When election reforms are discussed, they are framed in terms of increasing minority participation in the election, combatting right-wing corruption, and simplifying the process by which people access the polls and cast their vote. When they discuss the 2020 presidential election itself, AFT attacked what it called the violence, corruption, and incompetence of the Trump administration. They framed the election of any Democrat, and later, Joe Biden, as a rebuke of fiscal austerity and a necessary measure to rescue American democracy from the criminal behavior of the sitting president. Joe Biden was also upheld in 2020 AFT resolutions as a candidate who would solve the COVID-19 pandemic, restore sane foreign policy, and end systemic racism (largely through greater investment in public services). In 2021, mentions of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump sharply declined.

Likewise in 2021, discussion of elections dropped significantly. Elections were mentioned just eight times in two resolutions in 2021, out of a total twenty resolutions. The resolutions that did discuss elections in 2021 were “*Global Solidarity on Behalf of Democracy and Human Rights*” and “*Military Spending*.” The first resolution discussed Russian election interference and the role President Trump played in discrediting the 2020 presidential election, as well as his role in emboldening foreign “autocrats” to trample on their own democracies. The second, *Military Spending*, encouraged AFT members and the organization as a whole to hold politicians running for office accountable to the movement to cut government spending for defense.

COVID Politics

In 2020, resolutions also frequently referenced COVID-19, a trend that continued into 2021. In 2020, twenty-one of thirty-four resolutions mentioned COVID-19, with 165 individual mentions of COVID-19, Coronavirus, “the pandemic,” etc. Of these twenty-one resolutions, ten mentioned elections, eleven mentioned race, seventeen mentioned education, thirteen mentioned Trump, and five mentioned Biden. In 2021, seven of twenty resolutions mentioned COVID-19 with a total of forty-two individual mentions. Of those seven resolutions, one mentioned elections, three mentioned race, six mentioned education, zero mentioned Trump and two mentioned Biden.

These trends from the analysis suggest what teachers unions are prioritizing their internal affairs, their governmental relations, and their political rhetoric. The language decrying the existential threat to American democracy posed by President Trump and his supporters was a core part of the messaging and activism undertaken by the AFT in 2020.

Interestingly, as with their stance on elections, President Trump was often criticized as a commander-in-chief of the United States who had failed at every turn to manage COVID. He was often blamed for worsening the pandemic through his incompetence. This is language which appears in a majority of resolutions that discuss COVID-19 in 2020.



However, after Trump left office and was replaced by Biden in 2021, the twenty-one resolutions that concern COVID-19 mention Biden only twice: once in *Return, Recover and Reimagine: Toward a Renaissance in America's Public Schools*, where the AFT applauds Biden's American Rescue Plan as a key factor behind the return to in-person schooling; and in *Vaccines and Schools*, which states that "... as was indicated by President Biden earlier this month, workplace vaccine policies will be employer-driven, rather than government driven."²⁴

When discussing Biden and the COVID-19 pandemic, the union resolutions tend to speak favorably or neutrally, if they speak at all. From an election year to a non-election year, it is clear that the AFT wanted to emphasize election issues, current crises, and political candidates until their man was elected to office. This no doubt corresponds to the massive efforts made to mobilize the Democratic vote in 2020 and their record-breaking contributions to 2020 political campaigns.²⁵

AFT's focus on COVID-19 is also inextricably related to the union's plans for reopening schools. When COVID-related school closures are discussed in AFT resolutions, the authors of these resolutions explicitly tie reopening plans to widespread access to free, government- or employee-provided personal protection equipment (PPE), increased educational funding by the federal government, abolishing "whiteness-centered curricula," and broad renovations of public-school buildings.

For example, in 2020, the AFT published "*Elevating Schools Beyond the Legacy of COVID-19.*" This resolution outlined plans to use COVID-19 school closures as an opportunity to implement broad educational reforms. Such reforms included the "establishment of 25,000 community schools where students and families can access tailored health services and social services in one place, and marginalized communities can have access to services"; "equitable school environments that reject colorblind ideology and curriculum centered around whiteness and replace with culturally responsive teaching"; and "[s]eeking waivers on state summative assessments (testing) and the high-stakes consequences attached to them as the upcoming year is a bridge period following prolonged coronavirus closures and re-established instruction in schools."²⁶

Occasionally, the AFT acknowledges that school closures have harmed student learning and health, and that these closures put school employees out of work, ultimately affecting the union.²⁷ In reading the plans and demands released by the AFT, however, it seems that school reopening is being leveraged as a reward for educational and societal change in line with AFT ideology. School reopening is one of the core COVID-related issues that inform AFT's COVID-policies, but it is closely entwined with their political goals.

Race & Gender

Overall, the resolutions in 2020 made frequent mentions of money and funding, the federal government, education, elections, workers and unions, COVID-19, violence, race, healthcare, and Trump. In 2021, the most mentioned terms were education, violence, race, unions and workers, funding, COVID-19, the federal government, police and criminal justice, LGBTQ issues, and vaccines.



Two of the most controversial issues currently dominating the political landscape relate to race and gender identity. News reports from school board meetings across the country frequently reveal the tension between parents, administrators, school boards, and teachers. There have been many heated debates and shouting matches over what to teach in the classroom and the proper role of school officials in communicating with students about matters that have traditionally been left to parents.

In 2020, sixteen of the thirty-four resolutions (47 percent) addressed race and/or ethnicity. This trend continued in 2021 with eight of the twenty resolutions (40 percent) relating to race. Specifically, the resolutions addressed issues pressed by Black Lives Matter organizations, social justice, racism, diversity and equity. In 2020, twelve resolutions (35 percent) addressed equity.

With regard to gender and sexuality issues, five of the thirty-four resolutions (15 percent) addressed LGBTQIA+ issues in 2020 and three of twenty resolutions (15 percent) related to these issues in 2021.

When these rhetorical and linguistic trends are analyzed in conjunction with a review of the AFT's increased political spending and the activities of its leadership, it shows the American Federation of Teachers is pushing for broad societal changes and the complete overhaul of public education. These agendas have found a foothold through the COVID-19 pandemic, as governments and communities scrambled to respond to public health emergencies and to keep the economy afloat. In this time of great need and uncertainty, the AFT offered its agenda as a solution to societal ills, and strongly linked the reopening of the schools and the economy to accepting its social activism regarding race, gender, and criminal justice, as well as massive increases in public spending.



COVID Pandemic Affects Union Priorities

America's two largest teacher unions used the COVID-19 pandemic as the excuse to push for radical changes to public education. They exploited the crisis to financially benefit powerful elites with close ties to union leadership. The AFT and NEA adopted the moniker "Reimagining Education" to frame the wide-ranging demands for transformation. These "reimaginings" tout solutions that require the harvesting and sharing of vast amounts of personal data on students and increasing the number of "wrap-around services" provided to schools. This chapter concludes with an example of how AFT's President, Randi Weingarten, wasted union funds purchasing counterfeit COVID supplies from China, and funneled loads of cash to her cronies in New York.

Everything Reimagined

AFT recently published a report on health care that claims we have all learned two clear lessons from COVID-19.²⁸ First, the pandemic "disproportionately wreaked havoc in marginalized and racial groups"; and second, this inequity was all a consequence of "the structural racism embedded within the social fabric of the United States."²⁹

To combat these "deep structural inequities," both AFT and NEA call for their supporters to "reimagine" lots of things, some of which are basic and specific to education — such as reimagining summer school, teacher preparation, or standardized assessments. Others are not related to the mission of education, as most parents understand it, including a call to "Reimagine America," "Reimagine our social reality," or reimagine "what government can do."³⁰

When the Los Angeles Unified School District approved a plan in February 2020 to cut a third of its school resource officers and "redirect that \$25 million into programs that ensure Black students thrive," the NEA praised the plan. The plan "reimagines a school community that sets students up for fulfilling lives, where behavioral and mental health issues are addressed by providing students with proven solutions that work — school safety coaches, more health and human services, restorative justice coordinators, culturally-relevant curriculum, and ethnic studies."³¹

The district would also provide funding for ten of the 53 schools to become community schools, bringing the total from 30 to 40 community schools in the district.³² When teachers unions seek to "reimagine education" or anything else, the end goal is not an open-ended discussion about all the visions that educators might imagine for improving education. Instead, it appears teacher unions have preset goals they want to impose on public education, in particular to expand the number of "wraparound" service providers contracting with schools.

Here are just a few of the demands made by NEA and AFT in a report they co-wrote entitled "*Learning Beyond COVID*."³³



- Recruit “substantially more specialized instructional support personnel (therapists, counselors, speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, behavioral specialists, school nurses, etc.).”³⁴
- “Additional tutoring support, whether virtual or in person, must be prioritized... to ensure that our highest need and most vulnerable students receive a maximum amount of interactive, intensified one-on-one instruction.”³⁵
- Teacher Unions should use collective bargaining agreements to negotiate new staffing positions that will increase learning time for students with “opportunity gaps.”³⁶
- Employ “nurses, counselors and psychologists” to “address trauma and social-emotional learning.”³⁷
- Increase staffing to accommodate the expansion of “small-group learning” which became necessary due to social distancing requirements.³⁸
- Provide “union-developed and -led professional development so that programs ensure safe environments and a focus on social-emotional learning and addressing trauma.”³⁹
- Teacher unions need increased federal funds to subsidize their expanded professional development training goals, which includes training all non-teacher school employees with a focus on equity and racial and social justice.⁴⁰
- AFT and NEA “are eager to collaborate with federal and state governments to develop an apprenticeship program” for recent graduates.⁴¹
- “Implement community schools districtwide... to address several of the racial, social and economic injustices that students and families face.”⁴²
- AFT and NEA “support deep federal investments that will dramatically expand the number of community schools.”⁴³
- “Now more than ever, multiple systems — child care, healthcare, social services and public education itself—must be coordinated and fully funded. Only then will we be surrounding students with the supports they need and deserve and creating conditions for them to thrive.”⁴⁴
- “Returning to schooling exactly as it was before the pandemic is neither possible nor acceptable. This is especially true for our students of color, students with special needs, rural students and other underserved students who have struggled with racial and economic injustices and lack of opportunity.”⁴⁵



In another document called *Amplifying Educator Expertise Through Collective Bargaining and/or Collaboration to Address COVID-19 Issues*, NEA further explains that “[a]t every stage of planning and implementation... racial and social justice must be in the forefront” when educators address student disparities that were revealed by the COVID pandemic.⁴⁶

COVID Cronyism

On May 7, 2020 the AFT published a press release describing its urgent attempts to purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) for the 200,000 health workers and nurses AFT also represents.⁴⁷ The press release says that while serving as the head of the federal government’s Coronavirus Task Force in early 2020, AFT demonstrated, filed complaints, signed petitions, and ran ads demanding the federal government provide more PPE to healthcare workers.⁴⁸

AFT’s president, Randi Weingarten, personally blamed the Trump Administration for failing to secure PPE for its healthcare workers.⁴⁹ In response, Randi Weingarten decided to use money from union member fees to purchase \$3 million in PPE herself. “We have to try to figure out how to procure this stuff... People are scared shitless,” Weingarten said. Yet she was clueless about how to procure the medical equipment.⁵⁰

To purchase the PPE, Weingarten enlisted a boutique Manhattan business development firm, Empire Global Ventures (EGV), to locate, ship, and deliver \$3 million worth of N95 masks, face shields, and more than one million surgical masks.⁵¹ EGV eventually found what they considered to be an “established importer-exporter” to acquire the equipment, but that still did not prevent AFT from receiving a counterfeit shipment of N95 masks from China.⁵²

AFT had to pay the company before it would manufacture the equipment, so the funds for the counterfeit masks were wasted.⁵³

Weingarten never mentions the amount wasted on fake COVID supplies, but ultimately her “reliable middle men who knew the ropes in China”—that would be EGV—got Weingarten what she wanted.⁵⁴ “Our brokers were able to do it,” Weingarten said.⁵⁵

Who are these brokers that pulled strings in China on behalf of AFT?

According to a May 2020 *Mother Jones* article, EGV’s website boasted that it “supports its clients entering China by introducing them to influential Chinese business partners, providing access to non-public Chinese deal flow, managing the Chinese governmental registration and permitting process, and supplying privileged sector-specific research on the Chinese market.”⁵⁶

However, a few months after the article was published, this description, along with the entire section describing the company’s work in China, vanished from EGV’s website. Using the Wayback Machine, one can see that on September 19, 2020, the description of the company’s China-specific work appears on EGV’s website; but by October 20, 2020, the description was gone.⁵⁷



What triggered the removal?

One likely answer is the NY Post's October 14th news story that the paper had received emails from one of Hunter Biden's laptops revealing his business dealings in China.⁵⁸ The owners of EGV — the husband and wife team of Sam Natapoff and Alexandra Stanton — previously worked for Hunter Biden's Rosemont Seneca companies from 2010 to 2011 before starting EGV in April 2011.⁵⁹ By removing the references, the Natapoff and Stanton dodged scrutiny of their ties to Hunter Biden and China, because the emails reveal how the couple helped communicate and coordinate events with AFT President Randi Weingarten on behalf of Rosemont Seneca.

Stanton in particular was trying to help Rosemont Seneca invest in AFT pension funds, and on a couple of occasions she coordinated with former Gov. David Paterson to attend policy meetings on the topic.⁶⁰

Stanton had previously worked as a senior policy advisor to Paterson when he was minority leader of the Senate.⁶¹ She has longstanding ties to New York politics through her previous appointment to New York State's economic development agency, Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC). At the ESDC she served alongside her husband Sam Natapoff, who joined ESDC after working in state government as "Senior Advisor to the Governor of New York for International Commerce."

Stanton also serves as the Chair Emeritus of the board of directors for J Street, a liberal Jewish lobbying group often critical of Israel, on which Randi Weingarten's wife, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, serves as a member on the Rabbinic and Cantoral Cabinet.⁶² Stanton has been affiliated with J Street for years, and Hunter Biden's emails show that in 2010 she was asking Hunter what could be done to help smooth over J Street's relationship with the Office of the Vice President, which was occupied by his father.

Although AFT never publicly states what company EGV used to purchase the PPE equipment, the Department of Labor's Online Public Disclosure Room reveals that AFT paid \$1,260,000 to a company called China Energy Construction International Investment (CECII) for COVID-19 medical equipment.⁶³ Research indicates that two companies exist with that name—one registered in Hong Kong and another in Uganda — but AFT never clarifies which company received the payment.⁶⁴

In August 2020, a Government Accountability Institute researcher reached out by phone and email to AFT to inquire about the payment to CECII, specifically asking whether or not CECII was the company that provided counterfeit supplies. AFT has yet to respond.

In September 2020, five months after paying CECII \$1.2 million for COVID equipment, AFT paid more than \$700,000 for COVID supplies to a company owned by Alexandra Stanton: AGS Medical Solutions, which does business under the name "Tiny Lives PPE."⁶⁵

Stanton created Tiny Lives PPE in response to the COVID pandemic, with a focus on manufacturing COVID masks and face shields, primarily for children.⁶⁶ AFT's May 2020 press release states that EGV "volunteered its services" to help AFT procure COVID supplies, but records show that EGV's "volunteer" effort actually resulted in a \$700,000 payout a few months later. These two payments — to



CECII and to Tiny Lives PPE — are the only transactions in AFT’s history that were used to procure “medical equipment.”⁶⁷

At the beginning of the pandemic, AFT passed a resolution titled “Responding to the Coronavirus Epidemic to Keep Families Healthy, Protect Frontline Providers and Save Our Economy.” One of the resolution’s demands is a call-to-action that all Americans can agree with: “RESOLVED, that the AFT calls for the U.S. Department of Justice and state justice departments to investigate and prosecute those in power who have taken this crisis and attempted to profit from it.”⁶⁸

Given such strong resolve, one might expect AFT to expose COVID profiteers like Stanton and Natapoff, instead of paying them.



Teachers Unions Prioritize Race & Gender Issues

For months, parents and school districts have been at loggerheads over social activist messaging in public school education. As the COVID-19 pandemic moved the classroom into the home, parents began to notice increasing curriculum radicalization, with ideas like “gender fluidity” and “institutional racism” appearing in lessons being taught to children as young as preschool.

Disagreement with these ideas in school curricula led to emotionally charged conflicts playing out in local school board public meetings. Angry parents questioned whether teachers and parents were still allies in their children’s education. This raises several questions. Why did this happen? How did education become so deeply divisive, and what role have teachers unions played in producing this contentious educational environment? Finally, what effect has this had on the teaching profession?

Research has shown that teachers unions have played a significant role in the radicalization of school curricula and administrative policies in schools. As professional networks, teachers unions have developed and advocated for workplace standards that promote certain ideologies. They have leveraged their resources in ways that have inflamed the division between families and teachers. As educational authorities, the teachers unions have generated a range of educational material that stresses controversy over academic value. These decisions have immediate and far-reaching consequences, from the societal level down to the individual child.

Critical Race Theory

One of the key points of contention was the question of incorporating a controversial set of ideas known as Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the classroom. According to the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, CRT is an academic framework that emerged in the 1970s to address the presence of systemic racism in society and its institutions. Through CRT, racial disparities and history are intertwined to explain why racism needs to be addressed above the individual level.⁶⁹

Many left-leaning policy makers and educational organizations will dispute the notion that CRT is taught at the K-12 level, arguing that CRT’s concepts and assertions are taught only in law schools and other specialized areas of higher education. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten used this very argument in July of 2021 when she told members of the AFT that “critical race theory is not taught in elementary schools or high schools. It’s a method of examination taught in law school and college that helps analyze whether systemic racism exists — and, in particular, whether it has an effect on law and public policy.”⁷⁰

Their argument appears to be that it is not possible for CRT to be taught at the K-12 level, because CRT is taught at the college level, by definition. This overlooks a simple truth: that what is taught at first only to law school or advanced educational students inevitably filters down into educational concepts that find their way into lower grade levels in a more general way. The full set of theoretical underpinnings may not come along in the process, but the basic concepts do.



An analysis of what Republican lawmakers and concerned parents call “CRT in the classroom” reveals that these lesson plans and classroom policies support the same ends as CRT. Children are being taught that American society, culture, and history is predicated on inherent, widespread, *institutional* racism. They are being taught that their own skin color and ethnicity determines where they fall in a racial hierarchy, with some children inherently oppressed, and others inherently oppressive. Hand-in-hand with the idea that American society has been corrupt since its inception is a call for radical activism targeted at children as young as five years old. If CRT is not being taught at the K-12 level, then American children everywhere are meeting its younger brother, and teachers unions are making the introductions.

For example, a resolution issued by the American Federation of Teachers in 2021 calls on its educator members to participate in “Black Lives Matter at School Week,” a nationwide event to bring the principles and beliefs of the Black Lives Matter movement into the classroom for several days of unique instruction.

The resolution called on teachers to “wear Black Lives Matter at School shirts to school that week and teach lessons about related topics.”⁷¹ This creates an environment where teachers are visually representing their political beliefs to their students and colleagues. Choosing to participate is, in itself, making a political statement, while opting to abstain from the observance is as well.

This kind of “encouragement” from unions puts pressure on teachers to either comply or actively resist, instead of allowing them the ability to objectively do their jobs without generating conflict with the families they serve or their own colleagues at school.

Furthermore, the National Education Association’s social justice auxiliary, EdJustice, is a listed partner of the Black Lives Matter at School (BLMAS) organization, which is responsible for most of the programming and planning associated with the nationwide event. BLMAS is endorsed by figures such as Opal Tometi, the founder of #BlackLivesMatter, and Ibram X. Kendi, the author of *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*.⁷²

According to EdJustice, “the goal of Black Lives Matter at School is to spark an ongoing movement of critical reflection and honest conversation and impactful actions in school communities for people of all ages to engage with issues of racial justice.”⁷³ The group’s website encourages teachers to show their support by signing a school pledge and downloading BLM posters to print and hang in their classroom. The invitation to sign the pledge includes a link to Black Lives Matters at School’s curriculum page. This page is a library of social justice lesson plans that includes lessons based on articles such as “Disability Justice is an Essential Part of Abolishing Police and Prisons,” and instructions on how to recognize a “Trans Day of Resilience” in the classroom.⁷⁴

NEA also provides its own resource guide for BLMAS week, including links to activist sites that provide lesson plans such as “Introduction of Transgender and Nonbinary Identities with *I Am Jazz*,” for pre-k through second grade students,⁷⁵ and “Role Play: What We Don’t Learn About the Black Panther Party — But Should.”⁷⁶



The latter lesson plan comes from a pressure group called Rethinking Schools, which describes itself as “a nonprofit publisher and advocacy organization dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public education through social justice teaching and education activism.”⁷⁷ According to the introductory portion of the group’s Black Panther Party role-playing exercise, Rethinking Schools started in 1986 and has close organizational ties to both the NEA and the AFT. NEA is an active supporter of Rethinking Schools and the group regularly attends NEA events where it presents on activism in the classroom.⁷⁸

Rethinking Schools is also the parent organization of the “Zinn Education Project,” which the NEA has also offers as a resource for its members.⁷⁹ The Zinn Education Project promotes lesson programming and ideas based on Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, a controversial history book that explicitly reframes US history in Marxist terms as a class struggle viewed through the lens of oppression and responding social movements.⁸⁰

Sexuality in the Classroom

Controversy in school curricula is not limited to issues of race, either. Teachers unions have also pushed for inclusion of radical gender politics and a heightened role for discussion of sexuality in the classroom. For many teachers, incorporating these sensitive and mature topics can create situations of fundamental conflict with parents who would prefer to have those discussions in their family environment at home.

NEA’s EdJustice website directs teachers to dozens of resources for supporting the LGBTQ+ community, including tips tailored to virtual instruction that encourages teachers to establish “a private, virtual connection with an LGBTQ student that is not supported at home, so you can check in with them about their family dynamic and brainstorm self-care strategies.”⁸¹

EdJustice also links to a resource guide entitled *Supporting LGBTQ Students During the Coronavirus Quarantine: A Tip-Sheet for School Counselors*, which warns counselors that “unsupportive family members, or those who are unaware of their child’s LGBTQ identity could potentially listen in” on these private communications, adding a “new risk” which school staff have to consider.⁸²

These suggestions presume that parents are the antagonists in a child’s life, and adults outside the home are their rescuers. While school counselors may in some cases be justified in seeking private communications with a student, expanding these recommendations to all educators, as the NEA has done, broadens the role of teachers beyond their educational purview.

Obviously, it is important for teachers to observe and intervene in cases of abuse, but what constitutes “an LGBTQ student that is not supported at home?” Who holds teachers and school staff accountable for the content of these “private, virtual connections,” especially if conversations turn inappropriate or manipulative? Does a parent have the right to know what adults their children are communicating with online and outside of the home? And what happens to teachers who may mean no harm, but expose themselves to disciplinary action and unpleasant accusations when parents find out that they have been communicating online with their children about their sexuality?



This is a disturbing example of the expanding role of teachers which unions and other organizations are pressuring teachers to play, but dovetails with broader concerns about expanding the role of the school in the community and interrupting the traditional role of parents as the heads of the nuclear family. Expecting teachers to take this level of initiative in their student's personal life is asking too much of educators and deprives parents of their natural right to be informed about their child's health and developing personality.

Expectations that teachers and administrators should imbue schools with controversial gender politics has also ignited impassioned debate across the country, with lasting effects on families and students. In Leon County, Florida, a family filed a federal lawsuit against middle school administrators who helped their daughter create a gender transition plan that specifically noted that the parents were unsupportive and should be excluded from the dialogue, despite the fact that the parents had communicated with the school about their child's issues and were providing their daughter with mental health counseling outside of school.⁸³

As teachers unions push to minimize the role that parents' play in education, the responsibility of deciding what is right for impressionable children with varied needs and problems falls on the educator. Teachers are being encouraged to defy or circumvent parents to achieve what they deem best for the child, in situations that are well beyond the scope of intervening against mental or physical abuse. For many teachers, this may over-extend their obligations and capabilities in the classroom and put them in precarious legal and ethical situations. Are teachers and administrators right to make decisions which will directly affect the course of a child's life? Does excluding concerned parents from conversations about their child's identity and mental health foster trust and support with that family, or does it instead hinder healthy family dynamics? Should teachers really be expected to coordinate the long-term care and upbringing of thirty or more children they only met this past September?

Teachers unions say yes, with AFT and NEA minimizing parents' rights and advocating for student privacy over parental intervention. These unions have characterized parents' rights movements as racist, homophobic, right-wing politics, spearheaded by parents who prioritize their ideology over their relationship with their children. Certainly, this rhetoric by itself goes a long way toward fueling the distrust between families and their public schools, whether a particular teacher agrees or not.

The Daily Wire reported in March 2021 that Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) officials in Virginia had discussed firing teachers who raised objections to CRT-based curriculum. The chairwoman of a minority achievement committee within the district, Kiara Jennings, wrote an email to the board complaining of "negative feedback" to the curriculum coming from teachers. She wrote: "I was disheartened to see so much hate and vitriol centered around something that is meant to bring about inclusiveness and equity! While much of the push back came from parents and other community members, from what I understand there was also a great deal of negative feedback from LCPS teachers. That simply cannot and should not be tolerated by anyone employed by LCPS! If our teachers and staff cannot be open and willing to learn how to be culturally competent then they do not need to be in the



classrooms any longer as they will only hinder the process and most importantly cause irreparable harm to the vulnerable hearts and minds of our students.”⁸⁴

Teachers unions have played a critical role in the promotion of controversial, radical curriculum for children as young as preschool age. The NEA and the AFT contribute to an ecosystem of “activism” in the classroom, which imparts a biased viewpoint of the world to impressionable youth. Yet, these curricula also have an impact on teachers. By disseminating these materials, partnering with these organizations and passing these resolutions, unions have stoked an environment of “activism” that demands teachers actively participate in a movement that has increased tension with parents in their communities. The more these materials are enshrined in the unions’ professional standards of teaching, the less an individual teacher is free to choose to refrain from lessons and activities that are bound to start a conflict with concerned parents. Even as they claim to promote justice and equity, teachers unions are building a culture of ideological uniformity. This is bad for students, for the essential trust between families and schools, and for the educational working environment.

Teachers unions have also opposed state laws that seek to minimize discrimination and radicalization in the classroom. In July of 2021, AFT president Randi Weingarten told union members that the AFT would provide support to teachers who got into legal trouble for violating state laws that ban the teaching of CRT. Weingarten again denied that CRT is being taught in public schools below the university level but called these laws right-wing attacks on “honest history,” and claimed they would prevent teachers from accurately covering topics including the history of slavery in the United States.⁸⁵

As of this writing the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah have all passed legislation restricting or banning the use of CRT in public school curricula, or teaching related concepts such as “white privilege.” Alabama, Kentucky, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Wisconsin are all considering similar legislation; in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Rhode Island, and West Virginia legislation was offered but was rejected.⁸⁶

According to a poll conducted by the Economist/YouGov in June of 2021, more than half of adult American citizens said they knew what critical race theory was. Of that group, nearly 60 percent had a very unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable view of CRT, and more than half of them agreed that teaching CRT was bad for America.⁸⁷ With data such as these suggesting that critical race theory and related “social justice” topics are divisive and unwanted by the general public, it is a wonder that teachers unions continue to reiterate their support for CRT and refuse to heed parental objections.

Teachers unions are also encouraging substantial changes to the physical security of schools, calling on school districts to end their partnerships with local police departments and remove “school resource officers” from public schools. They are critical of current disciplinary practices against students who break school rules or local laws, which in itself is not necessarily objectionable, but they then tie such disciplinary reforms to social justice agendas that have little to do with keeping classrooms safe for all students.



For example, in 2017 AFT published a resolution called *Ending Discipline Disparities and Improving School Climate*. This resolution tied disciplinary “equity” among students of various ethnic backgrounds to initiatives such as increased ethnic education, wrap-around services, peer-to-peer mediation, the implementation of “restorative justice practices,” and the end of “zero-tolerance” disciplinary policies.

The AFT also recommended hiring more ethnically diverse educational staff, more school counselors and psychologists and a bigger commitment to diversity and inclusion training for school faculty and staff.⁸⁸ This push continued into 2021 with *Making “Black Lives Matter” In Our Schools*, which again links the reform of school discipline policies to “inclusive curriculum,” diverse hiring practices, and wrap-around services. This time, however, the AFT also called for police officers to be removed from schools, which was not a feature of its 2017 school discipline resolution.⁸⁹ The messaging here demonstrates that, in the wake of the George Floyd murder and riots in Minneapolis in 2020, teachers unions are using any tangentially related issue to push social justice programming into the classroom and expand school influence on student lives.

As the political atmosphere of the United States has become more divisive, tensions between left and right will seep into the classrooms of even the youngest students. The AFT and the NEA are advocating on behalf of spoon-feeding children radical ideas that “activists” know many of them will not hear at home. With at least half of the country objecting to the teaching of critical race theory and the social justice concepts that fall under its umbrella, teachers unions are doubling down on the belief they can pressure districts and communities to accept radical curriculum and policies by creating new norms in the public schools. These agendas damage the student-teacher relationship, the teacher-community relationship, and the quality of teacher experiences in the workplace. By pushing divisive, politically charged teaching into our classrooms, teachers unions are creating lose-lose situations for teachers who want to maintain objectivity and avoid conflict with parents and colleagues.



Community Schools Facilitate Union Priorities

The idea of “community schools” has been around for more than three decades in the US, but recently support for the alternative schooling model has dramatically increased. This year, the Biden administration’s official plan for education calls for a nearly fourteen-fold increase in funding for community school initiatives, from \$30 million per year to more than \$400 million.⁹⁰ A bill titled *Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2021* was introduced to Congress seeking to invest \$3.65 Billion over the next five years by awarding grants to schools who fully implement the community school model.⁹¹ In California, governor Gavin Newsom’s 2022 budget includes funding to transform more than one-third of California’s 10,000 public schools into community schools.⁹²

Several factors may explain this surge of interest, but the single largest driver is the enthusiastic support of teacher unions. This chapter examines the close relationship between teacher unions and community schools and reveals the most dangerous component of the community school model – its extensive and unprecedented data collection and surveillance of our nation’s most vulnerable and needy students.

Wrap-around Services

The term “Community School” is a catch-all phrase that can suggest different things. The Coalition for Community Schools, a pressure group in support of the concept, defines it broadly as “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources,” but also as “a strategy that coordinates relationships and resources through a public school to accelerate equitable outcomes in health, education and employment.”⁹³

The US Department of Education defines it more precisely as a “public elementary or secondary school that uses established partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and meet the social, emotional, physical, mental health, and academic needs of students.”⁹⁴

In practice, community schools are public schools that have been transformed into full-service community welfare centers, focused on addressing a wide spectrum of needs for each individual student and their family. The goal is to educate the “whole child.”⁹⁵ In order to meet this declared need, community schools will partner with private companies, nonprofit groups, and other community stakeholders to provide a vast array of student support. These comprehensive services are often referred to as “wrap-around services.”⁹⁶



A list of common wrap-around services typically includes:

- Extended learning time (before and after school, weekends, summer)
- Social-emotional development programs
- Early learning programs
- School transportation
- Housing programs
- Probation programs
- Primary healthcare
- Vision care
- Dental care
- Mental health care
- Trauma-informed care
- Nutritional programs
- Youth development programs
- Tutoring and other academic supports
- Wellness training
- “Mindfulness” training
- Yoga training
- Parent-Teacher home visit programs
- Enhanced student enrichment programs
- Truancy reduction programs
- Conflict resolution training
- Restorative practices that support mental health
- Anti-bullying training
- Academic courses and language classes for student parents
- Alternative disciplinary programs aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions
- Behavioral modification
- Laundry services
- Personal grooming services



A community school's constellation of wrap-around services can extend to every part of a student's and family's life. When a community school in Washington DC closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, one mother said that she had forgotten the price of haircuts, because for years the school had provided them for free.⁹⁷

Teachers Unions Promote Creation of Community Schools

Teacher unions have long championed these wrap-around services, which serve as the main differentiator for the community school model. One could even argue that teacher unions are ultimately responsible for the creation of community schools, which emerge out of the union philosophy of “bargaining for the common good.” Under this banner of greater-good advocacy, teacher unions can expand “the scope of bargaining beyond wages and benefits.”⁹⁸ A 2016 AFT report titled “Successful and Sustainable Community Schools: The Union as an Essential Ingredient” touts union-management collaboration as “a unique advocacy lever that only the union has access to.”⁹⁹

Across the country, community school leaders collaborate with teacher unions to “utilize collective bargaining agreements, memoranda of understanding and/or consultation agreements to introduce language supporting community schools to ensure that both the community school coordinator position and the local site-level decision-making team are in place at each school.” To better promote their wide array of educational and non-educational allies, teacher unions also play the role of “convener” by “leveraging these relationships for the common good of all students and families” in order to bring the community school strategy to local policymakers.¹⁰⁰ In support of community schools, teacher unions also create “internal activist taskforces” for local advocacy; they train “building representatives/site stewards”; they create formal agreements for stakeholder accountability; and introduce national and state-level resolutions.¹⁰¹

When United Teachers of Los Angeles went on strike in 2019, it was the biggest strike in thirty years. In the end, a deal was reached to fund thirty community schools based on the model furnished by the National Education Association (NEA).¹⁰² In 2019, the Chicago Teacher's Union also used collective bargaining to negotiate a contract with Chicago Public Schools that included \$10 million of funding to expand the number and variety of wrap-around services for the city's community schools.¹⁰³ And if the bill currently before the US Congress called *Full-Service Community School Expansion Act* passes, it should be noted that six of the twelve registered lobbyists roaming the halls of the Capitol advocating for that bill are AFT employees.¹⁰⁴

Two sentences from the New York City Council's Fiscal Year 2022 Adopted Expense Budget provide a glimpse of how directly teacher unions are involved in the wrap-around services provided by community schools. Under a section heading of “Educational Programs for Students” is the following:

“The allocation to the United Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation supports the Positive Learning Collaborative program (\$1,500,000), the BRAVE mental health hotline (\$200,000), and the expansion of Dial-a-Teacher to an online platform (\$168,800).”¹⁰⁵



All three of these programs were created in partnership between UFT, NYCDOE and third-party partners. The Positive Learning Collaborative (PLC) seeks to develop the social-emotional skills of students and eliminate major inequities by helping schools implement therapeutic crisis intervention, positive behavior interventions and support, and “restorative practices.”¹⁰⁶ The BRAVE mental health hotline (Braveline) is a confidential anti-bullying hotline provided by UFT and operated by the Mental Health Association of New York City.¹⁰⁷ Dial-A-Teacher is an afterschool homework help line and online platform staffed by active and retired UFT member teachers.¹⁰⁸ For each of these programs, extensive data on students and their family is collected, analyzed and shared with partners to meet student needs and ongoing funding requirements.

“The \$1,000,000 allocation to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) supports the Connect All Kids program, which provides students with laptops.”¹⁰⁹

This allocation statement does not reveal that all of the Dell laptops the NAACP will be providing to students in the Connect All Kids program will be pre-loaded with online educational gaming software made by a global company called KneoMedia Limited.¹¹⁰ Since 2018, KneoMedia has been partnering with NAACP to bring its educational gaming and assessment software (KneoWorld) to NYC schools, and in May of 2021, New York City Councillors committed \$3 million to the *Connect All Kids* program, with KneoWorld receiving nearly \$800,000 of the allotment.¹¹¹

School Vendors Harvest Student Data

One of KneoWorld’s crucial features is data capture and analysis. This information provides immediate, measurable results for schools, teachers, and parents to track a student’s progress.¹¹² This data harvesting also produces “highly detailed biometric data created from student use, creating student profiles that were not previously available,” the company says.¹¹³

KneoMedia’s executive director, Franklin Lieberman, has been a media and marketing director for more than forty years, producing tv shows and movies for the NBC, CBS, ABC, and PBS networks, as well as running a marketing firm whose clients included Coca Cola, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, and Pfizer.¹¹⁴ For the past ten years he has worked with UFT and the AFT to develop these educational programs. Jeffrey Huart, a member of KneoMedia’s educational advisory board, also worked with UFT for twenty-five years as the local AFT affiliate’s Special Representative. In that role he represented UFT members in grievance arbitration hearings.¹¹⁵ Huart serves concurrently as the Education Director of Projects for the New York State NAACP affiliate.¹¹⁶

This use of student biometric data is concerning, given that KneoMedia also supports the use of blockchain technology for the digital tracking of students. At the NAACP’s 2019 national conference, a resolution was proposed opposing the use of blockchain for “digital identity management,” but there was an attempt to amend the resolution by the group’s Brooklyn delegation, a group of attendees that included... Frank Lieberman.¹¹⁷ The delegate offering the amendment was Tiffany Linzan, a



“digital behavior data analyst” who has worked with IBM, and who claims to be working on “quantum mechanics.”¹¹⁸ Linzan’s amendment sought to insert language into the resolution that emphasized working with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the MacArthur Foundation’s Data and Society Research Institute to develop cross-device tracking, digital tracking and advertising, and digital customer segmentation.¹¹⁹ Ultimately, the amendment was voted down, because it would have undermined the original intent of the proposed legislation, which was to prevent the use of blockchain systems in educational settings.¹²⁰

Also, Frank Lieberman, through the NAACP, has “an established and very wide-reaching infrastructure across the United States, and the not-for-profit accreditation, to fast-track the sales and the roll-out of the KneoWorld content throughout the US.”¹²¹ Lieberman’s connections to powerful teacher unions will certainly help to streamline and sweeten every deal.

There are competitors in this space. “Schoology” is another digital learning ecosystem, endorsed by the NEA, which similarly partners with tech and health companies to extract vast amounts of student biometric data.¹²² Many school districts operating as community schools, such as Richmond Community Schools in Michigan, are using the Schoology platform. The company is actually a subsidiary of Powerschools, a leading cloud-based provider of K-12 education that supports “over 45 million students and 12,000+ districts, schools and other education institutions in over 90 countries.”¹²³ Powerschools partners with companies including identiMetrics, which offers “unified biometric ID management,” and Eyemetric Identity Systems, which incorporates “3-D facial recognition” into a school’s “automated alert system.”¹²⁴ Powerschools wrap-around partners also offer services such as artificial intelligence-enhanced analysis of student “well-being” data and, in some cases, algorithmically driven “precrime” behavioral tracking.¹²⁵

Educating the “whole child” is a primary tenet of the community school model, and is the driving force behind Powerschool’s hyper-personalized learning platform. A Powerschools white paper called “From Sight to Vision: How Data Can Contribute to Personalization and Preparedness in K-12 Education” asserts that “whole child” education can only be accomplished through the widescale collection and sharing of student data. The white paper calls for urgency in harvesting all this personal student data as a necessary response to the student and community inequities exposed by the COVID pandemic.¹²⁶ Here’s how the white paper begins:

“In March 2020, school buildings across the country went dark, and districts built remote learning programs out of whole cloth. Teachers, as they frequently lament, spent several months, if not a year or more, seeing only their students’ faces in little boxes on computer screens. Their complaint was about more than the limitations of video conferencing. It was a metaphor for their inability to see the whole child.”¹²⁷

The phrase “see the whole child” is used four times in the white paper, and the overall report makes more than a dozen references to “seeing” each student, as well as the need to “see” the school and district staff. For instance, Powerschool writes that “As educators become more comfortable relying on



data, they begin to see how it can allow school districts to personalize instruction, build equity, improve social-emotional development and, **most importantly, allow them to see the whole child**, not just one piece of them.” [emphasis added]

According to Powerschools, pre-pandemic data systems were wholly inadequate to deal with all the student inequities that the pandemic brought so starkly into focus, which leads to perhaps the most insidious claim in the white paper: “As students across the country return to brick-and-mortar classrooms, teachers now know that **seeing kids in person again won’t necessarily mean they’re seeing the whole student** — not without the systems in place that connect all available data, and not without the data culture that prioritizes it.” [emphasis added] In other words, traditional in-person learning will no longer be enough for those intent on vacuuming up every conceivable type of student data.

The 2021-2022 school year has also seen a new use for the community school model: helping refugee families transition into American public schooling. The NEA devotes a web page to how schools can partner with Afghan refugees, and touts a case study by one of its nonprofit partners — iColorín Colorado! – that explains how the Austin Independent School District (Austin ISD) is coordinating with Afghan refugees and bringing them into their schools.¹²⁸ Austin ISD is a community school, which means an extensive number of wrap-around services will be furnished (by necessity, according to ESSA community school policy) to meet every Afghan student need, including trauma care, health care, social-emotional development, English language learning, etc., for the whole family.¹²⁹ It will be interesting to see if all the Afghan students end up in “community schools,” which could ultimately serve as hubs for welfare services for Afghan families outside of the normal channels.



Endnotes

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