

Choosing aspiration over anger

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If there is one place where you can see the herculean lift of real-time recovery from the effects of the pandemic, it's in our nation's public schools. Every day, teachers and school staff are working with students to overcome challenges, accelerate learning, and bounce back from disruption and anxiety. Educators and mental health professionals are providing counseling and other interventions to support students' healing from unprecedented social and emotional trauma. Kids are adapting to new ways of doing "kid things"—school plays, sports, clubs, recess and just hanging out. Parents are getting back to work and more predictable schedules. These are all a welcome return to many of our old routines.

We all yearn for normalcy, like not having to wear masks, which is why I asked federal health and education officials months ago for science-based off-ramps to help determine when students and staff can be unmasked in school.

There is no denying that two years of pandemic upheavals have taken an enormous toll, particularly on families with school-age and younger children. While some people play up anger and finger-pointing, I see parents and school staff working every day to get our students through these challenges. In numerous polls, the vast majority of parents [praise](#) their schools' handling of health and academic concerns. Polling conducted for the AFT found that [parents](#) give very high ratings to their children's teachers and say that their teachers have made an extra effort to help students during the pandemic. Parents are very satisfied with the job public schools are doing to keep children safe, support their social and emotional well-being, and help them achieve their potential.

So why are some operatives stirring up controversy, stoking divisions and miring public schools in political squabbles instead of supporting this healing and progress?

Journalist Ronald Brownstein explored on CNN.com this week how schools are getting swept up in culture wars, particularly "the effort by Republican-led states to censor how teachers talk about present and historic racial and gender inequities." Jeffrey Sachs, a political scientist who tracks these laws for the free-speech group PEN America, told Brownstein he expects that ultimately all 23 Republican-controlled states will approve some version of these measures.

Make no mistake about what these extremists are doing. They are banning books that tell the stories of Black people, of gay people, of Jewish people. They are passing laws restricting teachers from teaching about true but troubling parts of our history. And they are setting up tip lines and offering bounties to "report" teachers, in an attempt to censor how public schools talk about race, gender and what some lawmakers deem to be "divisive" concepts.

Parents and educators are partners, helping students recover and thrive.

I taught social studies and civics. I know that teachers don't tell students *what* to think; we teach them *how* to think. We teach honest, age-appropriate history, the good and the bad, not a mythology that erases painful truths. As a grandmother, I know that families and educators work hand in hand to help our children become well-informed, well-read and engaged citizens.

In this moment, more than ever in my memory, we need to find ways to come together to solve problems. And our children need to see us do just that. A new report from the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation describes a "civic virus" affecting many

people throughout the country. Fear and anxiety about what's happening around them lead Americans to separate and segregate themselves. In turn, leaders, media and social media exploit this polarization for their gain, creating an alternate reality that confuses and upsets people. People may respond by breaking into smaller "tribes" to protect themselves or gain validation, while others retreat from engaging at all.

We must address this "civic virus" as surely as we must combat the coronavirus, and our public schools can show us a way. Parents and educators are vital partners, helping students come back from disappointment and loss, showing up and listening to one another, and showing grace and gratitude. America is at its best when we come together.

Every moment in history, and every new day, can be viewed through a lens of hope or fear, aspiration or anger. We have seen how anger can consume, misguide and divide people. But we know that aspiration can lead to understanding our differences and having empathy for one another's fears. It leads to knowing that our shared hope for a better life is not a zero-sum game—that we all benefit from access to good jobs; high-quality healthcare, public schools and colleges; freedom from discrimination; and a voice in our democracy. I think we can all agree that, as individuals and as a country, our hopes take us further than our fears.



Photo: Megan Ackerman

Weingarten with a student during a visit to PS 6 in Brooklyn on Feb. 17, as part of the AFT's "Reading Opens the World" campaign.

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