

Freedom from fear

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Presidents set a tone for our country. Franklin D. Roosevelt guided the United States through the Great Depression at home and a war against tyranny and genocide abroad, reassuring the country that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Subsequent presidents set the nation’s sights on the moon, strove to regain trust after Watergate, called for unity after the 9/11 attacks, and led with hope over fear.

What a stark contrast to the current president. Donald Trump traffics in fear: The contrived threat he calls an “invasion” of nonwhite immigrants. The panic that grips immigrants who worry their families will be ripped apart as they seek refuge and a better life. Hatred of the “other”—races, religions and ideologies—that has emerged from the periphery of society into the mainstream. Indeed, Trump has said that “real power” comes from instilling fear.

Such toxic fear is never far from my mind these days. Tragically, even the start of the school year, which should be a happy and exciting time, has been clouded by fear. In El Paso, Texas, Latinos doing back-to-school shopping were deliberately targeted by a white supremacist whose manifesto echoed Trump’s rhetoric. After the massive raids by U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement in Mississippi that same week, many immigrants are so scared that they are not sending their children to school. Eighty percent of teens say their greatest fear is gun violence. The specter of the worst of humanity invading what should be our safest spaces is no longer unthinkable.

America’s educators know we are more than imparters of skills and knowledge; we are first responders to all that affects children’s well-being. But we need help and resources. We need more school counselors, nurses and mental health professionals to deal with the anxiety, bullying and trauma that our students now routinely confront. We need to address the fact that young people are more stressed about gun violence than any other issue—a horrific reality that is unique to the United States. We need lawmakers to enact real change to our gun laws so that every person can feel safe in school and in our communities. And we need corporations to use their clout to make our country safer; it is infuriating that corporate giants like Walmart sell both guns and bulletproof backpacks, while writing checks to lawmakers who stand in the way of sensible gun laws.

Last week, educators and healthcare professionals from our union traveled to McAllen, Texas, and Canton, Miss., to help immigrant children and families. Federal authorities denied our many applica-

tions to check on children being held in detention centers at the border, claiming our group of teachers and nurses “does not have a legitimate mission” justifying a visit. Armed guards even threatened to arrest us as we prayed outside one detention center. Mandy Manning, the 2018 National Teacher of the Year, articulated why we were there: “We don’t only

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have a responsibility to the kids in our classrooms,” she said. “We have a responsibility to all children.”

The Catholic Charities Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, in contrast, welcomed our presence and our gifts of supplies, books, blankets and toys. I met a mother and her teenage son who had made a dangerous three-month journey from Honduras to Texas, walking the entire way. Their exhaustion was eclipsed by excitement, because that night they would board a bus to Houston, where the mother would be reunited with her husband after 15 years and the son would meet his father for the first time. The determination, hopefulness and elation of this family that soon would be united contrasted sharply with the cruelty of the Trump administration’s family separation policies and abject disregard for people seeking refuge in our country.

As the new school year begins, educators will inspire, encourage, empower, nurture and motivate our students. But the current social and political climate has put enormous pressure on our schools. Educators strive to make their classrooms safe and welcoming places for every child, knowing that, increasingly, school may be the only such

place outside of children’s homes. Today, teachers are called on not only to teach, but to be nurturers of decency and guardians of democracy.

Public schools are at the center of our communities. They are where people get to know their neighbors. They are where we guide young people to build not just skills and knowledge, but relationships as well. They are where we celebrate America’s diversity, respect our differences and forge a common identity. In so doing, our public schools are central to the well-being of society and the strength of our democracy.

Fear is a tool of demagogues and bullies. It diminishes us as a society. It makes us less safe and less humane. We are better than this, and our leaders must be better than this. Let us strive toward FDR’s great aspiration of “freedom from fear.”



Photo: Asher Huey

Weingarten (in white), Evelyn DeJesus and LeRoy Barr of New York City’s United Federation of Teachers, lead AFT education and healthcare leaders in prayer outside an immigrant detention center in McAllen, Texas, on Aug. 14.

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