



On Target

AFT Local #2569

January 2020



Clarence Teachers Make the Difference

01/21/2020

Court considers public funding for religious schools

The AFT and dozens of other education and religious groups are watching closely this week as the Supreme Court considers whether to strike down the prohibition on state funding for religious education. The case, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, examines whether school voucher programs—which use tax-credited donations to pay for scholarships to private schools—must include religious schools among those they fund.



If the court rules in favor of religious school vouchers, “it will be a virtual earthquake in terms of what will happen to religious liberty and public education in this country,” says AFT President Randi Weingarten. The AFT is among dozens of education, religious and civil rights organizations, and legal experts—along with 10 states—that have filed amicus briefs to protect the ban on religious school vouchers.

These public education advocates—including the many protesters expected outside the court on the day of opening arguments, Jan. 22—call the case a dangerous attempt to mandate taxpayer support for religious schools, where students may learn intolerance of other religions, be indoctrinated against sexual preferences and gender identities, and be encouraged to reject science in favor of creationism. “The question before the court is simple yet critical,” says Rachel Laser, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

“Does the court require that we pay for religious education and religious practice? ... Does the Constitution require that our tax dollars go to support schools that would refuse to hire LGBTQ people or take their kids?” Or, she adds, does it require that Jewish and Muslim families pay for Christian indoctrination?

Religious institutions are also opposing the vouchers, which would entangle the government in their function and undermine freedom of religion.

The First Amendment is at the center of the argument: AFT leaders and others call it “inconceivable” that those who wrote it—the framers of the Constitution—intended to require public funding of religious institutions or schools. In fact, that’s exactly what the amendment’s free exercise clause and the concept of separation of church and state were intended to prevent: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” it reads. This clause ensures Americans’ freedom to practice the religion of their choice by keeping the government out of those decisions, and it is the reason we became a nation of citizens who are deeply religious and who hold diverse faiths and views.

The *Espinoza* case is “a total and utter perversion of the First Amendment,” says Weingarten. “It turns the free exercise clause on its head to mandate particular support for religion.”

Espinoza’s impact will be felt far beyond Montana: Thirty-eight states include language in their state constitutions to prevent the funding of religious schools, indicating that public money should go to public education. All of them are threatened.

This case is also bigger than one parent suing the state of Montana. The plaintiff, Kendra Espinoza, is a mother who wants the state to pay for her children to attend religious school, but the case is actually funded by the Institute for Justice, which has collected tens of millions of dollars from the Waltons, the DeVoses, Charles Koch and other wealthy, right-wing donors. They are bankrolling this effort as a backdoor attempt to get the Supreme Court to impose the failed DeVos agenda of private school vouchers nationwide.

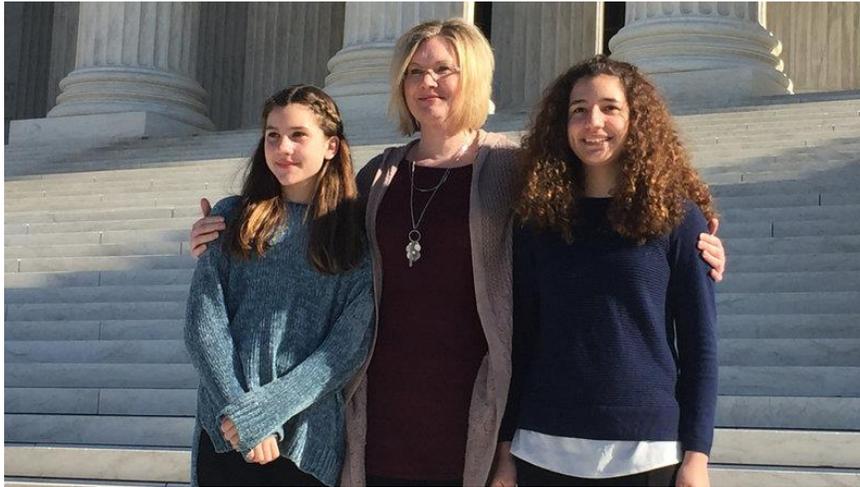
Join the AFT on [Twitter\(link is external\)](#) and on [Facebook\(link is external\)](#) to resist this effort to privatize education and allow the public funding of religious schools.

[Virginia Myers]

Supreme Court Could Be Headed To A Major Unraveling Of Public School Funding

January 23, 2020 5:00 AM ET

NINA TOTENBERG



Kendra Espinoza stands with her daughters outside the U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday. Espinoza is the lead plaintiff in a case that could make it easier to use public money to pay for religious schooling.

Jessica Gresko/AP

In a case with potentially profound implications, the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative majority seemed ready to invalidate a provision of the Montana state constitution that bars aid to religious schools. A decision like that would work a sea change in constitutional law, significantly removing the longstanding high wall of separation between church and state.

The focal point of Wednesday's argument was a ruling by the Montana Supreme Court that struck down a tax subsidy for both religious and nonreligious private schools. The Montana court said that the subsidy violated a state constitutional provision barring any state aid to religious schools, whether direct or indirect.

On the steps of the Supreme Court Wednesday, Kendra Espinoza, a divorced mother of two, explained why she is challenging that ruling.

"We are a Christian family and I want those values taught at school," she said. "Our morals as a society come from the Bible. I feel we are being excluded simply because we are people of religious background."

Vocal Supreme Court justices

Thirty-seven other states have no-aid state constitutional provisions similar to Montana's, and for decades conservative religious groups and school-choice advocates have sought to get rid of them. On Wednesday, though, that goal looked a lot closer.

Five of the justices at some time in their lives attended private Catholic schools, and some of them were particularly vocal. Justice Brett Kavanaugh said that the history of excluding religious schools from public funding has its roots in the "religious bigotry against Catholics" in the late 1800s. He seemed to dismiss arguments made by the state's lawyer that Montana had completely rewritten its constitution in 1972, without any such bias.

Mae Nan Ellingson, one of the delegates to that convention, said afterward that there were ministers and "people of all faiths" at the convention who overwhelmingly had supported the no-aid provision.

"We didn't think that public funds should be used to support private parochial education but rather that public funds need to support public education," she said.

The justices, however, seemed uninterested in that record.

'A radical decision'

Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito compared the exclusion of parochial schools from taxpayer-funded aid programs to unconstitutional discrimination based on race.

That view suggested that Wednesday's case has the potential for much broader public funding of parochial schools.

It wasn't enough, for instance, that the Montana court treated all private schools the same way, whether they were religious or not. As Justice Elena Kagan put it, once the Montana court invalidated the tax subsidy for all private schools, weren't they all "in the same boat?"

No, replied lawyer Richard Komer, representing the religious parents. He maintained that the no-aid provision in the state constitution is itself a violation of the federal constitution. And he also argued that because the state

constitution illegally discriminated against religious schools and families, the tax-credit program must be revived. In short, that the state has no discretion to abolish it.

"That would be a radical decision," said Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

Justice Stephen Breyer wondered where the plaintiffs' equal-treatment argument would end. He noted major school systems spend billions in taxpayer money to fund the public schools. "If I decide for you," he asked, would these school systems "have to give proportionate amounts to parochial schools?"

Deputy Solicitor General Jeffrey Wall, representing the Trump administration, basically answered "yes."

"You can't deny a generally available public benefit" to an otherwise qualified institution "based solely on its religious character," he said.

Representing the state of Montana, lawyer Adam Unikowsky told the justices that the states until now have generally had the power "to decide that they're only going to fund the public school system."

But Justice Kavanaugh repeatedly seemed to suggest that religious families who want to send their children to parochial schools should be treated equally under the constitution.

Just how far the Supreme Court will go in that regard may depend on Chief Justice Roberts, who, after a long night at the impeachment trial, did not entirely tip his hand.

Editor's Note

Each month the On Target will come out near the end of the month.

If you have something that you would like included, please send as a Word document by the 20th of the month to: lpunek@clarenceschools.org

Items that could be included are: Articles dealing with education/unions, Good ideas for teaching, something humorous/light dealing with education, Information for sharing, Opinion pieces on education, Advertisement for a service you provide.

Thank you,
Lisa Panek

• Graduation Requirements

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020 ISSUE
JANUARY 06, 2020

NYSUT surveys members on state graduation requirements

Author: Sylvia Saunders
Source: NYSUT United



Caption: Mary Tomczak of Erie 1 Professional Education Association talks about how her BOCES has had great success with its “Twilight” program that offers early evening classes to students in danger of dropping out. Photo by Andrew Watson.

As state policymakers launch a two-year exploration into changing graduation requirements, NYSUT is polling members both formally and informally to see what they think about Regents exams and possible alternatives.

“Our focus has been and will always be to ensure your voice is heard,” NYSUT Executive Vice President Jolene DiBrango told members of the union’s Policy Council, subject area committees and BOCES Leadership Council during December meetings. “To help guide NYSUT’s advocacy, we want to have your feedback. You are our curriculum leaders — our eyes and ears in the field.”

DiBrango said NYSUT’s Polling Center surveyed more than 1,000 members by phone to see what they think about the state’s graduation requirements. The current requirements for a New York State diploma include, at a minimum, successful completion of 22 units of credit and passing four Regents exams (English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies) plus an approved graduation pathway assessment.

- **RESULTS: NYSUT Membership Survey on State Graduation Requirements. (Member login required.)**

DiBrango gave committee members a quick overview of polling responses and then sought their feedback. The phone survey identified several key issues: The majority of members, or about 82 percent, believe there should be greater flexibility for students to meet graduation requirements.

More than two-thirds think all students should continue to be provided with the opportunity to take Regents exams, even if students are not required to pass Regents exams to graduate.

More than half said there should be a statewide test like a Regents exam to determine proficiency in a specific subject.

Respondents were split when asked if the current number of required Regents exams is on target. Forty-nine percent said it's the right number; 38 percent said there are too many; and 8 percent weren't sure.

In addition to the Regents exam option, 90 percent said they would support an alternative to the Regents exam for students to meet graduation requirements.

In answer to an open-ended question about what kind of alternatives they would like to see offered, respondents suggested: portfolios, capstone and project-based assessments; local assessments; vocational and technical exams; and alternative exams for students with disabilities. Some said passing courses and attaining the credits should be sufficient; others called for a single statewide proficiency test.

In discussion with NYSUT Policy Council and subject area committee members, several noted that the current battery of tests can be frustrating for English language learners and students with special needs, especially those at a reading level far below the test. Others said school counselors are carrying such heavy caseloads that it's difficult for them to provide students the guidance and support they need to navigate the state's complex system of graduation options and take advantage of the current flexibility.

DiBrango urged committee members to take part in upcoming Regents forums to be held January through March.

"It's important for the Regents to hear about all the complexities you are talking about," she said. "They need to understand there cannot be a one-size-fits-all system."

Michigan charter schools got millions in taxpayer money for schools that never opened

By DUSTIN DWYER · DEC 11, 2019

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CREDIT AARON BURDEN / UNSPLASH

A federal program awarded \$7.7 million to charter schools in Michigan that never opened. That's according to [a report](#) from the Network for Public Education.

A total of 257 charter schools in Michigan received money from the federal program. 72 of them never opened. No other state had that many unopened charter schools that received money from the Charter Schools Program.

Another 40 charter schools in Michigan that received money have since closed. In total, 44% of the schools that won grants are no longer open.

Despite that, Michigan is moving ahead with the latest round of the federal program, which could send an additional \$47 million to the state's charter schools.

"I continue to have major concerns about this entire program," said State Board of Education President Cassandra Ulbrich, "not just here in Michigan, but on the federal level as well."

In May, Ulbrich and others on the board voted to reject the criteria for the new round of grants through the Charter Schools Program. The money has already been appropriated, and charter schools can still get funds.

But Ulbrich told fellow Board of Education members on Tuesday she still has questions.

“The most disturbing thing that I found from reviewing the documentation from these grants was that there really appeared to be no prohibition on conflicts of interest,” Ulbrich says.

The report from the Network for Public Education lists several examples from Michigan in which charter school operators paid themselves, or their family members, tens of thousands of dollars in consulting fees for schools that never opened.

State Superintendent Michael Rice told members of the State Board of Education at a meeting Tuesday that he’s asking the Michigan Department of Education to keep a closer eye on funding for the next round of grants.

“I have asked the office of the internal audit services to begin an audit in this area,” he said. “I do think that it is appropriate.”

Ulbrich says she will continue to monitor the program as well.

“We just need to remember that this is taxpayer money,” she said. “And we on the board are the representatives of the taxpayers. And so we need to do a better job, and I need to do a better job and I will be doing a better job moving forward.”

Nationwide, the Network for Public Education says more than \$500 million in federal money has been spent in the Charter Schools Program on schools that are no longer open.

. **SECOND OPINION**

UCare generously supports MinnPost's Second Opinion coverage; [learn why](#).

Music participation in high school linked to higher scores on English, math and science exams

By [Susan Perry](#) | 06/27/2019



Creative Commons/Nic McPhee

The study found that students who had participated in music courses consistently scored higher on English, math and science exams than their peers who took no music courses.

Students who take music courses in high school tend to perform significantly better on math and science exams than their non-musical peers, no matter what their socioeconomic backgrounds, according to a large Canadian [study](#) published this week in the [Journal of Educational Psychology](#).

The effect was observed among all types of high school music students, although it was stronger among those who played an instrument than among those who sang.

The findings suggest that schools should be encouraging rather than eliminating music programs, the study's authors say.

“In public education systems in North America, arts courses, including music courses, are commonly underfunded in comparison with what are often referred to as academic courses, including math, science and English,” says **Peter Gouzouasis**, the study’s senior author and a professor of music education at the University of British Columbia, in **a released statement**. “It is believed that students who spend school time in music classes, rather than in further developing their skills in math, science and English classes, will underperform in those disciplines. Our research suggests that, in fact, the more they study music, the better they do in those subjects.”

Study details

For the study, Gouzouasis and his colleagues examined the academic records for more than 112,000 young people attending public schools in British Columbia. All had started the first grade between 2000 and 2003, had completed their last three years of high school and had taken at least one standardized test for English, math or science. The researchers also had demographic information for the students, including their socioeconomic status (determined by the neighborhood in which they lived).

About 13 percent of those students had taken at least one music course during their time in high school that required performing and practicing music, such as concert band, jazz band, conservatory piano, concert choir or vocal jazz.

The study found that students who had participated in these courses consistently scored higher on English, math and science exams than their peers who took no music courses. And the higher their level of involvement in music, the higher their exam scores were likely to be.

“Those associations were more pronounced for those who took instrumental music rather than vocal music,” adds Gouzouasis. “On average, the children who learned to play a musical instrument for many years, and were now playing in high school band and orchestra, were the equivalent of about one academic year ahead of their peers with regard to their English, mathematics and science skills, as measured by their exam grades.”

Students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to take music lessons (both inside and outside of school). They are also more likely to score higher on standardized tests. So the researchers adjusted the data to control for this factor.

The findings still held.

Limitations and implications

This study is **observational**, so it can't prove a direct causal relationship between taking a music course in high school and scoring higher on English, math and science tests. Other factors not controlled for in the study may also explain the results. (The parents of children who are involved in music classes in high school may have a parenting style that leads to higher academic achievement, for example.)

Also, the database used in the study only identified students who took music classes in schools. Some students may have been involved in private music instruction outside of school.

Nor was the study able to measure the quality of the music lessons offered in the schools.

Any of those factors that may have influenced the study's results.

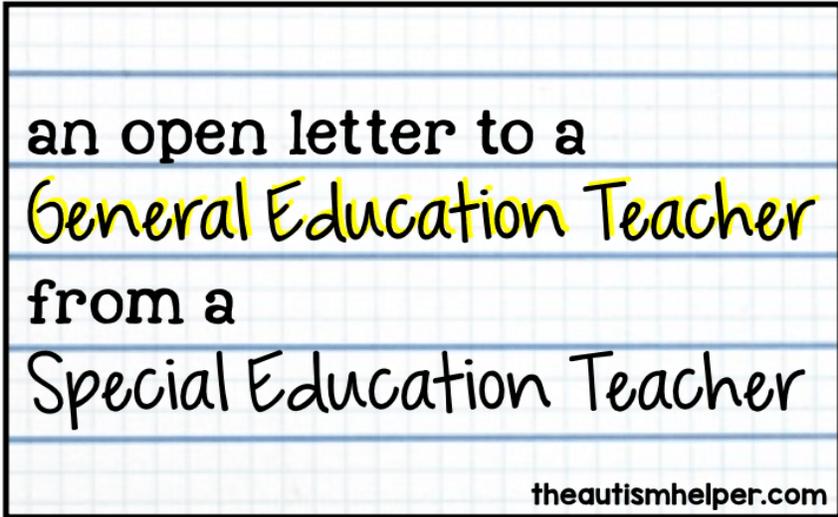
Still, Gouzouasis and his co-authors say there are good reasons to believe that the skills children learn from studying music are transferrable to their studies in other subjects.

“Learning to play a musical instrument and playing in an ensemble is very demanding,” Gouzouasis points out. “A student has to learn to read music notation, develop eye-hand-mind coordination, develop keen listening skills, develop team skills for playing in an ensemble and develop discipline to practice. All those learning experiences play a role in enhancing children's cognitive capacities and their self-efficacy.”

“Often, resources for music education — including the hiring of trained, specialized music educators, and band and orchestral instruments — are cut or not available in elementary and secondary schools,” Gouzouasis adds. “The irony is that music education — multiple years of high-quality instrumental learning and playing in a band or orchestra or singing in a choir at an advanced level — may be the very thing that improves all-around academic achievement and an ideal way to have students learn more holistically in schools.”

An Open Letter from a Special Education Teacher to a General Education Teacher

Sasha Long 09.13.17 Comments: 10



an open letter to a
General Education Teacher
from a
Special Education Teacher

theautismhelper.com

Dear General Education Teacher,

Let me take a minute to introduce myself and my class. Even though we have worked down the hallway from each other for years, we have both been so busy that we never got a chance for a proper introduction. I am a special education teacher. Similar to you, I teach academics, write lesson plans, deal with challenging behavior, have parent meetings, go to Professional Developments, and deal with a mountain of paperwork and assessments. Because we have both been so busy, I want to clear up a few misconceptions about my job and my class.

I teach academics too. My students might not academically be on the same level as their grade level peers but they are still working hard on language arts, math, science, and social studies at their individualized level. Some of my students might need more breaks and shorter work sessions to get through their tasks. We use assessments and data to plan our curriculum and instruction just like your class.

Just because I have more help than you doesn't mean my job is easier. Sometimes you might glance in my classroom as you are walking down the hallway and see

4 adults. You might be a little envious of that extra support. I know your job is challenging just like mine. The extra adults help give my students the individualized instruction they need. Whole group or even sometimes small group instruction doesn't always work with my students. The added adults in my classroom make academic and functional learning possible for my kids. It isn't a bonus – it's a necessity.

I'm not inflexible to be a pain, I'm advocating for my students. You may have had a weird encounter with me within the last few years. It might have left a weird taste in your mouth and you probably walked away thinking, "dang that teacher is a diiiiiva." Maybe you asked me if we could switch gym class periods for the day because of your testing schedule and I said no. Maybe you saw me throwing a small tantrum in the principal's office because one of my paraprofessionals was out and there was no substitute. Maybe you've seen me march down to the office each and every school picture day and have them switch my scheduled time. I promise you I'm not being a jerk. I'm not thinking my class is more important than anyone else's. In those moments, I was advocating for my students. I was advocating for my students who can't talk or can't express their wants, need, and frustrations well. I was advocating for my students who have extreme difficulty with change, novel events, and overwhelming sensory situations. I was advocating for their best interests to keep them happy, calm, and feeling safe. I was advocating for consistent schedules and routines that help my students feel secure, comfortable, and decrease anxiety. I was advocating for my kids just like you advocate for yours. I'd love for our classrooms to work together more. As a special education teacher, I sometimes feel left out. Our students may be working on different skills so collaboration just doesn't happen as naturally. I know you are busy planning for your own classroom as well as organizing special events like pep rallies, spelling bees, dances, committees, field trips, class parties, and so much more. **Invite my class to special events.** Please. It would mean the world to me. We won't always be able to say yes. Some special events may be too challenging for some of my kids. But please keep asking. There will be special activities that will be a great fit for some of my kids.

I'd love to learn from you. I'd love for my classroom to look more like yours. If you are doing a cool project or monthly theme, let me know. **I'd love to learn how you are teaching that concept and see if there is a way I can incorporate that in my classroom.** I'd also love for you to learn about my classroom. I often feel like I am on an island all alone. Ask me what my students

are working on. I am an expert in the world of data collection and behavior management and I may be able to share a helpful tip or two for your class. Your students might not know how to interact with my students. That's okay. They are kids. Teach them about my class. Teach them about how we are all different. Teach them that differences aren't scary. **Model for your students how to interact with my class.** When you walk down the hallway and pass my class, say hi. Learn my students' names. Be the positive role model that your students need to learn how to engage with my kids.

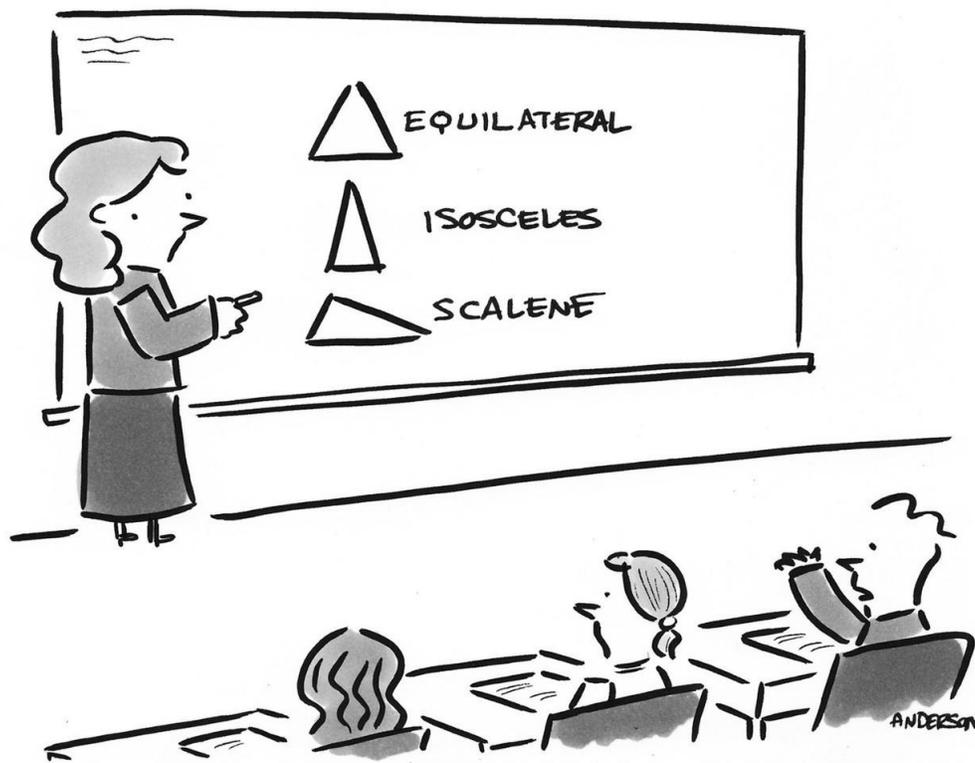
You may have seen some challenging behavior go down in the hallway or at the playground. Maybe a student was aggressive. **It's okay to feel scared or uneasy about seeing aggression. Please ask me about it later.** Ask me if I am okay and the student is okay. Ask me what you should do in the future if you see that happening again. Your interest and concern is beyond appreciated. Asking shows that you want to learn more. All behavior is communication – even aggression. I'd love to share with you what my student was trying to communicate and how we are working on teaching more functional behaviors. Please keep any judgments or opinions to yourself, it's easy to make quick assumptions like "he shouldn't be in this school" or "that is unacceptable." Important details that you are unaware of like medication and home life factors may impact behavior in a big way.

Our students are all members of this school community. Giving your students the opportunity to have meaningful relationships with my students will create more empathetic, inclusive, creative, flexible, and understanding adults. These will be the kind of adults that change the world. These will be the kind of adults that make our community better for everyone. **These relationships start with you and I.** When we can work together and be a united force, all of our students benefit. This year, I am looking forward to working alongside with you towards this goal. It was nice to finally have this formal introduction 😊

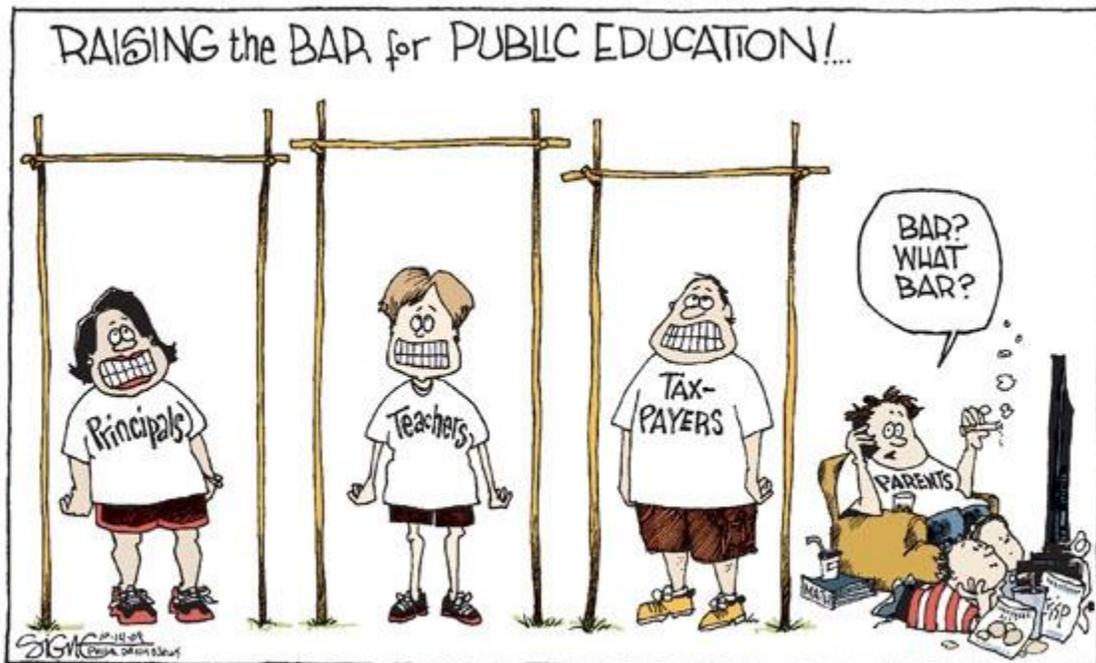
Sincerely,
a Special Education Teacher

• The Lighter Side

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"You forgot Bermuda."



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Preventing Youth Suicide: Tips for Parents and Educators

If you or someone you know is suicidal, get help immediately via 911, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK or the Crisis Text Line (text "HOME" to 741741).

Suicide is preventable. Youth who are contemplating suicide frequently give warning signs. Do not be afraid to ask about suicidal thoughts. Never take warning signs lightly or promise to keep them secret.

Risk Factors



- Hopelessness
- Non-suicidal self injury (e.g., cutting)
- Mental illness, especially severe depression, but also post traumatic stress, ADHD, and substance abuse
- History of suicidal thinking and behavior
- Prior suicide among peers or family members
- Interpersonal conflict, family stress/dysfunction
- Presence of a firearm in the home

Warning Signs



- Suicidal threats in the form of direct (e.g., "I want to die") and indirect (e.g. "I wish I could go to sleep and not wake up") statements
- Suicide notes, plans, online postings
- Making final arrangements
- Preoccupation with death
- Giving away prized possessions
- Talking about death
- Sudden unexplained happiness
- Increased risk taking
- Heavy drug/alcohol use

What to Do



- Remain calm, nonjudgmental and listen.
- Ask directly about suicide (e.g., "Are you thinking about suicide").
- Focus on your concern for their well-being
- Avoid being accusatory (e.g., don't say, "You aren't going to do anything stupid are you?").
- Reassure them that there is help; they will not feel like this forever.
- Provide constant supervision. Do not leave the youth alone.
- Remove means for self-harm, especially firearms.
- **Get help!** Never agree to keep suicidal thoughts a secret. Tell an appropriate caregiving adult. Parents should seek help from school or community mental health resources as soon as possible. School staff should take the student to a school-employed mental health professional.

Reminders for Parents



After a school notifies a parent of their child's risk for suicide and provides referral information, parents must:

- **Continue to take threats seriously.** Follow through is important even after the child calms down or informs the parent "they didn't mean it."
- **Access school supports.** If parents are uncomfortable with following through on referrals, they can give the school psychologist permission to contact the referral agency, provide referral information, and follow up on the visit.
- **Maintain communication with school.** After an intervention, the school will also provide follow-up supports. Your communication will be crucial to ensuring that the school is the safest, most comfortable place possible for your child.

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