



# On Target

AFT Local #2569

## March 2019



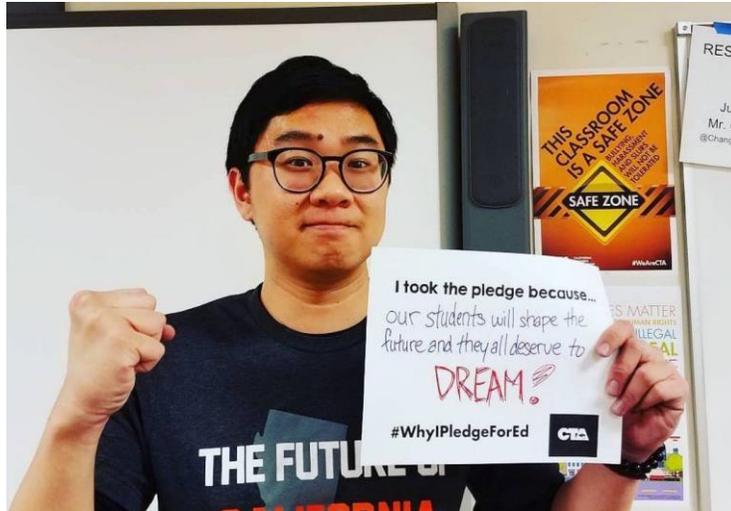
Clarence Teachers Make the Difference

## • Why Stay?

MARCH 19, 2019 • 12:10PM

# Why We Stay: What Motivates Educators To Step Into (and Remain) in the Classroom

BY **BRENDA ÁLVAREZ** AND **LISA LEIGH**



*Jayson Chang*

It's a well-known fact that many public school teachers enter the profession **only to leave a short time later**. The U.S. Census Bureau says teachers are leaving the profession at a rate that has continued to climb for the past three years.

First-grade teacher Michelle Usher stays. Currently in her eleventh year of teaching, and her second year at Brentfield Elementary School in Dallas, Texas, Usher says she considered the statistics on teachers who leave while attending last summer's **NEA Representative Assembly**, and wondered, "Why aren't we also talking about the people like me who stay?"

Her musings inspired this story about the motivations that encourage Usher and other teachers to stay.

Usher was raised by a mom who this year entered her 39th year as an educator. But it was really her third-grade teacher, Robin Johnson—with whom Usher continues to maintain contact—who inspired her to teach.

While she was a student in Johnson's class, Usher's grandmother died. "It was really hard on me," she says. Johnson assured her they would weather Usher's grief together.

Johnson's support led Usher to understand early that teachers provide more than academic instruction. They also provide care—the lesson Usher says she most wants her students to receive: “I’m not just here to teach you something. I really care about you.”

Usher's first teaching experience was in an Arkansas county where the number of students from families with low incomes was high. In the neighborhood surrounding her current school in Texas homes average \$300,000, compared to a state-wide average of \$185,000. The only difference between the two sets of students, says Usher, “is what their parents can provide.”

She says students enter school carrying with them an invisible suitcase filled with whatever is going on in their lives, and they can't set it aside. “Even though I don't know what's going on, I can help them unpack their suitcase.” At day's end, she helps pack it back up, hoping that she has helped to make the contents a bit “fluffier and brighter,” she says.



*Michelle Usher (Photo: Hoyoung Lee)*

And that's why she remains. “I stay because I want to make change. Even when I started teaching, there were laws and policy procedures that didn't fit with what is actually happening in the classroom. I could have left five years ago, but my drive is if I keep teaching in the classroom, [and] keep talking to parents, we can get the votes we need.”

She adds, “I think now, we are seeing what we decided earlier isn't going to work. If I can impact students every day, teach them how government works, I am impacting what we will see in 20 years.”

## **Student Success**

Jennie Campbell, a special education teacher at Pine Ridge Elementary School in Aurora, Colo., has a similar experience and agrees with Usher's sentiment about how educators help to shape the future.

“For our kindergarteners today, the world is going to look completely different by the time they're in twelfth grade,” says Campbell, who adds that educators strive to “help best meet the needs of our kids so that the world is accessible to all of them.”

Campbell is a fifth-generation educator and says teaching runs in her blood. Her mom was a teacher of students with severe needs. Her grandmother was an English teacher whose mother and grandmother were one-room schoolhouse teachers.

Campbell also has aunts and cousins who teach. But when *NEA Today* asked Campbell why she decided to teach, she, like Usher, credited her third-grade teacher.

“There are always one or two teachers in your life who stand out because they did something to help you or they connected with you on a personal level,” Campbell says. “Ms. Harper was my inspiration [to become] a teacher. There was something about her that made learning fun and magical.”



*Jennie Campbell*

Campbell has been a special education teacher for 12 years, and has worked with students with severe autism and Down syndrome. Her student caseloads have been, at times, overwhelming. Yet, she remains in the classroom.

“Every kid is like a puzzle and I’m trying to figure out what pieces I can give him or her to make learning a whole picture,” says Campbell, explaining that one of her students at the beginning of the year was reading 31 words a minute at grade level. Today, this student reads 85 words a minute.

“This is tremendous growth for a kiddo to read more fluidly and to more accurately comprehend,” she says. “And, to have the kids have the ability and the skills to be functional citizens within our world—however that may look—is why I’m still in it.”

Not every teacher comes from a family of educators or instantly recalls that *onespecial* teacher.

## **Goodbye Private Sector, Hello Public Education**

California’s Jayson Chang, who teaches tenth-grade world history and twelfth-grade government and economics at Santa Teresa High School in San Jose, Calif., held an unfulfilling marketing position for two years before entering the classroom.

He recalls a staff meeting during which his manager explained how it was cheaper for someone in India to buy a TV from their U.S.-based company and have it shipped from their warehouse (also U.S. based) to India, than for the person to buy a TV from China and have it ship from China.

“China and India are right next to each other!” Chang recalls thinking that day. “It makes no sense to ship a TV back and forth across the Pacific. I made a comment about ‘That’s not good for the environment.’ My manager replied, ‘I’m here to sell TVs, not save the world.’ That’s when I knew I had to leave.”

After he resigned, Chang did some soul searching. He reflected on his love of history—how, as a high school student, he often thought of wanting to teach history so other students, like him, would love the subject, too. He thought about his undergraduate studies, which focused on being a global citizen and making human connections. He thought about making a difference in the world.

In 2016, Chang stepped into the classroom recognizing that while all students may not end up loving history, they can at least understand its importance.

“Teaching history, and why it matters—especially now that the country is so divided—is where I can make an impact,” he says. “Students are our future and they can shape it as they see fit. It’s important to teach them about community.”

While he does enjoy his students’ “aha” moments, Chang finds it most rewarding when his graduated students come back to visit.

“It’s these moments that reinforce why I teach. Students share how I made a difference in their lives or how they used the lessons learned from my class in real-world situations,” he explains. “These are the kinds of connections and the type of community experiences that get me pumped and ready to go the next day.”

## **From Volunteer to School Secretary**

For JaTawn Robinson, a secretary at Thomasville Heights Elementary in Atlanta, Ga., the power of community is strong.

Several years ago, Robinson was a frequent volunteer at her children’s school, Slater Elementary. Robinson was a lunch monitor, volunteer reader, and a field trip chaperone.

She made copies and assisted in the office. “Whatever needed to be done, I was there,” says the mother of three sons.



*JaTawn Robinson*

The seed for JaTawn Robinson's commitment to her children's school was planted long ago when Robinson herself was in elementary school.

"My mom volunteered a lot at my school," she fondly remembers. "Attending PTA meetings was a requirement for us, and I always appreciated the sense of community and family in school when I was a little girl."

One day, while she was working as a volunteer monitor in the cafeteria of her children's school, the principal approached Robinson, said, "I need to talk to you in my office," and then walked away.

"It made me nervous," Robinson says, "I thought, 'Did my children do something?'"

The principal had asked Robinson about her background. She explained how she held an associate degree in education and was affiliated with the Georgia Association of Educators and the NEA.

They discussed opportunities within the school, but nothing concrete. By the end of the school year, Robinson was offered a position as the school's parent liaison.

Two years later, she became the school secretary. Robinson spent two years in that role, and then moved to Thomasville Heights—the elementary school she attended, and where her mother spent countless hours as a volunteer.

Robinson has been the secretary at Thomasville since 2017. Remembering her time there as a fourth and fifth grade student, she says that while the surrounding community struggled with poverty and drugs, she felt safe when she arrived at school.

"You knew you were loved here. You knew someone was going to care for you. Our babies still battle some of the things we battled when I was in elementary school, and I want to provide that same love and the same sense of safety I felt when I was a student here."

## A Teacher For Life

Erika Navarro-Dix also teaches at the school she once attended. She is a first grade teacher at Carnation Elementary School, in the small, rural town of Carnation, Wash., about 30 minutes east of Seattle.

The reason she continues to teach? “I’ve always enjoyed being around kids,” she says.



*Erika Navarro-Dix*

Navarro-Dix says her first year of teaching was hard. She she was young and new to the profession, and says she didn’t emerge from her preservice with a developed classroom management style.

Still, she adds, “I knew this was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life..”

Navarro-Dix sought help. She went to her principal and asked for additional classroom observations. She watched other teachers. She looked for mentors.

Ten years later, she is still in the classroom.

“For me, it’s teaching first grade because that’s a really big ‘aha’ year for kids. School starts to make sense and their light bulbs turn on and just geting to see their love for learning has made me want to stay in this profession.”

Navarro-Dix, Usher, Campbell, Chang, and Robinson are hardly alone in their decision to step into—and remain—in the classroom. Nationwide, and day after day, millions of educators step into school settings with a willingness to share love and commitment with their students. And although they use different words to describe why they stay, it all boils down to the determination to make a difference in students’ lives—one that will last a lifetime.

03/16/2019

# Fund Our Future

by Randi Weingarten  
President, American Federation of Teachers

The wealthiest Americans don't have to worry about how they will pay for groceries, or a visit to a doctor when they're sick, or heat for their homes during frigid weather. They never have to think about whether their children will be able to afford to go to college or how they'll pay for summer programs to keep their children safe when school is out. But tens of millions of Americans are consumed with those worries, and the budget President Donald Trump released last week decimates the very programs that help address the needs of the most [vulnerable Americans](#)([link is external](#)).



Weingarten at a rally for public education in Austin, Texas, on March 11. Photo by Matthew Jones.

Budgets reveal priorities. They reflect choices. And Trump, whose lavish 2017 [tax cuts](#)([link is external](#)) for corporations, special interests and the ultra-wealthy exploded the deficit to perilous heights, is making choices that are as heartless as they are reckless.

Trump's [budget](#) eliminates funds for community schools, preschools, and after-school and summer school programs in high-poverty areas. It cuts home energy assistance for seniors and people with disabilities. The man who promised "there will be no cuts to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid" wants to cut all three programs, proposing to slash more than \$1 trillion from Medicare and Medicaid. In the midst of the opioid addiction crisis, Trump's budget guts \$12.4 billion from the Department of Health and Human Services. Even the administration's supposed priorities, career and technical education and child care, aren't funded in a meaningful way.

At a time when the soaring cost of higher education is saddling Americans with record college debt and putting college out of reach for many people, Trump's budget would make

higher education even less accessible. He wants to eliminate public service loan forgiveness and divert \$2 billion from Pell Grants, which help students from lower-income families.

It is no wonder Trump plays so loose with the truth, as it disguises the fact that, by governing to favor America's elites, he is hurting the very people who thought he would work for them.

It's not just this administration that has misplaced priorities. Twenty-five states [still spend less on K-12 public education](#) than before the recession. And 41 states still spend less on higher education. The [lack of appropriate investment\(link is external\)](#) is the root cause of every single one of the teacher walkouts that are roiling this country. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that the recent teacher strikes led to substantial increases in [school funding\(link is external\)](#) in several states, but that funding remains well below 2008 levels in those states, and several have enacted only short-term fixes.

After a decade of neglect and austerity in our country's schools, the American people have had enough—and want a reordering of the country's priorities to focus on things that make their families' lives better. And that starts with our children and sustainable investments in public schools, colleges, infrastructure and healthcare.

That is the aim of [Fund Our Future\(link is external\)](#), the AFT's campaign to demand those in power invest in our public schools and in the resources students need to succeed—particularly children of color, children with special needs, children who are vulnerable and children who live in poverty.

On the same day that Trump and DeVos released their budget abandoning public schools and the families they serve, I was with parents, students and educators in [Texas\(link is external\)](#) for their Fund Our Future kickoff rally. Texas has a \$15 billion Rainy Day Fund, yet the state has cut public education spending by \$2.5 billion over the past decade. A Dallas high school physics teacher at the rally said that, if the school district gave her an extra \$5,000, she'd spend it on lab supplies and replace the broken chairs in her classroom.

In the first week of March alone, there were 90 Fund Our Future events nationwide, with students, parents and communities joining educators in demanding adequate investments in public schools and colleges. In Illinois, they're fighting for a fair tax system. In Washington state, they're calling for investments in community and technical colleges. In Philadelphia, educators and allies are demanding safe learning environments.

In Michigan and New Mexico, we're working with new governors whose priority is public education, and in places like New York we're building on progress toward ensuring all, not just some, of our children have access to the public schools and colleges they deserve.

In an ideal world, our elected leaders would use the country's economic resources to improve people's lives—to make the American people healthier, better educated and more secure; to promote their potential and create opportunity where it has been denied; and to make the vulnerable among us less so. In reality, we must elect and hold accountable leaders who are committed to funding our future.

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> of the month to:

[lpnek@clarenceschools.org](mailto:lpnek@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

## • The Lighter Side

It's official. Science just confirmed that Spring Break is the shortest week of the school year.



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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.

March 05, 2019

## COMMITTEE OF 100: NYSUT activists tell lawmakers: 'It's just not enough'

Author: Sylvia Saunders

Source: NYSUT Communications



*Caption: The property tax cap makes budgeting especially difficult for small school districts, says Erin Smith of Depew Teachers Organization. Photo by El-Wise Noisette.*

They waited in long lines at security, jammed into overcrowded elevators and elbowed their way through harried hallways to get to standing-room-only meetings with legislators.

Of course lawmakers tried to make small talk and tell them it's going to be a tough state budget year — but NYSUT activists stayed on message with four simple words:

"It's just not enough."

It's the pre-budget crazy season at the Capitol, as both the senate and assembly are putting together their one-house budget bills and beginning serious negotiations with the governor for the 2019-20 state budget due April 1. It was perfect timing for NYSUT's annual Committee of 100 Lobby Day, as more than 700 educators and other staff from school districts, SUNY and CUNY campuses and community colleges came to Albany today to make the case for more state support.

Though the governor's budget proposal includes a modest increase in funding for schools, [NYSUT is calling for a \\$2.2 billion increase in school aid](#), additional funding for public colleges, wage justice for CUNY adjunct faculty, teacher

center funding and the restoration of a \$89.7 million state subsidy for SUNY hospitals, which serve our state's neediest patients.

Activists also strongly urged lawmakers to [reject the governor's plan to make the tax cap permanent](#).

"The current tax cap is bad enough but making it permanent would be devastating," said Phil Cleary of North Syracuse Education Association. "A lot of costs we just can't control— and staying below the consumer price index means cuts and hurting kids."

When lawmakers tried to argue the tax cap is necessary to keep property taxes under control, advocates said the best way to keep taxes down is for the state to provide more funding.

If the tax cap cannot be eliminated, activists called for exempting certain expenses such as costs related to natural disasters; enrollment growth; school safety and school resources officers; and students with special needs.

Staying within the cap is especially difficult for small districts, said Erin Smith of Depew Teachers Organization. "You might get an additional student who needs special education services and the district simply can't provide what their IEP calls for. And when you don't provide what's needed, it's not just unfair for the child — it also gets more expensive down the line."

Advocates also called for removing the 60 percent supermajority requirement to exceed the cap.

"As a public official, you'd be pretty ticked off if you got 51 percent of the vote and lost," Cleary told Assemblywoman Pam Hunter, D-Syracuse. "The way it's structured now, you're robbing people of democracy, where 40 percent can take down something the majority really supports."

"Look how many elections are decided by one- to two-vote differentials," said Paul Szymendera of Sweet Home Education Association. "A supermajority is ridiculous."

"Supermajorities are a way of not making things happen," said Sen. Mike Ranzenhofer, R-Amherst. "I understand your concern."



*PSC Vice President Andrea Vasquez discusses the plight of adjunct faculty.  
Photo by El-Wise Noisette.*

Another key concern in meetings was the plight of adjunct faculty.

“This is a moral question, an educational justice question — a racial justice issue for our students,” said Andrea Vasquez, vice president of the Professional Staff Congress representing CUNY faculty. She said the starting pay for CUNY adjuncts is currently \$3,200 per course, or as low as \$20,000 per year.

“Near poverty pay for the majority of CUNY faculty should not be tolerated,” Vasquez said. “It is unfair to adjuncts and unfair to CUNY students.”

The Professional Staff Congress is seeking an increase in adjunct pay to \$7,000 per course. While adjunct pay is subject to collective bargaining, solving the adjunct pay crisis will require public investment. NYSUT is advocating for \$150 million to provide adjuncts with wage justice.

Another way to provide more state funding for CUNY and SUNY is to eliminate the TAP gap. The “gap” is the difference between the tuition credit that financial aid students receive and the actual cost of tuition. This gap has become an unfunded mandate that CUNY and SUNY are forced to absorb, without reimbursement from the state, and the gap continues to grow annually with every tuition increase. NYSUT is asking for \$150 million to eliminate the TAP gap so that SUNY and CUNY can redirect that funding to other much-needed programs and services.

Initiatives like the state’s Excelsior scholarship program and the Dream act are commendable, but the state needs to start investing in higher education, Vasquez noted. “What are the students getting if state funding is diminished from year to year?” Vasquez asked. “Access without quality is what?”

# Betsy DeVos grilled in Congress over proposed elimination of Special Olympics



Betsy DeVos grilled on proposed Special Olympics funding cuts

March 26, 2019, 9:13 PM EDT / Updated March 27, 2019, 7:24 AM EDT

By Doha Madani

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos struggled before a congressional subcommittee on Tuesday to defend at least \$7 billion in proposed cuts to education programs, including eliminating all \$18 million in federal funding for the Special Olympics.

Wisconsin Democratic Rep. Mark Pocan pushed DeVos on her proposed cuts to the Special Olympics and other special education programs during her testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee.

When Pocan asked whether she knew how many children would be affected by the elimination of federal funding to the Special Olympics, DeVos said she did not know.

"I'll answer it for you, that's OK, no problem," Pocan said. "It's 272,000 kids that are affected."

DeVos responded, "I think that the Special Olympics is an awesome organization, one that is well supported by the philanthropic sector as well."

Pocan at that point interrupted the education secretary to point out that the proposed budget includes a 26 percent reduction to state grants for special education and millions of dollars in cuts to programs for students who are blind.

After referring to his own nephews with autism, Pocan asked DeVos, "What is it that we have a problem with, with children who are in special education?"

She replied, "Supporting children with special needs, we have continued to hold that funding at a level amount and in the context of a budget proposal that is a 10 percent reduction."

The congressman stopped DeVos and claimed she was not answering his question.

Pocan wasn't the only House member to criticize DeVos over the proposed cuts to special education.

Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., noted that past proposed budgets also attempted to eliminate federal funding for the Special Olympics.

"I still can't understand why you would go after disabled children in your budget," Lee said Tuesday. "You zero that out. It's appalling."



Competitors in rhythmic gymnastics dance during the Special Olympics World Games in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on March 20, 2019. Karim Sahib / AFP - Getty Images

The Trump administration's proposed education budget includes about \$2 billion in cuts to Pell Grants on top of billions in reductions to about 30 other programs, according to Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., chairwoman of the appropriations subcommittee.

Trump also targeted education spending in both of his previous budget proposals, but Congress actually [increased spending](#) for the department's programs that help students with learning disabilities last year, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

The Special Olympics is the world's largest sports organization for people with intellectual and physical disabilities. [Founded in 1968](#) by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, it works with more than 5 million athletes across 174 countries, according [to the Special Olympics website](#).

The organization receives some funding from the U.S. government but also has sponsorships from private companies. Some of the program's listed sponsors include United Airlines, Toyota and The Procter & Gamble Co.

The Special Olympics did not immediately respond to a request for comment from NBC News.

March 04, 2019

# Opioid crisis takes lives as educators struggle to find solutions

Author: Liza Frenette Source: NYSUT Communications



*Caption: Presenters at the Opioid Addiction Crisis workshop at NYSUT's Health & Safety Conference: Laura Ficarra, OASAS; Ruth Grisham, Schenectady FT; Heidi Price, Prevention Educator from Council for Prevention; Michael McTague, principal, Hudson Falls Intermediate School; Ethan Doak, teacher, Hudson Falls TA*

The numbers could have been in neon. They were that glaring.

Every day, 131 people in the United States die from an overdose.

“It knows no bounds,” Robert Kent, general counsel for the state Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, told a packed room of NYSUT members who gathered for the biennial Health and Safety Conference this past weekend. Pay no attention to geography, economics, social status, or other would-be markers for preconceived notions about opioid use. Its poisoned arrow hits everywhere.

The U.S. consumes 85 percent of prescription opioids for the world, Kent noted. Their use often leads to the use of heroin, which can be snorted, smoked or injected with a needle, and that drug is increasingly supplemented or even replaced with fentanyl. A synthetic opioid, fentanyl is primarily concocted in China, and it is lethal in even the smallest amounts—about a tenth the size of a penny. It is 100 times stronger than morphine.

“The drug of choice is lethal,” Kent said.

On the very day of Kent’s presentation, the federal Drug Enforcement Agency raided a home fentanyl mill in a wealthy Westchester County town, seizing 11 pounds of fentanyl and 13 pounds of heroin. It was [enough drugs to kill nearly two million people](#).

Last year, 70,200 people died from a drug overdose, and 68 percent of those deaths involved opioids, according to the Center for Disease Control. That is more names than are etched on the Vietnam Wall commemorating the 58, 220 Americans who died in that long war.

Kent said the “perfect storm” was created by an explosion in the use of opioids, easy access to cheap heroin and fentanyl, and insurers blocking access to substance abuse treatment, often insisting on failure first at other treatment options. These are capped off by “the stigma of addiction,” he said.

Some changes are being made to address these problems. Half of the insurance policies written in New York are not subject to New York laws, he said, but for those that are, there is now immediate access to treatment: no more waiting.

OASAS has just been awarded \$5.1 million in funding to create 14 new recovery community centers.

About 45,000 people a year are served in opioid treatment programs in New York, Kent said, and OASAS also uses certified peers in emergency rooms, jails and on the street to connect with users. At [www.combataddiction.ny.gov](http://www.combataddiction.ny.gov), treatment facilities now update their sites every morning to indicate where beds are available for treatment.

Approaching the opioid epidemic from many angles will help tip the scales. OASAS, the New York State Education Department and the Department of Health sent 24,000 educational and informational flash drives to schools throughout the state, accompanied by a letter.

Schools are vital prevention partners, particularly since the majority of addictions begin in teenage years.

Coaches, for example, can play an important role by not urging students to take shots or pain pills in order to play through injuries.

Laura Ficarra, prevention planning and education coordinator at OASAS, said there is a link between mental health issues and addiction, especially with young people trying to self medicate. As of July 1, 2018, all K-12 health teachers must include instruction on multiple dimensions of mental health. The focus is on wellness, prevention and how students can access assistance, Ficarra said.

Programs that focus on school-wide positive actions help students to feel good about themselves and involve the entire school community. Positive action outcomes include a decrease in substance abuse and an increase in self-care, she said.

Ethan Doak, a fourth-year teacher and member of Hudson Falls Teachers Association, uses 15-minute lessons twice a week in positive action, which focuses on social skills, the concept of self and how to deal with tough times.

“I see the carryover into the curriculum,” he said. “It allows students to think collaboratively and to think through things and feel emotions.”

Other schools use PAX, a team-based classroom game that teaches students skills necessary for self-regulation. It is known to reduce aggressive and violence, disruptions and inattention. These are all skills that can help students build self-confidence, regulate their emotions, and resist drugs. OASES covers cost of training and materials for PAX.

Teacher Ruth Grisham of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers remembers when a young, bright, hard-working student of hers began missing school. She was told he was being used as a mule for a family drug business.

“I don’t know when I’m going to be able to process that,” she said, choking up.

Another former student of hers was written up in the newspaper for selling drugs.

Her school now uses full implementation of PAX in grades K-5.

“This is evidence-based and focused on preventing alcohol and drug abuse,” she said. On the surface, it is a lively game.

“Part of how we get where we need to is to work with students while they’re young,” Kent said. “We’re teaching them how to be focused, less isolated...to help them deal with isolation, pain or trauma.”

With new federal funding from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 11 new districts will be funded for PAX programs, he said, and programs are already going into Hempstead and Staten Island.

#### RESOURCES:

- [American Federation of Teachers Launches E-Learning Tool to Help Combat Opioid Crisis](#)
- Call 877-8-HOPENY
- TEXT HOPENY
- [NYS Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services](#)
- [Talk2Prevent](#) - Tips for parents
- [Kitchen Table Toolkit](#) - How to start the conversation
- [Spotlight on Synthetics](#)
- [Resources for combating heroin addiction](#)
- [NYS OASAS Treatment and Prevention Providers](#)

MARCH 5, 2019 • 3:27PM

# ‘Brazen Effort to Distort the Tax Code’: Betsy DeVos Not Giving Up on Vouchers

BY TIM WALKER



*(AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File)*

In her two years as U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos has seized on every opportunity to undermine public education. She has called for [deep cuts to federal funding](#), [rolled back protections for our most vulnerable students](#), and shilled for the [for-profit college industry that has defrauded countless students](#).

DeVos has floundered, however, in advancing her pet cause: the federal expansion of school vouchers. Even with GOP majorities in the House and Senate and the strong backing of President Trump, Congress in 2017 and 2018 rejected DeVos' efforts to create federal vouchers to attend private schools.

Despite this setback and the recent 2018 elections that sent a pro-public education majority to the House of Representatives, DeVos' enthusiasm for school vouchers hasn't dampened. This was evident last week with the introduction of something called the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunity Act.

In a [USA Today op-ed touting the proposal](#), DeVos, Senator Ted Cruz, and Representative Bradley Byrne, the bills' sponsors in Congress, called it "a historic investment in America's students."

The majority of Americans who reject vouchers know better. DeVos' proposal, said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García, is just the "latest attempt to push an agenda that is academically ineffective, fiscally irresponsible and that funds discrimination at the expense of student opportunity."

The good news is that Congress – who soundly rejected a similar proposal during the 2017 tax debate – isn't likely to give this reboot a serious look. Still, the corporate interests who have doggedly pursued school privatization for more than a decade are nothing if not persistent, which is why public education activists aren't about to let down their guard.

## What is an Education Freedom Scholarship?

Quite simply, it's a federal school voucher. For years now, proponents, [acknowledging that "vouchers" are unpopular](#), have worked tirelessly to reconfigure the scheme to 1) sidestep constitutional obstacles and 2) reintroduce them to a public that has consistently been in opposition, [using friendly-sounding euphemisms to make them more politically appealing](#).

Whether they're called "Education Saving Accounts," "Tuition Tax Credits" or "Opportunity Scholarships," the result is always the same: directly or indirectly, less money for public schools and more for private schools.

The Education Freedom Scholarship is a tax credit program, similar to what 17 states already have on their books.

Under such a plan, individuals and companies earn tax credits by donating money to nonprofit scholarship funds. Students then can use the funds to attend private schools, including religious schools.

**Take Action:** [Tell Your members of Congress](#) to oppose Betsy DeVos' latest private school voucher plan!

Carl Davis, research director at the [Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy](#), calls the DeVos proposal a "supersized" version, because it offers a dollar-for-dollar credit, meaning that every dollar given takes a dollar off the donor's tax bill.

"The contributors to these programs wouldn't have to put up a dime of their own money because the federal government would reimburse them in full," he adds.

So what DeVos wants is the federal government to reimburse wealthy taxpayers with tax credits in return for providing funding to private schools on the states' behalf.

"It's a brazen effort to distort the tax code into a tool for funding private and religious schools with public dollars," Davis said.

## The Cost to Public Schools

In their USA Today column, DeVos and Cruz claim that "this program won't take a single cent from local public school teachers or public school students."

That is simply false. Tax credit vouchers *will* drain public funding from public schools. Under these plans, potential taxes are never paid, which in turn decreases the overall amount in the coffers. This makes less money available for public schools.

"The voucher proposal peddled by Betsy DeVos will divert already scarce funding away from neighborhood public schools – where 90 percent of children go – and give it away to private schools, which are not accountable to taxpayers," said Eskelsen García.



In a 2017 analysis, ITEP took a look at how these programs had impacted the budgets of the 17 states where they had been put into effect. Taken together, these states were diverting more than \$1 billion per year toward private schools via tax credits.

“Allowing certain taxpayers to opt out of funding an institution as fundamentally important as the nation’s public school system erodes the public’s level of investment in that institution—both literally and figuratively,” the report states.

Furthermore, “expanding these programs at the federal level would lead to a loss of federal and state revenue directed at public schools that would weaken the ability of public schools to serve increasing numbers of students in poverty as well as students with disabilities and English-language learners.”

### **The Bill is Likely Going Nowhere But...**

Soon after DeVos unveiled her proposal, U.S. Senator Patty Murray immediately declared it “dead on arrival.”

“Secretary DeVos keeps pushing her anti-public school agenda despite a clear lack of support from parents, students, teachers, and even within her own party,” Murray said in a statement. “Congress has repeatedly rejected her privatization efforts and she should expect nothing less here.”

With DeVos’ push to expand vouchers stymied (so far), the shift in momentum away from privatization may be modest but it’s unmistakable.

Educators across the nation have been calling attention to the dangers of school privatization as part of the #RedforEd Movement. In November, Arizona voters rejected Proposition 305, which would have significantly expanded the state’s school voucher program.

Still, by attempting to pry open the federal tax code to enable school voucher expansion, privatization advocates are demonstrating how relentless they are and will continue to be.

“While this bill isn’t likely to be enacted during this Congress, it sends a worrisome message about the direction that some private school advocates would like to go,” Davis warns. “They’re hoping to set the table for a major federal voucher plan the next time the political stars align in their favor.”



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