

Stepping up in response to COVID-19

The events that 2020 had in store for the world could not have been predicted.

The novel coronavirus outbreak showed us the gaps in our social safety net and the systems that we urgently need to fix.

But what this crisis has also exposed in the past year is the way in which people guided by their hearts are stepping up to support each other in extraordinary ways. Stephanie Gallardo Lara, a Tukwila educator and WEA Board Director, says seeing community members step up to support communities most impacted by COVID-19 where the government failed prompted her to convince the board to help. Last fall, the WEA Board approved Gallardo Lara's proposal to allocate \$300,000 to local nonprofits serving the needs of communities disproportionately impacted by COVID.

"I saw it as an opportunity for our union to practice what it preaches when it comes to community organizing and standing in solidarity through challenging times," says Gallardo Lara, who chairs the Early Career Educator Committee and is a NEA Board Director. "Contributing funds and volunteer efforts is one of the best ways to invest in community partnerships."

To ensure that funds were distributed equitably across the state and reached the most people, a committee of Board volunteers decided to use a hybrid process for distributing the funds. They agreed on the following criteria, prioritizing educator-led mutual aid efforts; BIPOC-led mutual aid organizations; organizations that serve indigenous communities, immigrant, refugee, undocumented communities, houseless people, elderly populations, people with disabilities or are

WEA Individual Crisis Fund

Since May 2020, the WEA Board has awarded nearly \$1.4 million in financial assistance to 2,444 members hurt by COVID-19 reductions. A benefit of being in a strong union like WEA is that we are united — and we support each other.



immunocompromised, and organizations that meet a culturally specific need.

"We split the funding two ways, the first half to be decided upon by each council, and the second half was open to a statewide nomination process," she says.

Each of WEA's 22 councils had \$5,000 to determine which local non-profit or mutual-aid organization would receive the funds if they fit the criterion. The remaining \$190,000 was open to a statewide nomination process where WEA members could nominate an organization from their community. Each organization will determine how it will use the funds to best aid its community. The funds are not to be used on administrative costs. Visit WEA's website at <https://www.WashingtonEA.org> for the list of COVID-19 Community Relief Fund recipients.

The recipients "are all very local, which was the intention," Gallardo Lara says. "We knew that local presidents and members would know the best organizations to contribute to which is why we gave them the autonomy to decide and who to nominate."

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Nakia Academy brings comfort and ease in shared experiences

Nakia Academy was created by Black, Indigenous and people of color first for mentoring BIPOC educators so they don't abandon their careers in public education and second, to support all new educators in creating environments that are more inclusive.

WEA State-Based UniServ Rep. Torian Hodges-Finch spent the last couple of years traveling the state talking with early career educators as he began thinking about Nakia Academy. As Hodges-Finch began developing Nakia with others, his first goal was to find compelling leaders/instructors.



Tanisha Brandon-Felder

"When I was given the opportunity, I leaped," says Tanisha Brandon-Felder, an academy facilitator and equity and family engagement director for Shoreline schools. She says she was blessed to have Black mentors during her own student teaching.

"We have needed more mentors of color for a very long time. While we have these embedded in our communities in informal ways, to have a program that recognizes the experience and gifts of teachers of color and the intentional moves to make formal mentors available to our newest teachers is a powerful thing to be a part of," she says.

Two cadres, representing 36 locals from across the state, were launched at the end of February and will run through the end of June. Each cohort has some 35 folks who are meeting via Zoom now, but the plan is to incorporate in-person learning in the future. The first round of grants went to certificated members. Subsequent rounds will be open to education support professionals later this year.

Those who are selected for Nakia are passionate about guiding beginning educators and dedicated to providing a healthy social-emotional environment for all educators. The cohorts will help develop strategies that will eventually be used in mentoring all educators through the state Superintendent of Public Instruction's office's Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) program.

"From our first meeting, I was able to make so many connections with others who all had their own stories," says Vancouver EA member Wes Vann. She says she hears stories that affirm some of her perspectives and values that often differ from those who are in the majority.



Wes Vann

"The welcoming ambience and team spirit is so refreshing," says Federal Way EA's Sayantani Maitra. She says she welcomes the opportunity for BIPOC educators to engage in thought-provoking interaction over a few months and to learn from one another while honing mentoring skills.



Sayantani Maitra

More than just a "by-the-book" training, the academy offers participants a four-month experience where they get to think, learn, build skills, interact and have fun together.

"I was surprised to see how connected I felt with my cohort on the first day and how we found similarities even though we were remote," says Bellevue EA's Pushpanjali Sengupta. She says she wanted to participate because it is difficult to be in a system steeped in whiteness where people of color are

constantly made aware of "shortcomings," be it an accent, teaching style or coaching of white teachers. She wants to ensure that every BIPOC educator who enters the field knows there are others like them who will support them.



Pushpanjali Sengupta

Denise Wilson from Arlington says she often attends leadership academies where she is the only brown face in the room. “Now we get to truly have a seat at the table to make change and to show other educators of color that we do truly belong and that we have voices and serve a purpose,” she says.

Through more than 30 hours of Nakia Academy training, there is opportunity to support, guide and build the next generation of BIPOC leaders.

“There is just a safety net and ease of vulnerability we have for each other because we know the pervasiveness of racism within public education,” Seattle EA member Sha’ron White says. “We know the harm racism has caused to our students, communities and ourselves and therefore our time spent together is not just for training but a hope for the future and healing for us.”

White wanted to be a part of Nakia, she says, because her own mentor’s care and guidance was unmatched. She says she felt honored to be asked by her own mentor to train as a mentor herself.

“To be in spaces where I was not the only person of color gives me energy,” says Tacoma EA member Milagros Thompson. She says that talking with others gives her peace of mind that “I am not crazy.” She says she thinks Nakia will help with healing and gathering tools for survival.

While participants agree that the academy has been a source of untold energy, camaraderie and support for one another, many, especially those who may be the only person of color at their school or in their district, still are reluctant and uncomfortable to

speaking about their experience, which speaks to why this program is so important, Hodges-Finch says.

After completing Nakia Academy training, participants will be asked to commit to helping a few early career educators in the area where they live. While this next step is not required, the hope is that many Nakia Academy “graduates” will take the next step.

“I want to build community and support educators to find their voice, advocate for their students and community, and learn how to shift outcomes one interaction at a time,” Franklin-Pierce EA’s Brooke Brown says.

For Bellevue’s Segupta, “I am looking forward to learning from the multiple perspectives, working to recognize my privilege and biases, reflecting upon my practices, and building my toolbox to support other BIPOC colleagues.”

Those who are selected for Nakia are passionate about guiding beginning educators and dedicated to providing a healthy social-emotional environment for all educators.



Denise Wilson



Sha’ron White



Brooke Brown



Milagros Thompson

Stories from the trenches



When the closure happened in March 2020, my job virtually stopped. With no students on campus and all attendance processes stopped, my job duties shifted. I started handing out lunches to our community daily and provided educational support for our students through material distribution and coordination of homework

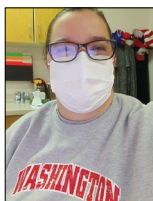
packet deliveries. So many of my colleagues left campus on March 13 and to this day have not returned.

I, along with so many other public-school employees, am also a parent of an elementary school-aged child. In addition, my 71-year-old Dad lives in our home and is extremely immune compromised. In the fall of this school year, I was 100 percent against schools re-opening and students being in the classroom. The thought of one person being able to responsibly supervise young children from touching each other and adhering to social distancing guidelines terrified me. I told my family that my daughter would not be returning to in-person learning until the 2021-22 school year. My biggest fear was that she would bring home COVID to my Dad and we would lose him.

As the year has progressed, I have watched my child transition from loving school, excelling and working hard to hating school, not paying attention and not engaging in any online instruction at all. Each day is a struggle to get her to pay attention to what the teacher is saying, turn on and keep on her camera and complete her independent work. She hates online learning and is totally burned out. She wants to be back in the classroom and says that online learning is not fun. Watching this transition is heartbreaking and knowing that she is not alone has shifted my mentality.

I now think and believe that students should have the opportunity, if their family is comfortable with it, to return to in-person learning. Children of all ages are struggling mentally and emotionally. We have the knowledge and tools to be able to make in-person learning happen.

Our District has gone to great lengths to provide proper PPE by following guidance and recommendations from local, state and federal officials. Our custodial crew has set up our classrooms to ensure that social distancing is taking place and have installed hand sanitizing stations throughout the halls around campus. I feel confident that our District administration is doing everything possible to ensure staff and student safety and have been working in-person throughout the closure to see this work firsthand."



Annie Jaquez
High school
attendance coordinator
Franklin Pierce ESP

We went back to school on a hybrid/modified schedule on Jan. 26. Some students in our district returned to the classroom in November. When I say hybrid/modified, what I mean is that all students, K-12, attend some classes in person and some classes virtually on Zoom.

It is not optimal, but to meet health district expectations and implement mitigation strategies, things are greatly adjusted. Hybrid learning/teaching is extremely stressful, and the mitigation tactics are extreme, but I am overjoyed to be back face-to-face with my kids. My stress is trying to get investment from kids after being in virtual classroom since last March. Content has been pared to bare bones, just to get as many students as possible involved. Teaching math online is not easy but learning math online when you are a 13-year-old child, that is as difficult as difficult gets.

My contract starts at 8:20 a.m. in building. My actual day starts at 7:15 in the building. I have direct student contact from 8:30-11:20 and again 12:50-3:35. I do allow kids in early or out late to give extra help, but that is limited too. My contract day ends at 3:50 p.m. and I am usually able to get out of the building by that time. I take my rolling bag full of everything home and work from 6-8ish, getting my Canvas page updated and grading work in Canvas only to transfer it to Skyward since Canvas will not automatically export to Skyward. Most of my Sunday is devoted to schoolwork, too. I can only pass out papers if I have hand sanitized right before passing them out. Kids can turn in work, but I am not allowed to touch it for 24 hours. I only see my kids every other day (math and science) for 1 hour 10 minutes. Because of the safety procedures, I just have kids turn daily work and homework in on Canvas. They upload a picture (every student has an iPad). I do tests pencil-and-paper in class.

In my building every case of COVID has come from outside of the building. It has been from gatherings or events or from family members. No cases have been contracted, nor were exposure cases, in building. That has added to my sense of security. Most of the kids have had family members who have experienced COVID. Including me. They argue the mitigation strategies are extreme, but I say they are necessary. Rarely do kids take masks off or share supplies.

When my students are absent, they use Canvas to find assignments and class notes and to turn things in. When they are out with COVID-related issues (exposure or positive test), they still use Canvas, but we set up a special Zoom just for them and they can attend via Zoom to see live notes and hear the teacher. That is probably what stresses me the most. I have eight classes. I have to set up Zoom and the camera for the class all while greeting, giving kids hand sanitizer, and getting them moving on the entry task. Oh, I also have to remember to open Zoom. I set it up as soon as I find out about the absence, but I have to remember to start it for class. I am stressed, I am exhausted, and I really want things to go back to normal. Tomorrow would be great. But I know that isn't an option. I know I am doing the best I can to help kids stay healthy and learn during this extreme time.



Brenda Hargraves
7th grade math teacher
Wenatchee EA

In consideration of Ramadan



Ramadan is a time for growth, reflection and community engagement. It is a month in the Islamic calendar when Muslims observe fasting from sunrise to sunset. For Muslim students, fitting in classes, extracurricular activities, and testing, the time can be an exhausting month to get through without eating or drinking.

Ramadan is celebrated in the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, which means it starts on a different date each year. Eid follows around a month later, depending on when the crescent moon appears.

This year, Ramadan will begin around April 12 and will end around May 12. The month culminates with Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan. Eid starts with a morning prayer and is followed by communal celebrations with friends and family which can last up to three days. Prior to fasting each day, Muslims will typically consume a pre-dawn meal, called suhoor. The time when dawn begins varies depending on location and changes over the course of Ramadan, as dawn begins at a slightly different time each day.

Most Muslims refrain from eating and drinking in the hours between sunrise and sunset. While most Muslims do not start fasting until ages 12-14, often young children may fast for a few hours or choose certain days to fast to get into the habit of praying and fasting.

Prayer is important for Muslims all year round, and praying on time also is incredibly important, especially during Ramadan. Some families may pray together during the day because they are at home given the pandemic, even if students are expected to be in a virtual class. It's important for Muslims to have an appropriate space to pray. Almost

anywhere will do, but students must be able to focus and turn toward Mecca. It also can be helpful to offer some privacy, especially since there may be students who choose not to disclose their faith. One way to create this type of space would be to periodically offer students "mindfulness time," during which students can pray, meditate, or take a short mental break from what they're doing.

As educators, take time to educate oneself about the month of Ramadan, and not rely on Muslim students to educate the class. Days will be long, and Ramadan is for an entire month. A student's energy will fluctuate over the course of the month.

For an Islamic student, she or he must weigh a series of conflicting concerns every year: Where should I go during lunch time? How will I make up missed work if I miss school to celebrate Eid al-Fitr? Should I wake up in the middle of the night for suhoor with my family, or sleep through it to be well-rested but hungry the next day? And more.

By law, educators must take reasonable steps to accommodate a student's religious beliefs or practices, unless that accommodation would create an undue hardship. Religious accommodations could include excusing absences for religious observances or activities, providing alternative assignments and waiving dress code or school uniform requirements that conflict with a student's religious beliefs or practices. The state Superintendent of Public Instruction's office encourages districts not to schedule significant school events on major religious holidays.

Having an understanding and practicing flexibility on deadlines during the Muslim holiday go a long way in supporting students and convey that they are a meaningful part of their school communities and that their religious traditions matter. Teaching students about diverse cultural and religious traditions holds a host of benefits, including increased empathy and kindness. And in this time of heightened awareness, we can all use more of both.

Visit the Council on American-Islamic Relations Washington at www.CAIRWA.com for additional educator resources.

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News from Olympia ...

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Speaking out for students in the 2021 legislative session

Our voices as educators are making a difference in Olympia this year, where we're seeing our legislation on safety, equity and funding move forward. Members have been sharing the message with legislators that it takes more, not less, to educate students during and following the pandemic. Lawmakers have responded with support for our key bills, and most of our priorities have passed their house of origin already. (*Our legislative update is current as of March 5 at the time of We2.0 production.*)

• Replacing the edTPA

A longtime priority for educators is finally coming to fruition — we are poised to eliminate the edTPA. We know the edTPA is an expensive, unnecessary hurdle for certification that creates barriers for low-income educators and educators of color. Working with our supporters in Olympia, we have advanced HB 1028 to eliminate the edTPA. Educators have logged on to virtual committee hearings and testified as to the harm caused by the edTPA. It has already passed the House and is now in the Senate. We believe we have a great chance to pass this into law this year.

• Training educators in equitable and anti-racist practices

WEA has also worked to advance legislation that would create anti-racist and cultural competency training for educators. It is critical that all of us share a common understanding of how to support our students and address systemic racism in the classroom. SB 5044 would create a statewide curriculum to equip educators to support our students of color. It has passed out of the Senate and is now in the House. We're working to make sure it passes this session.

• Advocating for a more equitable tax structure

Washington state's tax code is upside down, where working people pay way more of our incomes on taxes than do the wealthy. With the pandemic shining a spotlight on the widening gap between the wealthy and the rest of us, lawmakers are beginning to address the problems with our tax structure this session. A bill to create a capital gains tax has

advanced out of the Senate and is now in the House. It would apply to only the very wealthiest few but would begin to bring needed revenue and balance the tax code. WEA is supporting this important bill and will continue to speak out for a more equitable and just tax code.

• Ensuring full funding for our schools

This is a budget year and WEA members are making our voices heard for just and equitable education funding. We know that following the pandemic, we need more mental health supports, more nurses, and more staff to support students' learning recovery. We are keeping an eye on budget proposals as they're unveiled this month and will be taking action to call for a budget that meets students' needs equitably.

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