



## New Year, New Possibilities

*Brooke Brown, Washington's 2021 Teacher of the Year, shares thoughts on returning and engaging in our schools.*

# Safety, above all else



Larry Delaney  
WEA President

“And regardless of our differences, we find common ground in our commitment to students, public education and each other.”

For much of the world, January 1 marks the start of the new year, but as educators we all know that the real new year begins with the back-to-school season. This fall will be my third year away from the classroom, and one of the things I still miss most is the first day of school energy and excitement.

The past 18 months have challenged us in too many ways to count and I have dedicated space in this column over the last year highlighting many of the obstacles that we have collectively overcome.

Last June, I truly believed that when our schools closed for the summer, both educators and students would return in the fall to something that more closely resembled normal. I still hope that to be true, but it cannot be denied that the Delta variant is poised to disrupt our safe return to school.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, WEA has made it very clear that the health and safety of educators, students, families, and communities was our top priority. We also made it clear that we were going to follow the science — even as it evolves — and look to infectious disease experts and public health officials for guidance.

I must note, however, that our membership is a cross section of society and so, when Gov. Inslee announced that all PK-Higher Ed staff will be required to get vaccinated, I was not shocked when I heard from many of you with strong feelings on both sides of the vaccine issue.

We have all seen stories, or witnessed firsthand, school board meetings devolve into shouting matches. As we all navigate the impact of the vaccine mandate, it is important that we continue to treat each other with respect. The past 18 months have taken a toll on all of us. Many of you reading this have lost friends and loved ones to the virus. Some have had their personal finances directly impacted by the virus, while others are still adjusting

to a new normal and routine. Together, we must fight the urge to isolate and divide our membership.

I get that finding middle ground is a challenge when the debate over mask and vaccine requirements boils down to a debate between personal safety and personal freedom — both of which are non-negotiable for so many. But, I believe that there is still so much that we can all agree upon.

We want nothing more than to be in-person with our students. No one wants a return of the COVID rollercoaster that too many of us were riding last school year — closed, open, synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, quarantine was tough on everyone. We all want our students to be able to experience the richness that our schools offer and experience everything that you all bring to the school setting on a daily basis.

We have always agreed that our schools and work sites must be safe spaces. Safe spaces in which all our students can thrive and reach their full potential — and spaces that are safe from the virus that has impacted so many. Throughout the pandemic we have stood together and used our union strength to negotiate needed improvements to our workplace health and safety. We will continue to speak up for what our members, students and our school communities need. Safe, in-person schools. Though we may disagree on the best way to achieve safe, in-person schools in the midst of this pandemic, it’s what we all want and something that we can all agree upon.

In April, when I addressed the virtual WEA Representative Assemble, I reminded delegates that within our WEA family, there is still so much more that unites us than divides us. We are powerful and diverse in so many ways. And regardless of our differences, we find common ground in our commitment to students, public education and each other. Let’s use that commitment and diversity to carry us forward ... TOGETHER.

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# WHAT WE BELIEVE

As educators, we understand that to learn and progress, students must feel a sense of belonging and welcome at school. Toward that end, students must not only see themselves reflected within the physical environment of the school building but also see themselves represented within the subjects they study and the curriculum through which those subjects are taught. This means, students need to see how their communities have impacted U.S. history and how those impacts influence our nation today. At WEA, we reaffirm our commitment to truth in education. This is reflected in the decisions our leaders make, in the policies for which we fight and through the actions of our members.

“It is important to teach our students authentic American history,” explains WEA Vice President Janie White. “Our history is rich and filled with wonderful triumphs, but also terrible accounts. All of it is valuable and makes us the nation we are today. The most precious thing educators can do is have our students see themselves and their ancestors throughout the curriculum.”

No matter our race, background or zip code, we want our young people to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what’s right. We must tell hard truths about our country’s past and present so that our kids are well-equipped to create a better future. Joining together, we can demand that our schools have the age-appropriate resources to meet every child’s needs with well-trained and supported educators and curriculum that helps them reckon with and reshape our nation.

WEA President Larry Delaney puts this into perspective for us. “Across the country, and in our own communities, we are seeing organized and well-funded opposition against teaching the truth. As educators we have a tremendous responsibility to teach the true, non-whitewashed story of who we are and where we came from. It is not until we all have a common

understanding of our history — the good, the bad and the ugly — that we will be able to deliver on the most American of promises, ‘liberty and justice for all.’”

**At WEA, we reaffirm our commitment to truth in education. This is reflected in the decisions our leaders make, in the policies for which we fight and through the actions of our members.**

As educators, we are united in the belief that public education is the cornerstone of a strong democratic society and in the fundamental right of all students to have access to the best possible public education. For this to happen we must continuously improve the quality of public education, which means addressing our outdated and redlined versions of our nation’s past. Together in WEA we are

also dedicated to upholding academic freedom and creating safe learning and working environments for educators and students.

As NEA President Becky Pringle so clearly states, “Our students need to learn about the times when this country has lived up to its promise, and when it has not. Honesty. That’s what they need from us. Truth. That’s what they expect.” Only when we hold to these values and honor our true history in our classrooms can we realize the promise of public education as a common good aimed at uniting us and moving us forward as one nation.



*“Our schools need to be places for students to heal,” says Washington State Teacher of the Year Brooke Brown.*

## ‘Now is definitely the time to take action’

*Teacher of the Year Brooke Brown says we have a historic opportunity to reimagine public schools to put the needs of all students at the center of our vision*

For Brooke Brown, the question about *who* her students want to become is as important as their plan for *what* they want to become.

As an English and ethnic studies teacher and the 2021 Washington Teacher of the Year, Brown makes that an easy fit within her curriculum. And it’s especially vital given our nation’s racial tensions and renewed efforts to address racial and social justice.

“Ethnic Studies to me is, it’s humanizing,” Brown says. “It’s about love. It’s about really learning how to accept and respect who we are as people, as individuals. And that way to build empathy and compassion for one another, and to really learn how to show up for each other ... not as a way to judge where we’ve been, but as a way to understand where we are today, so that we can heal. So that we can support one another to transform and reimagine what a more just and equitable future could look like for all of us.”

Continuing to make personal connections has been one of the biggest teaching challenges for her during the pandemic. Brown has taught at Washington High School in Tacoma since 2006, in the Franklin Pierce School District.

The content of her classes changes each year because teaching must be culturally and community responsive, she says, but also relevant to the unique experiences of each year’s students and our unique time in history. She strives to create a brave, inclusive space where students can be their authentic selves. She typically begins a semester with poetry assignments so students can express their identity and their beliefs, like “For my People” or “Where I’m From,” so students can talk about their roots and their dreams.

In her application for teacher of the year, Brown’s building principal, Brent Whitemarsh, recognizes



Brown as a skilled instructor, but notes that her greatest contribution “has been working with our students and staff to address the challenges that result from systemic racism and providing strategies to help create equitable learning opportunities for all.”

“Brooke is at the forefront of the equity movement throughout the area,” Whitmarsh observes.

Brown believes we have reached a tipping point.

“We can’t keep doing the things the way we’ve been doing them,” she says. “How will we return to buildings in the fall? Will we return back to business as usual, or will we return to something different, something better, something new?”

Schools must change, and her message as teacher of the year is, “Now is the time.”

“Covid-19 and the pandemic have blown wide open the structural inequalities that exist in our communities, and we have a chance to think of something new, something better. This is a chance for our profession to work together to give our students the best,” Brown says. “We must confront the elephant in the room. The educational opportunities are not equal for all our students. They haven’t been, and this won’t change unless we start to dream and commit to a new way of doing things. My goal is to help guide that necessary work and channel the care and leadership of educators to focus that work on the best practices of today regarding equity and opportunity.”

Brown emphasizes the needs to center our decisions on students and their success, even when that disrupts our comfort as educators. She recalls how most every time we leave a store or restaurant, we’re offered a survey to share our experience. But how often do we do that with our students’ families?

“We have the chance to take a hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves some challenging questions,” Brown says. “Is this working? I mean really working? For everyone?’ And if the answer is no, then we owe it to our grandchildren to do our best to imagine and make a more just world. To ask our students and families how we can improve. To not be satisfied

*“A couple years ago I took down everything in my classroom, and then I slowly started to put things up that, to me, sparked joy and or was reflective of the students in my classroom. So to me, it’s very important for my students, when they come in, to see themselves on the walls of my classroom, and to have things that help center us or help us keep kind of anchored or focused during our time together. And so for me, it was no different here in my home office.”*



*“We have the chance to take a hard look in the mirror and ask ourselves some challenging questions.”*

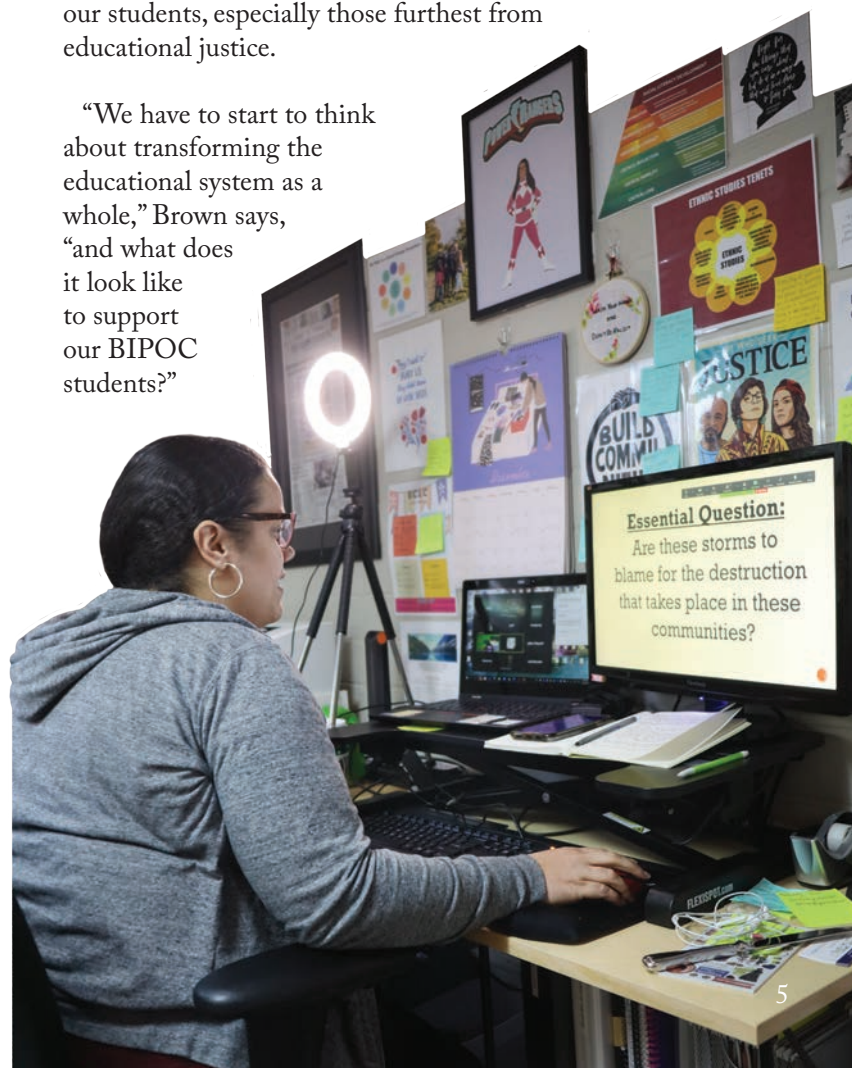
with the status quo of ‘most kids are doing OK.’ To be willing to share seats at the table and listen, really listen, to what our students and families need. To what our teachers of color need. To learn who we are and where we come from, both individually and as a nation, so we can move towards becoming more just.”

Brown says that as a biracial Black woman, she began teaching in part so that her students would have a teacher who understands and has experienced what it’s like to be biracial: “I wanted to be the person that I needed when I was in school.”

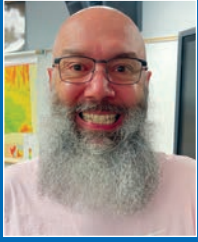
As teacher of the year, Brown worked in class with her students in the fall, remotely because of the pandemic, but was released at the end of December to work this year with OSPI. Her work this year focuses on restorative practices.

As schools work to hire and retain more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) teachers, thinking about ‘why do people become teachers?’ is important, she notes. The answer must start long before college teacher-prep programs and includes working today to improve the success of our students, especially those furthest from educational justice.

“We have to start to think about transforming the educational system as a whole,” Brown says, “and what does it look like to support our BIPOC students?”



# What Unites Us? *Even in divisive times, we know we are stronger when we find common ground to stand together*



Jonathan Babcock



Robyn Hayashi



Kathie Axtell

Living in a democracy allows us the freedom to say what we want; vote for those who align with our values; argue with one another freely. And polarization of citizens in our country is not new nor is it going away anytime. Still, as educators, there are many basic goals and values we share which unite us even if we may not agree how to reach them. We agree every student deserves high quality education, safe schools, academic freedom and economic justice. And as educators, we recognize it is our duty to teach facts, even when facing parental pressure or political friction.

The pandemic has thrown the world a curve ball and we find ourselves in ceaseless debates about vaccinations, masking, and how to keep schools safe for our students and their families. Passions run deep around political and social issues, and union members are split in their individual beliefs just as our broader society is divided.

How do we reconcile and honor our different beliefs while still standing united?

For Sunnyside EA member Jonathan Babcock the answer is simple. “I don’t have to agree with you about politics. We have a moral and a constitutional obligation to make sure we take care of all of our students,” the middle school language arts, history and AVID teacher says.

Robyn Hayashi, president of the Monroe Education Association, agrees the key is finding common ground.

“In my mind, it comes down to remembering that we all are here to do what’s best for kids,” Hayashi says. “Staying with the mindset of doing what’s best for kids gives us opportunities to focus on our common concerns: What do I need to be able to reach all of my students? What do my students need to be successful? When the foundation of our focus is on the kids, we can reframe our discussions around what we do have in common and then we can use our unity to push for necessary change.”

Chinook UniServ Council President Kathie Axtell has been a WEA leader for more than 30 years. A moderate Republican, Axtell says there have been times when she has felt more aligned with WEA and times when it has been far more difficult.

In those times of frustration when she feels she isn’t being fully heard, she says she tries to remember that the majority of our 90,000-plus members share a deep commitment to doing what they believe supports student success.

“Leading in a part of the state where there are more conservative members and making sure I am representing all members is not always easy to negotiate,” Axtell says. “I try to remember that at the end of the day, we are all striving to meet the same end goals for our students and their families.”

A long procession of labor protests and strikes throughout WEA’s history reveals another commonality that unites educators: poor decision-making by school administrators. Hayashi recalls Monroe’s rush to reopen schools last year before safety plans were ready, and its threats to fire teachers who wouldn’t knuckle under.

“The message to our members was clear and simple: ‘We want to make sure your working conditions are safe, and the district doesn’t,’” Hayashi recalls. “Members galvanized around that.”

Her members’ solidarity resulted in public pressure that forced the district to reassess and adjust its demands.

“We must keep in mind that we are stronger together,” Hayashi says. “I would be remiss if I didn’t mention how incredibly powerful it was to have WEA’s support every step of the way last fall. Without guidance from, and the backing of, our larger union, I don’t think our members would have won the health and safety guarantees that they deserved.”

Babcock, who identifies as a white, Christian male, says he was raised in an anti-union family. He says opinions about unions were formed for him from an early age, but that the first crack in those opinions came when he was forced to join a union at the United Parcel Service (UPS). As a husband, a father of five and a student, he says he appreciated the higher wages he received at UPS and didn’t mind paying dues to a group who helped him economically.

But he says what really shattered his deep anti-union



background was when he learned how much money the Sunnyside School District set aside (some \$14 million) in reserves during the 2008-2014 recession while he was “working my butt off along with my colleagues to make sure our students have a good future,” but also struggling mightily to make ends meet for his own family. He says it became evident how much members need one another.

Economic justice remains a key uniting force for members even in politically divisive times.

“We know that poverty has adverse, likely long-lasting, effects on our students,” Hayashi says. “When we think about doing what’s best for kids, we must work on leveling the playing field to help improve the outlook for our students who experience poverty. Stable housing, early childhood education, nutrition, reliable healthcare, amongst others, are needs that must be met before students can have success in school.”



Pro-Education. Pro-Labor.

## Want a more supportive school board? Run for it!

We all know how important school boards can be in setting policies and priorities that support our students and our professions. And as divisions in our community become even more stark, it is more important than ever to have pro-labor, pro-education school board members.

Across the state, WEA members are stepping up to run for school board, bringing our perspectives as educators to these important decision-making bodies. Nobody knows like we do what our students need and voicing those needs can shape policies that better serve each of our students.



Pamella Johnson

Pamella Johnson, a paraeducator and member of Rochester EA, is running for a seat on the North Thurston School Board this fall. When she attended one of the North Thurston School Board meetings, what she experienced was jarring.

“A few people are making noise and they don’t even know the truth behind it — it’s distorted information,” she shared. “NTSD (North Thurston School District) needs to hear from other cultures and what’s important to us.”



Brandon Hersey

Federal Way Education Association member Brandon Hersey stepped up to fill a Seattle Public Schools board vacancy to make sure student and community voices were central in the district’s decision making. He is now running to retain his seat. As a resident of South Seattle, Hersey is driven to strengthen and deepen community-SPS ties to help repair neighborhoods.

“I applied for this school board seat so that I could give our agenda over to the community,” Hersey said. “This is what educators do — we look for an opportunity to give back.”



Joe Bento

In his 19 years of teaching, Renton high school teacher Joe Bento steps up regularly for his students, community, and fellow educators. And last winter when a seat became open on the Kent School Board, Bento, who is vice president of the Rainier UniServ Council, once again took the opportunity to amplify those voices and applied to be a school board director.

“I bring things forward as an educator, activist, and union member that the board doesn’t necessarily think about,” Bento shared. “I want to make sure that people are heard, and that’s the point of this position, listening to the community — not loud voices, but more representative.”

While it’s too late to run for a school board seat in this fall’s election, it’s not too late to support pro-education, pro-labor candidates like our fellow WEA members. Visit [www.washingtonnea.org/advocacy](http://www.washingtonnea.org/advocacy) to find WEA-PAC endorsed candidates and join WEA-PAC at [www.washingtonnea.org/advocacy/wea-pac](http://www.washingtonnea.org/advocacy/wea-pac) to be part of our political strength.

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## Teaching Truth Tips for teachers in a tumultuous time

Educators are experts on making sure our students learn honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what's right. Recent broad-ranging attacks on how we teach and what we teach has created confusion about how we can safely continue teaching accurate and updated curricula to help our students understand our past and present in order to create a better future.

### You are protected in teaching the curriculum.

We are instructed by our school districts to teach prescribed curricula and cannot be disciplined for teaching these. We know that by presenting factual information, we give our students the opportunity to draw their own conclusions and engage deeply with the material. Educators have broad leeway to choose how each curriculum is implemented in the classroom, whether that's by choosing which books to read or by selecting which units on which to spend more or less time.

### Some union contracts go farther to ensure academic freedom.

Read your local union contract to determine whether you have additional protections for speech in the classroom. If you're not sure, talk with your building rep.

### Note that the First Amendment does not extend into the classroom.

When instructing students, legally speaking, we are considered to be speaking on behalf of the district. That means, unless otherwise stated in our union contracts, we have to refrain from taking political positions or espousing personal beliefs. That includes in our speech, classroom decorations, and displays.

### Safety comes first.

For our students and ourselves, the first consideration is safety. We must create an environment where all students feel safe and we must demand that our employers protect our personal safety. If you feel your students or yourself threatened by activists, report this to your administration immediately, and to the police as well if necessary.

### What about my classroom Black Lives Matter flag?

Stating that Black Lives Matter is stating the truth – that we lift up our Black students and work to ensure they have equitable access to education and resources. Some non-Black people have harmfully and wrongly assumed that Black Lives Matter is a political statement or suggests unconditional support for an organization and its actions. WEA maintains that Black Lives Matter is appropriate, and indeed needed, in our schools.

### What about curricula like the 1619 Project and Black Lives Matter at School?

Students need to learn our shared stories of confronting injustice to build a more perfect union, and students deserve better than the outdated, inaccurate, redlined accounts of the past history curriculum. While working within our districts' curriculum parameters, each of us bring our expertise to determine the best way to make history accurate, holistic, and engaging for all students, whether Black, brown, or white. Educators should not teach curricula that are explicitly prohibited by their administration.

### Can I do an Indigenous land acknowledgement?

Since 2005, Washington state has required PK-12 schools to teach Tribally-developed curriculum with a focus on learning more about Tribal sovereignty. A land acknowledgement can be an engaging way for students to recognize our history, however it is not a required part of the Since Time Immemorial curriculum. Educators can opt to do land acknowledgements unless told otherwise by their administration.

### I have been told by my administration I cannot teach Critical Race Theory. How does that impact me?

Critical Race Theory is taught in universities and law schools, but at the PK-12 and community college levels we teach age-appropriate lessons that help our students understand and communicate across differences and portray a holistic and accurate picture of our nation's history.

### What do I do if a parent has a problem with something I am teaching?

Corporate interests that seek to undermine public education are inciting paranoia among families, causing some to jump to conclusions about our materials and teaching. If a calm conversation with the family does not diffuse the situation, seek backup from your administration. If you fear you will be disciplined due to parental complaints about your curriculum, contact your building rep.

### How are union members protected in these situations?

Together in our union, we have additional protections. Some local union contracts include additional language about academic freedom that protect educators. Local union contracts also include a fair grievance and discipline procedure that ensure educators' concerns are heard. If you may need protection, reach out to your building rep.