



Uniting for student
mental health

Bringing visibility to invisible disabilities

Supporting students and educators with disabilities you can't see

Every year during the third week of October, we observe invisible disabilities week. This week is part of the larger Disability History and Awareness Month. Invisible disabilities are physical, mental or neurological conditions that are not visibly obvious, yet limit a person's movement, senses and activities in everyday life. Invisible disabilities can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions and judgments (<https://wea.mobi/3TF2uTn>).



Martha Patterson



Heather Grinde

Of the 26 million Americans who have a severe disability, 74% live with a disability that cannot be visibly seen. Because invisible disabilities are unseen, it can be difficult for students and educators to advocate for accommodations. Martha Patterson, Central Kitsap EA member and longtime WEA leader, recognized the need for WEA to advocate and bring awareness for students and educators living with invisible disabilities. During the 2021 WEA Representative Assembly, she brought forward New Business Item 20 to elevate the issue of individuals with invisible disabilities.

Patterson, whose son lives with an invisible disability, wants those with disabilities to have their humanity recognized and for their conditions to be accommodated, not seen as a nuisance. "The intent of the NBI was to recognize and provide support for members to advocate for one another and for students," Patterson says of her efforts. "Mainly the aim was to raise awareness for educators to know their rights and better understand students' rights."

Patterson sees disability rights as an important component of racial, social, and economic justice within our organization.

"The disability rights movement is part of the civil rights movement," she says. "Discrimination against individuals with disabilities is a real issue. We can do more if we stop looking at accommodating individuals with disabilities as an inconvenience. Access should be equitable."

Patterson suggests that we design our school environments to support and accommodate students and educators with disabilities first and not focus only on efficiency.

Heather Grinde, South Kitsap EA member and teacher, lives with an invisible disability. Grinde has a colostomy bag attached to her abdomen. If she was not open about her condition, people would not know that she has had 22 surgeries since the age of 21 and that her condition impacts how she engages in her daily life.

"Even getting basic needs met, like taking an extra-long bathroom break because of my condition, makes me feel incredibly guilty knowing someone has to sit there and cover my classroom for me," says Grinde. "Chronic and invisible illness, because they are not visible, are often viewed as a character flaw, not an actual illness, which makes it incredibly difficult to advocate for myself."

Grinde noted the shift during the pandemic and how educators and education leaders went above and beyond to provide access for every student.

"During the pandemic we did everything to ensure every student had access to what they needed to learn," she explains. "But in 'normal' times that same grace is not given for students or for educators with invisible disabilities."

Grinde suggests that flexibility is key.

"We need to figure out ways to level the playing field for students and teachers alike," she says. "Education is a job in which we always put students first. We need to do the same for educators."

Money, she notes, can be a barrier to providing accommodations and the lack of substitute educators is also an issue.

See INVISIBLE, Page 7



CONTENTS

- 2 Invisible disabilities: hidden but real
- 4 Student social and emotional needs have risen exponentially and resources, including mental health services, can't come soon enough.
- 6 Meet the next generation

Many people with invisible disabilities get unnoticed because others aren't aware of their conditions, says Martha Patterson, a Central Kitsap special education teacher. But educators, especially special education teachers like her, are working to change this.



NEA Super Week was anything but normal this year.

It's usually a time for NEA Board of Directors to conduct board business and to meet with state congressional leaders, but the September meeting also included a surprise visit from President Joe Biden, and an Elton John concert at the White House for some lucky directors.

"I was one of the members who was chosen to stand on stage behind the President as he spoke to everyone," says Pamela Sepúlveda Wilson, a Northshore teacher who attended her first board meeting as an NEA State Director along with Audra Shaw, WEA-Eastern Council president. Both were selected to be on stage with the President at a gathering of roughly 500 educators and labor leaders at NEA headquarters.

"It was surreal being so close to him, but it also really felt amazing standing shoulder to shoulder with other labor unions and chatting and making connections," Wilson says. "It was not only a time to realize how important our vote will be this election (as with every election) but also the power of union when we stand together as labor."

Along with Wilson and Shaw, Washington's other NEA Directors are Jeb Binns from Rainier UniServ Council, Becca Ritchie from WEA Olympic, Pamela Johnson from WEA Chinook and Charlotte Lartey from Vancouver. They joined WEA President Larry Delaney in Washington, D.C., for the NEA Board of Directors meeting and Super Week in September.

The NEA Board of Directors is NEA's top decision-making body and includes directors from each state affiliate. NEA State Directors are elected by a majority of valid ballots cast by delegates at the WEA Representative Assembly. Terms are for three years.

"For me, the most remarkable part of any Super Week is lobbying," says Binns. NEA State Directors attend Super Week in September, February and May, along with a virtual meeting in December and a board meeting at NEA Representative Assembly. He says Washington's team juggled lobbying schedules to accommodate the agenda change and directors made sure they each had a mix of staff and member meetings with lawmakers. Directors talked about education funding, child nutrition, marriage equality, and Public Service Loan Forgiveness, which led to Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal's webinar last month with WEA members.

"Being on the NEA Board is a surreal experience," Ritchie says. "As I walked into the NEA Building, I took a moment to think of all those who came before me to make NEA what it is today. I also pondered my own values of leaving places better than they were when I entered. I spent time looking at the historic display at the entrance and thought about the struggles that educators have faced, the challenges we have overcome and pondered what our Union will face in the future."

"Doing this work is the culmination of years of learning about the process, spending time advocating and organizing," she says. "When I walked into the board room and saw my name plate on the table, I thought about how my role now is to bring the voices, stories and experiences of the members of WEA into the room to commingle with the voices of educators across the country."

Shaw, who is a new state director, says it's an honor to be part of WEA's team. She met with Reps. Derek Kilmer and Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Sen. Patty Murray. WEA's team had nine different meetings scheduled throughout the day because of Binns' work and coordination before the rest of the team arrived in D.C., she says.

"I truly appreciate the guidance and support received from the more experienced board directors throughout the day," Shaw says. "It was simply amazing to be there in person and relate educators'

See SUPER, Page 7

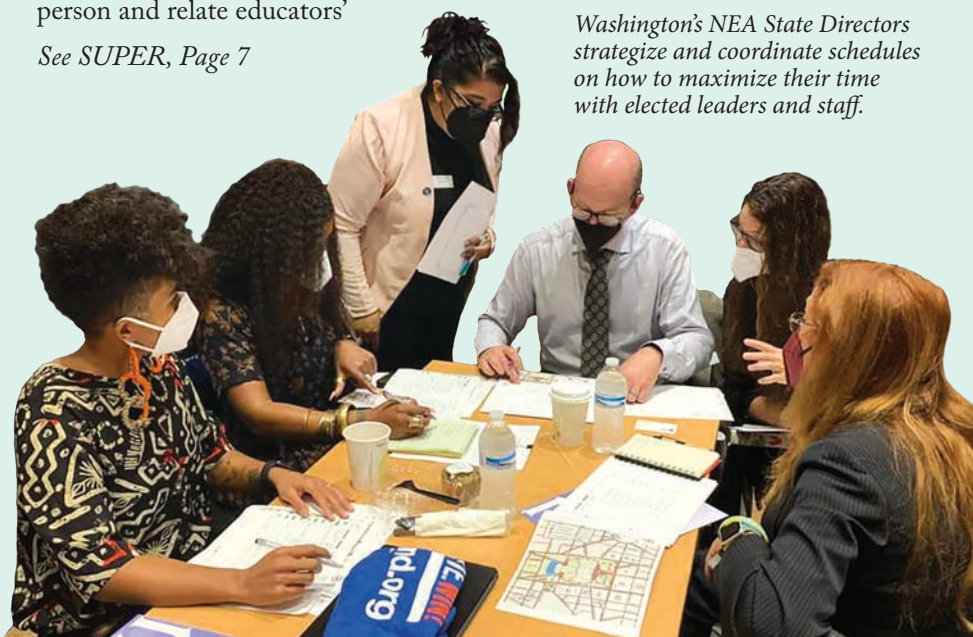


Joe Biden, President of the United States, takes a selfie with WEA's Becca Ritchie during a labor rally at NEA headquarters in Washington, D.C.



Audra Shaw (WEA-Eastern) and Jeb Binns (Rainier) at the Capitol before they visit with Washington's elected congressional leaders.

Washington's NEA State Directors strategize and coordinate schedules on how to maximize their time with elected leaders and staff.





School, social workers, nurses and other specialized instructional support professionals often lack the necessary resources to address students' social and emotional needs. When the COVID pandemic struck, needs became overwhelming.

Supporting student mental health to support learning

Across the state, across all grade levels and in all positions, WEA educators are seeing the same things—our students have more and more severe mental and behavioral health needs than ever before.

“Students’ needs are so much higher,” observes Shayla Tiffany, an Eastmont elementary school psychologist in East Wenatchee. “We see anxiety so much more than we did before, all the way down to Kindergarten students. A lot more students are sharing that they’ve had suicidal thoughts or are feeling loneliness or hopelessness.”

The growing mental health needs – many of them unmet – translate to behavioral challenges in the classroom.

“We have wonderful students, but some are clearly in pain,” remarks fifth-grade teacher Jennifer Collins, a member of the Pasco Association of Educators. “Some are acting out, some are clearly

scared and acting in.” Collins says the pandemic break in in-person learning meant lost social-emotional learning and she’s seeing many fifth-graders with second grade social-emotional skills. “I spent the first six weeks of school this year teaching social-emotional skills,” she recalled, “from how to solve a problem, to how to be respectful to each other, to how to interact. They’re big kids now but they don’t know how to behave as big kids.”

And middle school counselor and Everett EA member Kaley Mitchell notes how the students she sees are having needs that reflect other challenges. “Mental health needs are high because basic needs are high, especially in impoverished communities,” she says. “Families don’t have the resources they need to support their kids.”

Educators know our students can’t learn when they have unmet basic needs, what experts call the “Maslow before Bloom” rule. And these behavioral health challenges often impact an entire learning community.

“There’s one teacher with 25-30 students in the classroom and if you have 2-3 students with pretty significant behavior issues it’s difficult for a teacher to support them and their needs while still continuing to teach the class,” says Aurelia Gomez, an Eastmont elementary school counselor. “We do a lot of crisis response; there are a lot of students with big needs.”



At Kenroy Elementary in East Wenatchee, Eastmont EA’s Brynn Nielsen works on breathing exercises with students as part of a stress management exercise (top photo). In an assignment on teamwork, she and students work on how fast they can pass a hula hoop around while holding hands.

“We’re pulling students out of the river and we’re not seeing what’s putting them in the river upstream,” Eastmont high school social worker Kelsy Bendtsen says. “It’s very responsive and there’s no time for prevention.”

Working together to win more supports

Recognizing the growing problem, educators took action in the

2022 legislative session. Hundreds of WEA members across the state reached out to our legislators and won an historic increase in student mental health funding. While the funding is phasing in over three years, even in the first year, educators are seeing what a difference we've made together. Districts were given the flexibility to use the funding to meet their most immediate needs.

"Our district used the new funding to add an additional counselor to each high school," Everett's Mitchell says. "That's important because of the career and graduation demands on those counselors, and every time you reduce the student-to-counselor ratio, you're creating more time and mental space to support more students."

State funding is also making a difference in Pasco, where Collins is finally able to get mental health resources for students.

"We partnered with a community mental health organization that does tele-health appointments so the students can meet with mental health counselors while they're still at school," she shares. The supports mean shorter wait times for access to counseling, plus better access for students who would meet challenges with transportation to an outside appointment.

The Eastmont School District pursued a similar partnership with an outside provider, bringing mental health counselors into some elementary schools to meet with students. Where students used to have a 6-8 week wait for a counseling appointment, now they can meet with a mental health counselor within the next week or two.

"It's nice because with more counselors we've been able to get access to services for students we haven't been able to get to," Eastmont's Tiffany says. "We can do a double-dose with an outside counselor and me to give more support, and we have time to run more social skills and emotional regulation groups with students."

The additional funding also helped Bendtsen finally get the additional support she had been needing.

"I have been screaming for help the last three years," she recalls. "That has finally paid off. Last month we hired an additional staff member to do mental health and drug and alcohol intervention support. It means we're able to serve more students."

And Gomez's school added funding for an interventionist to work part-time on social-emotional learning, under the same intervention model used for reading and math supports.

A long way to go to fully meet student needs

Educators agree that while the legislation and new funding are beginning to make

a difference, it will take a full community effort to address the increased mental and behavioral health needs in the longer term.

"School counselors don't have the resources to even identify the kids who need resources when our caseloads are so high," remarks Brynn Nielsen, another Eastmont elementary school counselor. "We do have some resources we can tap into, but it's limited and there needs to be more prevention and awareness overall."

"We need to think systemically," says Mitchell. "We need more partnership with community agencies and stakeholders that can bring in more support, and we need more mental health therapists and social workers in our school buildings."

Part of the ongoing challenge is not just the need for triage and level one supports in schools, but also higher levels of support in the community.

"Our biggest challenge in the Wenatchee Valley is we've grown exponentially as a community but our services haven't matched it," notes Tiffany. "We have three community counseling agencies but it's not enough for our valley. We have a crisis line but we don't have residential or crisis inpatient."

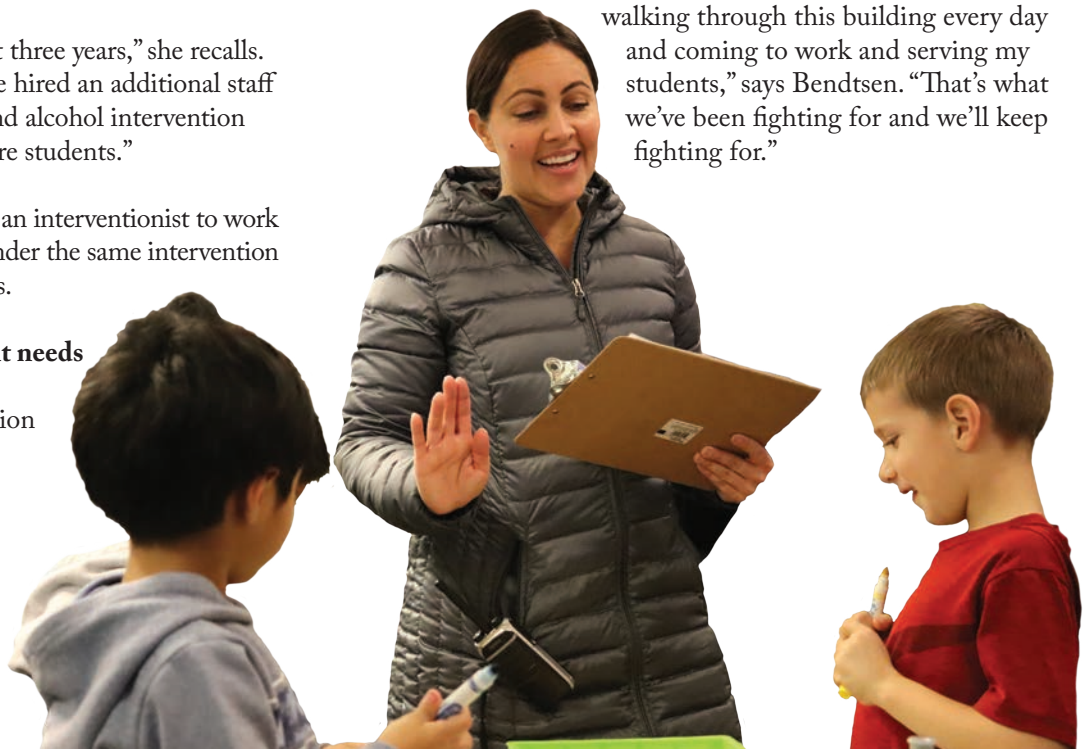
Bendtsen agrees, "We're seeing wait times of six or more months to see a provider and some agencies can't even give a timeline. It leaves us with a lot of crisis intervention."

"I think families need a lot of support right now," Pasco's Collins says. "A lot of families are insecure with employment and housing. We're doing our best taking care of students' physical needs. The emotional needs are going to take time and love."

As the 2023 legislative session approaches, WEA members are coming together to look at legislative and funding solutions we can advocate for to put us farther down the path toward meeting student mental and behavioral health needs.

"It's been crazy but I love my job, I love my students, I love walking through this building every day and coming to work and serving my students," says Bendtsen. "That's what we've been fighting for and we'll keep fighting for."

Aurelia Gomez at Cascade Elementary in East Wenatchee works with kindergartners on how to be good listeners.



Off to a strong start

SWEA leaders hope to share the benefits of membership with aspiring educators as soon as possible

Thomas Fairchild and Angela Caron won't take it personally if you joined Student Washington Education Association (SWEA) mainly for the educators' liability insurance.

Fairchild, SWEA's new president, and Caron, new vice president, joined for the same reason when they needed the coverage so they could do their student teaching. At just \$22.50 a year to get access to this essential coverage, SWEA membership is a real bargain.

But there's more — a lot more — to the program, and these leaders hope to get the word out to more aspiring educators and get them plugged in even earlier. By the time most aspiring educators need the liability insurance, they're toward the tail end of their education. They hope to reach out to first-year and second-year students as well, so they can enjoy the benefits of SWEA's programs, too.

Caron is working on her master's degree at Western Governors University (WGU) and is student teaching in a third-grade classroom at Glacier Elementary School in Maple Valley. After signing up to get the insurance, she found, "they just started offering so many resources and opportunities that I wanted to get involved and help others see what resources are available. The things being offered by WEA and NEA are really valuable resources."

Both cite the value of the SWEA community.

"I think it's important because you can build those connections," Caron says. "Some people you meet can help you with student teaching and give you advice."

Fairchild agrees, citing the support he's gotten from fellow SWEA members.

"This sounds cliché and exaggerated, but student teaching is one of the hardest things you can do," Fairchild says. He's also attending WGU and just started a long-awaited placement in seventh-grade math at Evergreen Middle School in Everett.

"You will doubt yourself. You will ask yourself, 'Is this what I really want to do?'" he says. "Having a community of people who are where you are or have been where you are is invaluable."

There are other benefits to membership, of course. You get free or low-cost professional development, which is no small thing at a time in their lives when students are already shelling out a lot of money to become educators.

And the many discounts on things like travel and dining certainly help when you're living life on a student budget.

But the support network is why Fairchild and Caron hope that SWEA can encourage aspiring educators to join and make connections with other aspiring and current educators — especially now that so many students are doing a lot of coursework online.

For those who move on to work as educators and become members of Washington Education Association (WEA) or another National Education Association (NEA) affiliate, SWEA can end up being almost free: First-year educators can apply to get a dues rebate of \$20 a year for each year they were a SWEA member up to four years.

Caron knows that some aspiring educators might have their doubts about the value of a union.

"I used to be like that," she says. "I used to just wonder how much the union actually did for people. I felt like I could advocate for myself. But there really is power in numbers."

Both officers saw that power in action when they participated in this year's virtual WEA Representative Assembly. They heard about what WEA members are prioritizing, both at the bargaining table and at the Legislature.

Caron was impressed that many of the initiatives were focused on the greater good: "A lot of the things people are pushing for is what's going to be good for students — things like hours of art or hours of PE. Student protections and making sure they have safe spaces in schools."

Fairchild and Caron have started holding monthly SWEA chats, to answer questions and help make others aware of what benefits are available. They're also sending out a survey in early 2023 to find out what SWEA members want to see from their organization. In the meantime, they also urge SWEA members to contact them at SWEA@WashingtonEA.org.

"Don't be shy," Fairchild says. "My inbox is open. Even if you just want to say hi. I'm here to support you in any way."



Thomas Fairchild



Angela Caron



Know someone who should join SWEA? Scan this code or go to <https://wea.mobi/JoinSWEAToday>

SUPER from Page 3

stories regarding the impact of education funding, relief from student loan debt, child nutrition reauthorization and marriage equality, for example, and impact the consideration of elected leaders on behalf of our members."

The fall's board agenda was modified for a labor rally and visit from President Biden. Washington's team was among the roughly 500 educators and labor leaders at NEA headquarters to greet Biden, who called on the union audience to stay focused on the midterm elections. His visit to NEA was the first since Lyndon B. Johnson. The White House extended an invitation to NEA for 30 educators to attend a cocktail party on the South Lawn and the Elton John concert. WEA's Ritchie and Shaw were selected to attend.

While the agenda for board and Super Week was

modified to allow for the presidential visit, the board still dug into NEA business, including filling out get-out-the-vote (GOTV) postcards, taking short videos of GOTV messages and sharing state election plans. Julie Chávez Rodriguez, senior advisor and assistant to the president, and granddaughter of union leader and labor organizer César Chávez, was one of the guest speakers when the board observed Hispanic Heritage and Native American and Alaska Native Heritage months..

"I will admit, I was fangirling," Wilson says. "She was so inspirational and said these words that resonated with me, 'Once the change for social justice begins, it cannot be reversed.' It reminded me to keep doing what we are doing. We are on the right path and need to continue moving forward."



Clockwise from left: NEA State Directors Jeb Binns, Pamela JoUson, Audra Shaw, Pamela Wilson, Charlotte Lartey, Larry Delaney (WEA President) and Becca Ritchie represented WEA members in the other Washington in September.

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INVISIBLE from Page 2

Yet, she still has hope that we can overcome these barriers because of our creativity during the school closures at the height of the pandemic.

"We were able to cut through red tape and be flexible and ensure access for every student," she says. "There really isn't a reason we can't overcome obstacles. We just choose not to."

Grinde warns that there is already a teacher shortage.

"The demands of the job are so high, but little is given in return," she says. "All of this is compounded for educators with an invisible disability."



Member-to-member support

Martha Patterson took Heather Grinde's story, along with those of several other educators and students, to the 2021 National Education Association Representative Assembly. There she pushed another NBI at the national level. Learn more about Invisible Disabilities at <https://wea.mobi/3X3DXdo>

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United

Across the state, WEA members united, took action and achieved contracts that do more for students and educators



WEA started the 2022 bargaining season with 170 open bargains, but educator contract negotiations didn't gain much public attention until late summer and early fall.

Especially in Eatonville, Kent, Seattle and Ridgefield, where members went on strike demanding their employers make the investments students deserve. They stood on the lines for contracts that include supports for students in special education and multilingual education, manageable workloads and class sizes, and respectful, competitive pay to attract and retain the very best for our students.

In highlighting collective bargaining, it is somewhat tempting to elevate locals who go on strike. Strikes are very visual. They give members unique time to bond with one another. They produce emerging leaders. There is a clear beginning and an ending.

However, going on strike is a tactic members use as a last resort to change the balance of power and make necessary gains. With or without a strike, winning a solid contract takes hard work, preparation, unity and strength among the membership and community engagement.

Many locals reached a settlement without a strike, and those efforts were just as stressful. Some like Moses Lake EA and Nine Mile Falls EA, for instance, organized and held on, just wrapping up negotiations some two months into the new school year.

