

Congratulations,  
**Blaire Penry**

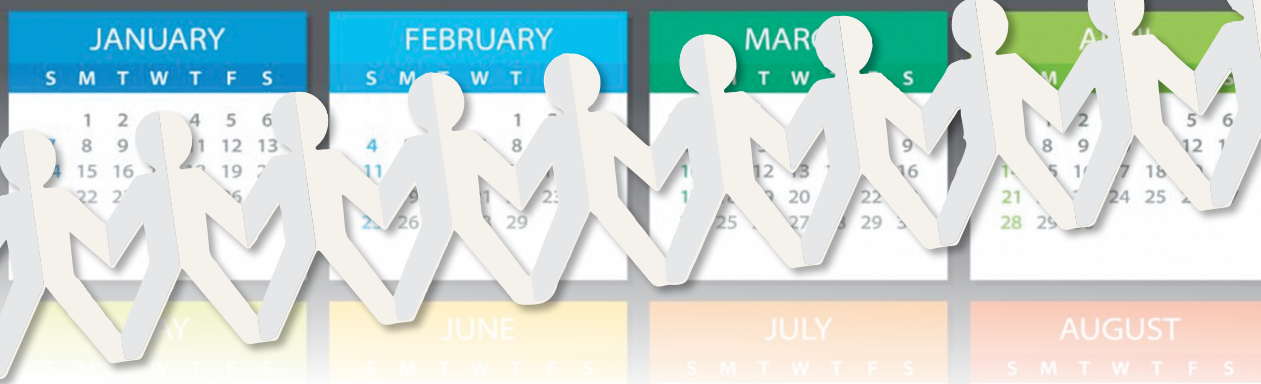
WA Teacher of the Year • Page 4

Building toward  
**2025 Legislative Session** • Page 3

**Loan Forgiveness** • Page 7



# President's message



Hello, WEA.

When the calendar turned to January, we knew that this year was going to be a year in which the Washington Education Association would be tested. What we didn't know was the degree to which we would be tested.

January marked the start of the legislative session in our state, and with a short 60-day session this year, we knew that getting large gains would be difficult. But by mobilizing member voices, we were confident that we would see success on our legislative priorities: progress on a professional and living wage for all classified educators, increased funding for special education, and a beginning to the work of finding solutions to the mental and behavioral health crisis in our schools and communities.

Coming into this year, the 2024 election cycle presented another challenge. With a slate of open seats — governor, attorney general, state schools superintendent and more than 100 legislative races, we knew that our resources would be spread thin.

Add to that the filing of multiple versions of a statewide school voucher initiative that could siphon billions of state dollars from public education to

religious and secular private schools and home-schools, and our work just grew exponentially.

I'm not going to lie, it's a lot. But here's the thing: I know that 2024 will be a year that we will look back on with pride. It will be a year that educators and those who believe in the promise of public education come together to say no to those who wish to weaken and undermine our schools and communities. 2024 will be the year that we work collectively to elect public officials who recognize the value not only of educators and public schools, but organized labor, too.

As we look at the work that lies ahead, we may feel overwhelmed, but what we need to remember is our strength is not in the one. Our strength is in the many. Our strength is in you all — the members of WEA, WEA-Retired, higher education, aspiring educators and our WEA staff. If this work were left to Janie and me, it would be too much, but we are 90,000 members located in every community in the state. When we, the 90,000 members of WEA come together in solidarity, there is nothing that we cannot do.

The days ahead may be long, but the months will be short. I am ready to roll up my sleeves and get to work. Will you join me?

*Our strength is in the many. Our strength is in you all — the members of WEA, WEA-Retired, higher education, aspiring educators and our WEA staff.*

— Larry Delaney



Larry Delaney  
WEA President

## CONTENTS

### 3 Looking ahead

Lawmakers passed a supplemental budget that will add significant funds to education and passed policy bills that will make our schools safer and more inclusive. WEA members made steps forward this session that we can continue to build on next year.

### 4 Meet Blaire Penry

Washington state's 2024 Teacher of the Year

### 8 Take the No School Vouchers pledge

School-voucher schemes are taking shape, but don't be fooled.

Oops! We misspelled Seattle EA member Marla Rasmussen's name in the Fall 2023 issue. Our apologies.



Northshore EA's Herr Ben Fisher-Rodriguez teaches German and Spanish — and builds a common vocabulary of inclusivity along the way. [Page 6](#)

# Making progress for ESPs and Special Education in the 2024 legislative session

Together in WEA, educators have a strong voice for our students, our schools and colleges and our families. We showed this during the 2024 legislative session when we sent more than 3,000 emails, signed in on bills 3,100 times, rallied, visited legislators and more. We made progress on many of our key issues.

Our top priority this session was Education Support Professional (ESP) staffing and pay. Together we secured \$70 million in additional funding for ESP staffing by increasing the allotment for ESPs in the school funding formula. Local unions can bargain for these funds.

We also added \$20 million in funding for Special Education by raising the funding cap by 1%.

For both Special Education and ESPs, this is a down payment but falls short of what our students need. Because this was a supplemental budget, legislators had limited funds available. We'll be back in the 2025 legislative session ready to fight for our students and ourselves when there's a full budget on the table.

We also protected our students' freedom to learn about themselves and their community, helping to pass bills that include LGBTQIA+ individuals in materials and that direct districts to create a fair process that limits arbitrary book bans.

We also together won adjunct faculty access to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and a 3% cost-of-living adjustment for PERS Plan 1 retirees.

This was a legislative session of incremental change, giving us some steps forward but still plenty of progress needed to get our students, schools and colleges what they need. We'll be back in the 2025 legislative session ready to raise our voices once again.

Winter 2024

## Advocating for rESpect

Education Support Professionals are the engines that keep our schools running but for too long have been severely underpaid, often forced to get second and third jobs or live hours away from workplaces. WEA members across the state are coming together for respectful wages for school support staff.

WEA members are uniting to win better staffing and better pay for ESPs. In the 2024 legislative session we worked on getting more ESP funding for districts. Already we're planning for the 2025 legislative session when we'll be speaking out for raises that show the importance of ESPs and allow ESPs to live on just one job — one of the most important jobs for our students' futures.



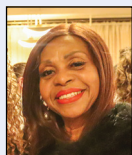
**Su Kwon, library paraeducator, University Place Classified**

*So many of my fellow paraeducators are single parents and they have to take care of their children; they do not have extra money to pay for child care. My other co-workers have to have extra jobs. That's why I'm speaking out for ESP pay increases — I want to support them and be a voice for all of us.*



**David White, Success program, Clover Park ESP**

*The people who are in support positions care about students so much, and there are many more who care as well but support staff wages are so low that they have to weigh supporting their students or feeding their families. Higher wages will help balance that so people can afford to give back to their communities.*



**Vallerie Fisher, Family Support Worker, Seattle EA**

*A wage increase for me as an ESP would make the difference between me and my colleagues working another job taking valuable time away from our families just to provide a living during these continuous raising cost of living, which our incomes can't compete with. I love my job.*



**Darrel Proszek, custodian, Chewelah CPEA**

*For my family, a raise would be huge. If you look at our retirements, our wages based on retirement, our Social Security — it would mean more. It's more money that I get to spend on different things in our town. It means we're valued and we're worth something.*

*We have a lot of paraeducators and staff members that are mothers with 1, 2, or 3 kids, and when their SNAP food stamps is more than what they're making, that's wrong. They're working just as hard as anyone else in the district, 30-40 hours a week. It's wrong.*



**Denise Pigue, behavior tech, Olympia Paraeducators Association**

*My daughter is also a paraeducator at Olympia School District. She's 24 years old and she doesn't make a wage enough to live on her own. She either has to live with me (she recently moved back home) or she has to have a roommate. She also has a part-time second job because she doesn't make enough to pay for herself to be independent. It's very important for young adults to make enough to be independent from their parents. It's very important to me as a mother. The districts need to pay more money, which means the Legislature needs to allow the districts to pay more money.*



**Cassie Legg-Schuyler, library technician and works at a gas station full time, Steilacoom Classified EA**

*I work seven days a week because I don't get paid enough from the school district to live closer or even pay all my bills. It would be nice to get paid at least a living wage so I could have more time with my friends and family. And maybe I could live a little closer and be able to focus on the one job and have more time to do the things I need to do outside of work.*



**April Fincher, paraeducator K-3, Vancouver Association ESP**

*I'm supposed to be in a professional position. I feel like I should be able to support myself but I can only do what I do because I'm passionate about it and I have a husband. Honestly he makes three times what I do. So I could not do it if it was just me.*

**Linda Freeland, media clerk, Vancouver Association ESP**

*ESPs are not really considered to be "for-real" members of the workforce because ESPs are not valued for various reasons. It's not recognized how essential ESPs are and that includes clerks and everyone else that students come into contact with. If the school districts and education system wants to have people who are competent and will support the best education for students they need to step up and actually pay us.*

**Mary Hilton, library technician, Steilacoom ESP**

*ESP wages are very important to me because we don't get paid a living wage and if you aren't married or working two jobs like myself you're probably living with your parents or somewhere else. I don't think that's fair that there's such a discrepancy between a living wage and what we get.*



# 2024 Washington Teacher of the Year brings authentic self to every lesson

*Blaire Penry teaches CTE and Fine Arts in Auburn and is the worksite learning coordinator for multiple schools. She has led in the creation of student equity groups, developed and facilitated equity and diversity professional development for faculty, and is committed to working with local leaders to ensure all students are prepared for the future that they choose.*

## *Auburn's Blaire Penry focuses on building engaging, student-centered learning communities*

Blaire Penry, Washington state's 2024 Teacher of the Year, recognizes that when educators are authentic with their students, students are authentic in return. "Students know fake and don't respond to fake," says Penry. "When teachers are real with students, students are real in return and more willing to be creative and take risks."

Penry is currently an instructional specialist in the Auburn School District, but previously, was an online Career and Technical Education (CTE) and electives teacher for Auburn Online, which was her role when she was named the state's top educator. Penry explains that in an online learning environment, authenticity must be intentional and a focus of classroom practice.

"This program that was started in response to the pandemic grew to be a program to meet students and their families where they were and in a way that they needed."



*In every learning experience Penry facilitates, her students drive and lead the learning. Colleagues say her unconditional positivity for her students is a key reason she is so impactful.*

In a time when many educators were glad to return to a traditional classroom after distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Penry saw online learning as a chance to be innovative and disruptive. "Teaching online is an opportunity to meet students in a different way."

As an educator of color, Penry has not always felt seen, valued or heard.

"I don't always feel valued within the education system," she says and recognizes that her students feel the same.



Penry credits virtual teaching with transforming her practice to better reflect her students. “I was forced to really look at my curriculum and look for what voices were not being seen or heard and whose lens the curriculum was coming from.” Teaching online allowed Penry to be creative and disrupt traditional practices that did not meet the needs of every student, especially students of color.

Reflection is a critical element of Penry’s teaching. “We need to examine our own stories and our own teaching and reflect on our own educational journey to see how that is playing out in our classrooms,” she says.

Penry’s experiences have shown her that educators must value and bridge what they are teaching with the lived experiences of the students in their classrooms. “We have to ask questions and be unafraid so that we can connect with all of our students,” she explains.

Penry also views online learning as a vehicle for creativity and for utilizing technology in new ways. “Technology is always moving forward,” she explains. “When we don’t teach students how to use technology, we’re doing them a disservice.”

Decision-makers are critical in this endeavor. “When I tell people I’m an online teacher they roll their eyes,” Penry says. People have preconceived ideas about online learning and the students who access that type of program, she explains.

In Penry’s experience the reality is that students are thriving and building rich community in the online environment. Penry believes decision-makers must shine a spotlight on programs like hers that are working for students, because it’s a matter of equity.

*‘We can’t just have the words equity, diversity and inclusion in our mission statements. We need to take the time to ensure that equity is actually happening.’*

– Blaire Penry  
Washington’s 2024 Teacher of the Year

“We can’t just have the words equity, diversity and inclusion in our mission statements,” she says. “We need to take the time to ensure that equity is actually happening. It can’t just be said. It has to be acted.” Online education programs, she says, are equity in action because they expand access to public education to more students.

Outside of school, Penry spends time with family and her 4-year-old son. “He is inquisitive and funny and very talented and lately he’s been in the why phase and sometimes that is really overwhelming,” she says. “But there are so many times when he asks why and it is a really good

question.” That inquisitiveness is a reminder to her that being curious and not being afraid to ask “why” is important. “I am asking more questions,” she says. “I am inspired to grow.”

Catch a glimpse of Blaire Penry’s day at work at <https://wea.mobi/toy24-vid>



# Northshore EA's Ben Fisher-Rodriguez models a changing world one student at a time



*The NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence recognizes educators from around the country who promote both excellence in teaching and advocacy for the profession.*

**B**en Fisher-Rodriguez approaches every student as a future neighbor and contributing community member.

“As educators we must adopt the broadest lens possible when teaching and be inclusive of every student,” he says. Teachers help shape society and “when we are inclusive in our classrooms, we model a changing world that works better for every individual.”

As a married gay man, Fisher-Rodriguez recognizes the world still needs work. “Nothing is safe,” he says. “In order to be the society we envision we are, we have to be willing to continue to do this work and safeguard the most vulnerable among us.” Teachers are a vital part of that work.

“Our work can be lifesaving,” he explains. “It can feel dire, but the work that we do to push back against bigotry can save our students’ lives and build community for a better future.”

Fisher-Rodriguez wants his students to know that “school is a place where you belong and where you can build yourself into the person you want to become.” He wants students to know that educators are in their corner. “As the adults in the building, we want the best life for you and want to help you know what that might look like as the world changes,” he says. “We’re doing our best for you.”

As a world language teacher at Bothell High, Fisher-Rodriguez focuses his classroom practice on building community through storytelling and the co-creation of story. “Stories are powerful and have the ability to carry a message,” he says. Learning is a collaboration between him as the teacher, everything students

bring with them each day, and every community member and administrator who enters his classroom.

Fisher-Rodriguez recognizes he can’t be every student’s person, and that teaching and learning cannot happen in isolation. Education requires resources, building trust with families and communities, and collaboration.

“Kids challenge us and help us grow,” he says. “I am a mixtape of all the best things that I have observed and learned from other educators.” Fisher leans on his colleagues to work alongside him to reach every student.

Being selected by his union to be the recipient of the 2024 NEA Foundation Teacher of Excellence Award feels like a “professional hug” to him. The honor has affirmed for him the work that he does, utilizing inclusionary practices to create a welcoming environment for every student.

Fisher-Rodriguez adds that the fact that this is a union award speaks to his success in community building and building professional relationships. “I am honored to highlight all the great things educators’ unions do from the local to the national level and the hard-fought victories that have changed educators’ working conditions which change learning conditions for students,” he says. “These victories help us make our classrooms inclusive, especially for students with marginalized identities.”

As an advocate, Fisher-Rodriguez believes education is the cornerstone of democracy. His message centers on the potential for public education to make our country stronger. “Investing in young people is pennies on the dollar for the future of our nation,” he says.

*Herr Ben Fisher-Rodriguez strives to create space where students feel like they belong and can become the person they want to be.*





# Outstanding Balance: \$0.00

“Your loans have been forgiven,” the Federal Student Aid letter said. “Thank you for your public service!”

Diana Cruz had to re-read the letter four times.

“It was unreal,” Cruz said as she recalled her reaction. “I kept saying ‘I don’t believe this.’ I was screaming from the rooftop here at my job.”

After 14 years of payments, Cruz, a special education teacher at Kellogg Middle School in Shoreline, was debt free, and she gives credit to her union.

Cruz had been paying down her student loans for years, always on time but at the minimum amount. If she couldn’t make a payment, she requested a forbearance to remain in good standing. When she started receiving her teacher’s salary, her payment increased from \$50 a month to about \$300 a month – but that was after not making payments for nearly two years during the pandemic. Her monthly payments were scheduled to restart and she was told they would be \$450 a month.

“When we came back, I started freaking out,” she said. “I couldn’t pay \$450 a month. That’s more than my car (payment).”

Cruz said she researched every avenue she could think of but was resigned to slowly chipping away at the \$130,000 debt every month. It wasn’t until she was having lunch with NAKIA Academy participants when the topic of student loans came up in a conversation.

“I don’t even know how it came up in a conversation and Torian (WEA state-based UniServ Director Torian Hodges-Finch) told me I gotta apply for forgiveness,” she recalled. “I said I didn’t qualify. I had consolidated my debt, and I stopped applying because they said I didn’t qualify. Torian said, ‘No, it’s changed.’”

That’s when she decided to take another look at the Public Student Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program. She says she couldn’t have navigated PSLF without the resources of WEA and NEA. Washington members are second in the nation, behind California, to use the NEA Student Debt Navigator Tool, an interactive tool that allows members to find out which student loan forgiveness programs and repayment plans are available to save the most money. Teresa Muench from NEA Member Benefits held 15 workshops about student debt relief last school year for 334 attendees. This year, she’s held four sessions with 162 attendees so far and will hold several more.

“It wasn’t a quick thing,” Cruz recalled of the process. “It took a year. When you first apply, you go through one process. Then you switch your loan to theirs then you wait for them to look at your history.

“That’s where they said, ‘you didn’t miss any payments and you were in good standing,’” she said. “I kept waiting and waiting and I was getting closer and closer to my payment deadline.”

PSLF was created to cancel the remaining balance of federal student debt for workers who provide 10 years of public service while making 120 monthly payments on their federal student loans.

Being free of those monthly payments — and free from the debt on her credit reports — did more than lift a mental burden: It allowed Cruz to consider options that once weren’t even possibilities when she didn’t have the extra money available.

“All I knew was I wanted to go to college to get an education and I ended up taking out a lot of loans. It wasn’t because I wasn’t working.

“Now I’m \$130,000 less in debt and I have a job I love and a degree to back it up,” she said.

Cruz’s advice to other WEA members: “Even if you think you don’t have enough qualifying payments, apply because they keep track of everything. Get yourself on there so that you’re automatically in the queue.”

## See if your loans could be forgiven, too

Many of you are likely eligible for forgiveness of your federal student loans through one or more of the federal programs currently available. There have been many updates and changes made to these programs and the information you need to know is often hard to find. Join NEA MB for an online webinar April 3 or May 30, 4:30-5:30 p.m., to learn about the latest federal programs and how to access the online NEA Student Debt Navigation Tool. WEA/NEA members can enter their own financial numbers for free through the online tool. (You’ll need to sign in to verify your union membership). You’ll receive information about programs for which you may qualify, and how much you can save — whether through loan forgiveness, cancellation or consolidation. You can check out the navigation tool at [neamb.com/StudentDebtHelp](https://neamb.com/StudentDebtHelp)

Register for either webinar.



Register for the April 3 session at <https://wea.mobi/StudentDebtApril>



Register for the May 30 session at <https://wea.mobi/StudentDebtMay>

# we2.0

Washington  
Education  
Association

Scan with  
your phone to stay  
connected to WEA.



### Governance and Administration

Larry Delaney, *WEA President*

Janie White, *WEA Vice President*

Aimee Iverson, *WEA Executive Director*

### WEA Communications Staff

John Coghlan, Adam Isaguirre, Yoko Kuramoto-Eidsmoe,

Mandy Manning, Brooke Mattox-Ball, Julie Popper,

Rachael Tom and Linda Woo

We are interested in your feedback and ideas. Reach Editor Linda Woo at [lwoo@washingtonea.org](mailto:lwoo@washingtonea.org), by mail at P.O. Box 9100, Federal Way, WA 98063-9100, or 253-765-7027.

*We 2.0* (ISSN 1544-5283) is published quarterly by the Washington Education Association, 32032 Weyerhaeuser Way S., Federal Way, WA 98001-9687. Subscription cost of \$1.99 is included in annual membership dues.

Copyright 2024 by the Washington Education Association.

Periodical nonprofit postage paid at Auburn, WA, and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *We 2.0*, P.O. Box 9100, Federal Way, WA 98063-9100.



WASHINGTON  
EDUCATION  
ASSOCIATION

Change of address? Mail this label and your new address to: WEA, Membership Dept./Address Changes, P.O. Box 9100, Federal Way, WA, 98063-9100, or e-mail the information to [member.records@washingtonea.org](mailto:member.records@washingtonea.org).

## What you can do to help

- Talk with your family, friends and neighbors about how vouchers would harm public schools.
  - Pledge that you'll "decline to sign" petitions for school-voucher measures.
- (QR code below and <https://wea.mobi/NoVouchers>)
- Ask people you know to sign the pledge as well.
  - Stay tuned: Your local leaders will get updates on how we can all work together to defeat voucher schemes.



<https://wea.mobi/NoVouchers>

# What's going on with school vouchers?

Here in Washington a group called Restore Washington is pushing forward school-voucher initiatives that could take more than a billion dollars a year of tax money from already-underfunded public schools and give it to religious and secular private schools, or to people who say they're educating kids at home.

In states that have voucher programs, effects on public education have been devastating, according to a recent article in *NEA Today* ('No Accountability': Vouchers Wreak Havoc on States, Feb. 2., 2024).

The initiative's sponsors started out trying to get on the November 2024 ballot with versions of the program that cost up to **\$1.2 BILLION** per year and **\$2.4 BILLION** per biennium.

But thanks to many of you, including our early work organizing against this effort and a legal challenge that helped clarify the harmful impact of vouchers, we forced our opponents to change course!

Restore Washington announced to followers in early March that they would delay putting vouchers on the 2024 ballot and would instead try to gather enough signatures by December for an Initiative to the Legislature in 2025.

### If passed, what would this mean for our schools?

This measure would blow a hole in education funding that could undo all the progress we've made since the McCleary decision, and WEA President Larry Delaney has called this "an existential threat to public education in Washington."

Voucher proponents try to appeal to good-hearted voters by painting these programs as a way to get

kids from poor families into schools they couldn't otherwise afford, but that's not the reality of what's happening. According to NEA:

*If passed, this measure would blow a hole in education funding that could undo all the progress we've made since the McCleary decision.*

An earlier Grand Canyon Institute report found that 80 percent of voucher applicants did not attend a public school, meaning they were already attending private schools or being home schooled.

A 2023 analysis revealed that most voucher recipients in Arizona live in areas with median incomes ranging from \$81,000 to \$178,000. Just 5 percent come from ZIP codes where the median income is under \$49,000.

Because small-town schools often don't have the population base to be able to afford the kinds of programs that city schools can, any new funding shortage this measure creates would hit rural schools harder. They're already running closer to the bone and there's less "fat" to trim. And small-town students often don't even gain the ability to use the program to attend private schools, since most of those are located in or near larger cities.

And as many WEA members know, private schools and homeschooling aren't subject to the same certification and accountability requirements that public schools are, meaning that taxpayers could end up getting LESS for their tax money.

There are many more reasons to oppose vouchers, and you'll be hearing more in the coming months, as WEA members, leaders and staff work together to educate Washingtonians on how vouchers could harm our students. In the meantime, we ask you to sign the 'No School Voucher' pledge and let others know about the harm vouchers would cause our public schools.