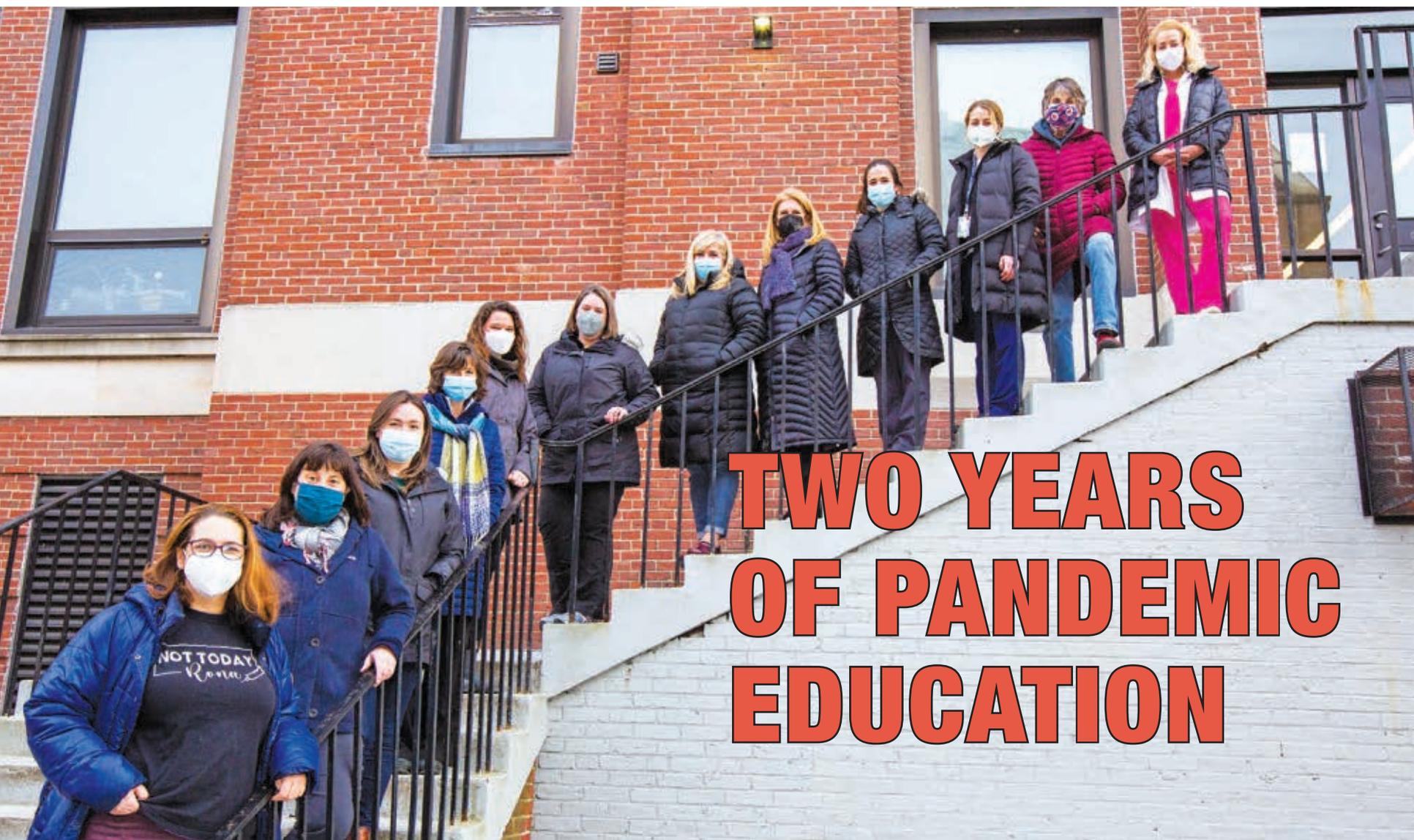


# MTA Today

*A publication of the Massachusetts Teachers Association  
Volume 52, No. 3/Winter 2022*



**TWO YEARS  
OF PANDEMIC  
EDUCATION**

# “HONOR OUR OWN” AWARD NOMINATIONS



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Completed nomination forms must be received by the MTA no later than June 3

# MTA Today

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*This edition also includes the Winter issue of The MTA Advantage*

## MTA'S MISSION STATEMENT

The Massachusetts Teachers Association is a member-driven organization, governed by democratic principles, that accepts and supports the interdependence of professionalism and unionism. The MTA promotes the use of its members' collective power to advance their professional and economic interests. The MTA is committed to human and civil rights and advocates for quality public education in an environment in which lifelong learning and innovation flourish.

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## ON THE COVER

Two years of weathering the unpredictability of COVID-19 have passed for Massachusetts public school and college educators, and many view the coming months with a mix of apprehension and hope. Educators say they've become more resourceful in the face of ongoing challenges as they have advocated for their students, their communities and themselves. Pictured at top are UMass Amherst colleagues Dean Robinson, an associate professor of political science, left, and Wilmore Webley, an associate professor of microbiology. In the bottom photo are nurses represented by the Arlington Education Association, who have worked closely with local health officials to create a successful testing and school-based vaccination program. Coverage begins on Page 6. Also in this edition are stories about community opposition blocking a new charter school that would have drained funds from public schools in the New Bedford and Fall River area, on Page 3; a look at how the Fair Share Amendment campaign would help meet the need for additional education funding, on Page 5; and coverage of the 2021 Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee Conference, on Page 9.



Cover photos by Eric Haynes



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## Quote-Unquote

*“We are trying to uphold this narrative that everything is fine — five-days-a-week school is back. But this year things are not normal, and it’s been really hard for educators to talk about how bad it is.”*

*— Elizabeth Thiel, president of the Portland Teachers Association in Oregon, in an interview with The Washington Post*

# Strong opposition blocks charter plan

By Scott McLennan

A coalition of educators, parents, students, community activists and elected officials recently defeated an attempt by well-connected political and business figures to open an additional charter school in New Bedford.

Days before the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had scheduled a vote, proponents of the Innovators Charter School withdrew their application, clearly stung by opposition organized in large part by the New Bedford Coalition to Save Our Schools.

In a statement, the coalition said the retreat of the charter school proponents was a “huge victory for public education and our communities.”

“The New Bedford and Fall River public schools have been underfunded for decades and have been the victims of consistent privatization efforts,” the NBCSOS said. “Though the *Student Opportunity Act* begins to address this funding crisis, communities like ours remain in the crosshairs of those who would wrest democratic control of our schools away” from local residents.

The Innovators Charter School proposal emerged with a splash in September 2021, with considerable support from segments of the business community.

But educators and their allies quickly responded. The presidents of the New Bedford Educators Association and the Fall River Educators Association jointly penned a public statement pointing out that the proposed school would take away more than \$10 million annually from the communities’ public school systems. Innovators had planned to enroll more than 700 students from New Bedford, Fall River and surrounding communities.

“This is a deeply flawed proposal for our communities as it will drain millions of dollars from public schools to support a privately operated charter school touting ‘innovations’ that are, in fact, duplications of programs already in place in our district public schools,” the presidents wrote.

Members of the New Bedford Coalition to Save Our Schools combed through the Innovators application, exposing its many weaknesses. They publicized the absence of genuine innovation in the plan and compared what the school intended to offer to existing programs in the public schools.

As the educators emphasized, not only would the charter school duplicate programs in public schools that provide early access to college and college credits while students are still in high school, but it also would fail to provide students with current levels of access to counseling and support services.

The NBCSOS — in coordination with MTA members from many locals in the region and members of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts — also mounted an expansive grassroots campaign of standouts, neighborhood canvasses, phone banks and mailings, all aimed at informing the public about how the new charter



Above, Kelly Haggerty, a member of the Greater New Bedford Educators Union, spoke against the proposed charter school during the hearing in New Bedford. Also opposing the plan was Michelle Willis, at left, the treasurer of the New Bedford Federation of Paraprofessionals, which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts.

Photos by Jonathan Ng

school would be run by a private board and further drain resources from public schools.

The community organizing proved effective. By December, when the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education held its public hearing on the charter proposal, dozens of education, labor and community activists turned out to denounce the plan. Prominent business leaders also spoke out, saying the time was not right to strip additional funds from public schools.

MTA President Merrie Najimy told BESE members to listen to the community. “You all know charter schools are not public schools. They are publicly funded private schools,” Najimy said.

After the hearing, she explained that the Innovators scheme would have dealt a critical blow to both the New Bedford and Fall River public schools, undoing all of the hard work that went into securing passage of the *Student Opportunity Act*.

“For more than 20 years, New Bedford and Fall River public schools, like those in many other

urban districts, were denied the resources that they needed,” Najimy said. “Such inequities reinforced structural racism and robbed these schools of the ability to fully meet the needs of their students, who are largely students of color, with many coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Letting this charter school take away funding equal to the overdue investment provided by SOA would have been the height of injustice,” she added.

After noting the volume of community opposition voiced during the hearing, the NBCSOS encouraged key supporters of the Innovators plan to rethink their position. Coalition members especially focused on BayCoast Bank, which had pledged to provide both financial assistance and leadership for the school. The community group wrote to the bank’s president and CEO, Nicholas Christ, and members held standouts at its headquarters, denouncing BayCoast’s support for the charter.

Christ, who along with other bank executives was named in the application as an ICS board member, announced in January that BayCoast was

Please turn to **Strong**/Page 19

# A momentous year for advancing our agenda

What was already a significant year for both public education and the Commonwealth as a whole is now shaping up to be a monumental one — with an incredible amount at stake.

After Governor Charlie Baker’s decision not to seek another term, we can look toward the months ahead in a somewhat different way.

The upcoming election holds the chance of a lifetime to loosen the grip of a system that is built on high-stakes testing, a punitive educator evaluation



Merrie Najimy  
MTA President

structure, and other ill-informed policies that have exacerbated problems for our students and our communities. Moreover, it offers the promise of creating a stable funding stream that will permanently provide resources for our public schools and colleges, our roads and bridges, and our public transportation systems. But realizing the potential before us means

hard work — and more involvement than ever on the part of MTA members.

If all goes as it can, educators and other unionists will have the opportunity beginning in January to partner with a progressive governor whose cabinet appointees stand ready to address the problems that have been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic — in preK-16 public education, public health, housing, and many other areas that are at the core of the common good.

Yet for that to happen, it’s vital for MTA members to use our power wisely and fight to continue building a state in which everyone can thrive and succeed.

The pandemic has been a pivotal time for Massachusetts. It has starkly revealed the injustices perpetuated by a system that serves the richest among us while failing so many others, including the state’s hard-hit communities of color. And it has shown the degree to which the power of the governor’s office affects our daily lives.

It is the governor who makes appointments at the cabinet level to spearhead the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the boards and agencies that control public higher education and countless other areas of vital public interest.

Those appointments, like so much else that originates in the corner office at the State House, are felt in our classrooms, on our campuses, and throughout our communities.

Now more than ever, as we hope that COVID-19 is receding, we see the need to transform public education. We have to break away from a quarter-century of failed accountability policy, and we must implement new standards for health and safety in our

The fights ahead will be daunting. But they are ours to win when voters go to the polls this November, elect a new governor, and pass the Fair Share Amendment.

schools — things that are only possible with a new direction at the state level. In addition, we must make high-quality public higher education accessible to all without forcing students to take on insurmountable burdens of debt.

Today, all of those things are within the realm of possibility.

They exist amid the goals stated by candidates for governor, whose positions are starting to reflect the way the MTA and other educators’ unions have changed the national narrative through the #RedForEd movement. They exist in the Fair Share Amendment, which will be on the ballot in November. They exist as we see women and people of color forming a new generation of leaders in cities such as Boston, in the Legislature, and in countless other spheres of influence.

Indeed, despite the many dangers we face from the right wing, the ongoing uncertainty about the course of the pandemic, and other forces currently at play, this is an amazing moment.

As educators, we always have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of our students. But the potential for large-scale change is greater now than it has been for some time.

The MTA, as an organization that is continually building ever-stronger alliances, truly has the power to shape history. By becoming advocates and by voting, our 115,000 members can play a decisive role in determining what lies ahead.

“While Jeff Bezos is flying into outer space in his rockets, I’m reaching into my pockets and buying school supplies for my students,” Worcester paraeducator Saul Ramos often remarks. It’s a sentiment that resonates with me, as I’m sure it does with many of you — and it speaks volumes about everything that we have to accomplish.

Although our collective experience over the last two years has been beyond traumatic, it has also shown us the path forward. The pandemic has exposed the degree to which so many people — our students and their families — were suffering before the coronavirus hit. That, in turn, leads us to strategies to shape a new landscape as we emerge from the worst that COVID-19 can throw at us.

It is clear from public opinion that most Massachusetts residents believe the time has arrived

for the richest among us to pay their fair share. And in our own polling, when Massachusetts residents were given two ways to approach public education, 70 percent of respondents supported the MTA’s vision of a system that addresses the whole child instead of the “information acquisition” concept advocated by the so-called reformers.

Such results highlight the degree to which the MTA has structurally changed the conversation about what our schools should provide — even as we have won victories such as the *Student Opportunity Act*.

This, however, is our time to achieve even more.

Passage of the FSA would put Massachusetts in a position to consistently stabilize revenues for preK-16 education and other vital investments. Helping our brothers and sisters in labor defeat the ballot initiative promoted by corporations that exploit “gig economy” employees would fend off yet another assault on workers’ rights. The election of a pro-public-education governor would help us move toward policies that would function side by side with the new funding to make our state work well for us all.

The fights ahead will be daunting. But they are ours to win when voters go to the polls this November, elect a new governor, and pass the Fair Share Amendment.

That will be Round One.

Round Two will be continuing to build our power and making sure the gains are used the right way — and put to work right away. But even then, we cannot let up. Round Three will mean ensuring that every year, we maintain the progress toward the greater good and create lasting change for students, educators and our communities.

We still have to solve the problem of massive student debt. We have to continue to diversify the educator workforce to better serve our students of color. We must stop the exploitation of adjunct faculty members and Education Support Professionals. And the state needs to rethink its approach to public health and other major areas of policy.

What that means for the MTA is that we need to understand ourselves as a powerful union with a vision — to fight, to continue to organize, and always to build on what is won.

## Letters policy

**M**TA Today welcomes letters to the editor from MTA members. Letters should be no longer than 200 words. Each letter submitted for publication must address a topic covered in *MTA Today*, must be signed and must include the writer’s telephone number for confirmation purposes. Opinions must be clearly identified as belonging to the letter-writer. We reserve the right to edit for length, clarity and style. To submit a letter, mail it to *MTA Today*, 2 Heritage Drive, 8th floor, Quincy, MA 02171-2119, or email it to [mtatodayletters@massteacher.org](mailto:mtatodayletters@massteacher.org). For additional information, please refer to the guidelines posted on [www.massteacher.org](http://www.massteacher.org).

# Fair Share victory would help meet vital needs of schools and colleges

By Mary MacDonald

Sarah Woodard feels optimistic about the Fair Share Amendment, which goes before voters in early November. Since last year, the grassroots campaign to encourage state residents to say “yes” to the amendment has placed her in front of potential voters at events and virtual conferences across Western Massachusetts.

The Commonwealth currently has a flat income tax rate of 5 percent, paid by all regardless of earnings. The amendment would add 4 percentage points — 4 cents on the dollar — to the tax on the portion of income above \$1 million.

The proposed constitutional amendment isn’t a hard sell, Woodard explained.

People seem to generally agree that it will create a more just state tax system, with the very wealthy — whose incomes have skyrocketed during the pandemic — paying their fair share.

“I had people coming to me, which is not true of all initiatives,” Woodard said. “This is something people seem genuinely excited about and interested in and want. It seems like a no-brainer unless you’re a multimillionaire.”

The amendment would dedicate as much as \$2 billion annually, in perpetuity, to public education and transportation, including infrastructure. The additional funding would help ensure that public schools get the resources they need — and make high-quality public higher education more affordable. The question will be on the ballot for the Nov. 8 General Election.

Woodard, a reading specialist at Hatfield Elementary School, said the message about the amendment creating a stable revenue stream for education priorities resonates with potential voters.

She has spoken with several hundred people since the fall. Sometimes they don’t understand how the education funding process really works, she noted, or what it takes to make a school function effectively. Passing the Fair Share Amendment would mean the state could make big investments where they’re needed.

“It’s really making sure that things that need to receive resources get addressed — that there’s money to do so,” said Woodard, who is also an MTA Senate District Coordinator.

As 2022 began, the campaign to pass the Fair Share Amendment kicked into high gear.

At a virtual kickoff held on Feb. 1 by Raise Up Massachusetts — the broad coalition of organizations and other supporters that is leading the effort — nearly 200 people logged on to learn more about the effort and sign up to volunteer.

Supporters have started contacting friends, family members and neighbors, as well as moving



“This is something people seem genuinely excited about and interested in and want,” said educator Sarah Woodard. “It seems like a no-brainer unless you’re a multimillionaire.”

forward to collect endorsements from town and city committees, councils and boards.

More than 14,000 cards already have been collected from people who have pledged to vote for the amendment.

Phone banks being conducted by MTA members are in full swing. In the months ahead, those phone banks will expand beyond members to state residents in general.

Nancy Stenberg is among the educators who are already making calls to fellow MTA members. It’s an easy conversation for the most part, Stenberg said, once she gets past the occasional family member who is screening calls.

“Once I get done with the opening, I’ve literally had like 10 people say to me, ‘Well, if that’s what the MTA wants, I’m voting for it,’” Stenberg said. “Conversation is done. Check them off; it’s awesome.”

Stenberg, a longtime union activist who is now partially retired, said one of the reasons the message is hitting home is that MTA members trust each other. They want to hear from another educator.

“These are people who are connected — a lot of people are retirees or partially retired,” Stenberg said. “They want to know what’s going on.”

Stenberg, who works part time as a librarian at a Springfield elementary school, said that when people ask for more information, the discussion turns to what the schools could look like if they had all of the resources they need. Or how public colleges could become truly affordable.

Her elementary school, for example, is getting federal funds this year through a COVID-19 relief program — which may go toward purchasing new library collections or modern classroom furniture.

That’s helpful. But the Fair Share Amendment would mean a permanent revenue stream, not just a one-year infusion. That can make a world of difference for schools and campuses across the state, which have struggled with facility needs as well as staffing shortfalls.

“That enables you to keep up with maintenance and things that we have just not had any funds for in most school districts in the state,” Stenberg said.

When the Raise Up Massachusetts coalition held its statewide organizational launch, activists in regional breakout sessions envisioned what the \$2 billion in annual revenue might mean for schools, campuses, student debt reduction, roads and bridges, and public transportation networks.

One of the sessions — for the Southcoast region — attracted more than 35 activists. Among the ideas that they shared in the Zoom chat: free fares for public transit, upgrading infrastructure to respond to climate change, debt-free college education, 15 children rather than 25 in elementary classes, and school substitutes, Education Support Professionals and adjunct faculty members being paid a living wage.

MTA President Merrie Najimy, Vice President Max Page and members of the MTA staff have spoken at more than 100 local meetings since the fall, asking educators what they need for their students. In January, Najimy and Page addressed an organizational meeting of Western Massachusetts activists.

When the omicron variant of the coronavirus spiked in January, resulting in widespread staffing shortages due to educator illness, it was clear that one of the biggest contributors to the crisis was a lack of sufficient staffing and adequate salaries before the pandemic, Najimy said.

“Imagine if we paid Education Support Professionals a living wage and if we paid substitute teachers a living wage. We might have less of a staff shortage problem,” she said.

Passing the Fair Share Amendment will assure that schools, educators and students have the resources they need to be successful, Najimy added.

“Winning the Fair Share Amendment doesn’t stop the pandemic or solve the crisis, but it brings us resources to do the things we need to operate our schools,” she said. “We need more counselors. We need more paraeducators. We need more teachers to reduce class sizes. And some of that is related to the pandemic — because of the emotional needs and the trauma our students are bringing because of the pandemic — but that has always been true even before the pandemic.”

For more information on the campaign, please visit [massteacher.org/fairshare](https://www.massteacher.org/fairshare) and [raiseupma.org](https://www.raiseupma.org).

# Two years of pandemic education

Union activism and concern for students' well-being continue to play key roles

By Mary MacDonald and Scott McLennan

For the past two years, Massachusetts educators have constantly had to deal with the unknown, often finding themselves exhausted and overwhelmed. Today, amid the continuing sense of upheaval resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, people are worn out. Infections, illness and absences spiked once again early in January as schools and campuses reopened for the second semester and the omicron variant hit with full force.

State officials promised needed supplies, including protective masks and rapid tests, for educators working in person in classrooms, labs and offices. Then they failed to deliver in a consistent way.

That problem followed a line of other issues that educators — working as part of their locals and the MTA as a whole — have had to fight to resolve.

Starting in 2021, after a unionwide “We’re Ready to Roll Up Our Sleeves” campaign on social media, educators from prekindergarten through college were able to obtain vaccinations.

Many students also have been inoculated, helping make Massachusetts one of the most highly vaccinated states in the nation. But the progress has remained uneven, with hard-hit communities of color and others still needing more extensive safety and health efforts on the part of the state and the administration of Governor Charlie Baker.

“We are tired of Band-Aid approaches from Governor Baker and Commissioner Jeffrey Riley when it comes to facing the biggest public health threat of our time,” MTA President Merrie Najimy said in late December, noting that the state has repeatedly failed to seek input from educators and their unions. “As always, key decisions will be most effective when made in concert with educators, locally elected officials and other community members.

“Proactive planning for the difficult months ahead is imperative,” Najimy added.

Despite widespread progress and currently falling coronavirus rates, the series of ups and downs has contributed to a continuing sense of unease.

Omicron, for example, was able to sidestep available protections and led to a major wave of infection and illness.

Through the worst public health crisis of their lifetime, educators at public schools, colleges and universities have kept their focus on supporting students as they taught classes, drove buses, prepared food, and provided nursing and counseling, amid other services.

Teachers, college professors, Education Support Professionals and fellow staff members often turned to each other, finding strength in numbers and their union identities. They remained resilient even through the most difficult weeks. And they are working to stay strong for the rest of the year.



Above, UMass faculty member Dean Robinson, left, an associate professor of political science, and Wilmore Webley, an associate professor of microbiology, walked across the Amherst campus on a recent afternoon. At left, nurses who are members of the Arlington Education Association chatted with each other outside Arlington High School.

Photos by Eric Haynes

Some towns and cities generally got it right, following vital protocols and winning substantial buy-in from local families and their education communities.

In Arlington, classroom educators and school nurses worked closely with the town’s Board of Health on testing and in-school vaccination programs.

The schools, working with the nurses and other members of the Arlington Education Association, maintained a successful “test-to-return” program that allowed students to go back to class after a five-day quarantine if they showed no symptoms and produced a negative COVID-19 test. And the inoculation program has resulted in Arlington having a 97 percent pediatric vaccination rate — among the highest in the state.

“We’ve developed a culture of cooperation here,” said Julianna Keyes, president of the AEA.

At UMass Amherst, the testing operation likewise was comprehensive, providing access to

testing for students, staff and faculty regardless of vaccination status.

Participants have regularly deposited completed tests into drop-off kiosks on campus, using existing lab equipment and heeding the advice of faculty members and other staff.

“It took everybody talking to make it happen,” said Wilmore Webley, an associate professor of microbiology and a member of the MTA’s highly active Environmental Health and Safety Committee.

But these successes weren’t uniformly replicated across public higher education campuses and preK-12 schools. Far from it.

Dean Robinson, an associate professor of political science at UMass and, like Webley, a member of the union’s EHS Committee, noted that the university system has had the institutional resources to provide a consistent level of support.

“We need programs like this to be in place from preK through graduate school,” Robinson said. “The

Continued on next page

# Reflections on two difficult and traumatic years

For this edition of *MTA Today*, we asked educators working in various roles to reflect on how their professional lives have changed since the start of the pandemic, what it's like today in schools and on campuses, and what they expect in the months ahead.

*Bianca Jones, a school nurse in Watertown, has been working in all of the district's schools since September 2020. She previously was a nurse in a hospital working with COVID-19 patients.*

I've only worked in the schools during the pandemic. Starting in September of last year, the students weren't even in school. Then we went to hybrid learning, then we went to full time. From winter break until now, we're definitely seeing the cases go down significantly. That's helped us be able to manage our time better and not rush through things.

We did contact tracing in the beginning of the year. For elementary school, the entire class would be considered a close contact. For middle and high school, we would check to see who was seated around them and whom they were with throughout the day.

But with the changes in policy, and from doing the test-to-stay, and showing there isn't much school spread, we only contact trace if we feel it's necessary, if the student isn't good with mask wearing, or if they're in a really close setting.

I came from a hospital, after four years, and I was on the COVID unit, so my mindset was ... we have power to control the safety of the students. We focus so much on that and so much on the policies. I felt like it was a controlled setting. Everyone — employees — are nervous about it,



Bianca Jones

but I just keep telling them, keep wearing your mask and protect yourself. In-school spread is barely there.

I had COVID patients for months in the hospital ... and I never got it. I just try to give them peace of mind from a medical standpoint.

*Brenda Charles is a first-grade teacher at Burbank Elementary School in Belmont. She has 11 years of experience as a teacher and a paraprofessional. The past two years have been an exercise in adaptation. Her students are adapting as well.*

Some of them didn't get the practice as a kindergartner of learning how to share and taking turns — things like being patient and problem-solving. We're kind of doing those social skills now.

There wasn't a lot of opportunity last year because we were socially distanced. We had our own materials. My thought was this school year was probably going to be similar to last year. The only difference was that we were going to be here every day, all day long.

Our district has pooled testing. We also have the weekly report — a report of how many staff and students, which school, and they tell you how many people tested positive. When we came back, they had reporting from the week of the holiday break.

I was a little worried. I know we're all using masks. We're using hand sanitizer on everything. I think we'll be fine. But when we got that report it was very high. There was uncertainty. I felt it was very important that we were in school. It was



Brenda Charles

important for the students to have the experience of how to be a student, building a routine and having opportunities to play with friends and having interactions with peers their age.

*Wilmore Webley is an associate professor of microbiology and associate dean of the Office of Inclusion and Engagement at UMass Amherst.*

It had been two months since my students in my Outbreaks class and I started tracking cases of severe pneumonia in China, later identified as COVID-19, when the decision was made to go remote after spring break. This momentous decision by our college administration was the beginning of a tumultuous journey of disruptions in teaching, research, service and mentoring.

As the pandemic continued over the last two years, I taught classes in person and virtually while balancing child care. Each semester had its own measure of uncertainty — including the fear of becoming infected in my lab by students who sometimes became infected, since I was not vaccinated until March 2021.

The thought of getting the virus and then infecting my unvaccinated family members was always at the forefront during those times. The required twice-weekly testing of students and the once-weekly testing of faculty, coupled with the excellent testing and vaccination center — providing results in 24 hours or less — gave me and many of my colleagues a sense of relief and confidence going into the classroom.

In addition to Zoom fatigue, students were struggling with a host of personal, family, political,



Wilmore Webley

Please turn to **Educators**/Page 11

## Educators find support in one another and the union

Continued from previous page

entire UMass system has a role it can play in keeping communities safe because we have the expertise throughout the system."

MTA leaders responded to the lack of a comprehensive state plan to keep schools and campuses open for in-person learning by applying strong pressure on state officials — to live up to their promises to provide effective masks, accessible vaccinations, a comprehensive and efficient testing response, upgrades to ventilation systems, and assistance in dealing with understaffing.

Many schools experienced educator shortages due to illness, which resulted in classes being combined and paraprofessionals having to fill in for colleagues. The lack of foresight and planning from state education officials made the situation worse, as Najimy repeatedly said in media interviews and public statements.

For many educators, one somewhat reassuring result of the pandemic has been a feeling of greater connection with others working in their schools and colleges. Collaboration was a constant as they went online for instruction in 2020 and has remained so since they have returned to in-person education.

Realistically, the pandemic won't be over soon. Omicron may have relinquished its chokehold on communities, but the slow rollout of vaccines worldwide means more variants with the potential to spread widely are likely, according to Webley.

"That's the tricky part with an ongoing pandemic like this, with a virus that's so contagious," Webley said. "If I had to look at past experience, I would have to say absolutely we will have another variant. It's just a matter of when."

Foreseeing an ending to the pandemic is problematic, Webley said, adding: "People expect it will be wiped out, but it will not be."

What the state needed to do to support educators was to provide a robust, comprehensive testing and reporting system.

"Once it became clear that people were resistant to vaccination, then everyone should have pivoted to having a system in place where over break, they should have gone in and improved the ventilation in every school," Webley said. "There should have been allocations immediately, a surge of workforce, to get that done."

But that scenario did not play out. And for the time being, educators will have to keep turning to each other and following the proven methods of protection — wearing high-quality masks, getting vaccinated, and practicing good hand hygiene — as they try to keep their students, themselves and their communities as safe as possible.

For updated information, visit [massteacher.org](http://massteacher.org).

# ESP Conference offers chance to learn and network

By Mary MacDonald

The unique challenges facing Education Support Professionals and proven solutions — whether they involve gains in working conditions or approaches to helping anxious students — will be among the subjects covered at the upcoming MTA ESP Conference.

The event is scheduled to be held in person this year and is set for Friday and Saturday, April 1 and 2, at the Sea Crest Beach Hotel in Falmouth.

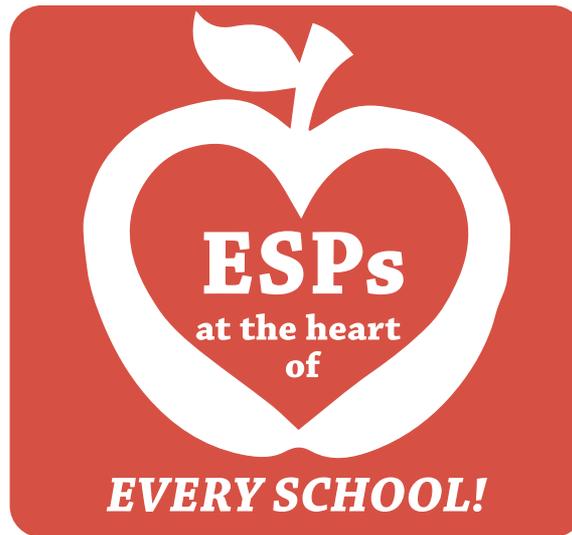
Due to the uncertainties of the pandemic, the conference will be modified, and attendance will be limited compared to prior years.

The conference traditionally draws several hundred ESPs and is among the most attended among MTA events. This year reservations will be limited to about 150 people, allowing attendees to spread out. Registration will begin soon.

Yahaira Rodriguez, chair of the MTA ESP Committee, said the conference will give educators from preK-12 to higher education a chance to create and strengthen relationships. The workshops and other sessions are designed to appeal to a range of ESPs.

“This is for ESPs by ESPs,” Rodriguez said. “What better than to listen to someone who knows exactly what you’re going through?”

This year’s event will begin with dinner on Friday, rather than the traditional afternoon work-



shops, giving preK-12 attendees more flexibility to arrive without asking to be released early from school.

That evening’s schedule will include the presentation of the 2022 MTA ESP of the Year award.

The award recognizes the achievements of an ESP who has made a difference in the lives of students.

MTA President Merrie Najimy, Vice President Max Page and 2021 ESP of the Year Susan Soares are expected to address the conference audience.

On Saturday, nine workshops will be held over two sessions, focusing on topics including union-building skills, motivational ways to educate students, self-care, and advancing racial and social justice.

“ESPs are seeing their value in education,” Rodriguez said. “We’ve learned how to educate through Zoom. We have had to step into classrooms that didn’t have teachers.”

Sessions will include “Motivating Mindfulness: Strategy, Practice & Takeaways to Support Us All to Cope with Trauma,” “Working with Anxious Students,” and “Creating Space to Talk about Race.” The latter session, led by Rodriguez, will include discussions of how to create spaces that make students of color feel welcome.

Two workshops will focus on negotiations and bargaining issues, both critically important to ESPs as the campaign for a living wage gathers momentum. Advancing the goals of the MTA ESP PreK-12 Bill of Rights is an MTA priority.

“Preparing and Planning for Negotiations” will be a two-hour session for new and veteran members on how to best prepare, including through organizational techniques and record-keeping, as well as how to analyze contract language.

“Key Bargaining Issues for ESPs and Classified Staff” will address the unique challenges in working

Please turn to **ESPs**/Page 21

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# Rebuilding inclusive communities

## EMAC Conference focuses on post-pandemic recovery and helping all students

By Mary MacDonald

Educators attending the recent MTA Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee Conference were challenged to think carefully about how they respond to their students, the way they choose texts and assignments, and whose stories they are amplifying — or ignoring.

The conference, held virtually over two weekends in early December, featured keynote speakers as well as breakout sessions that explored current issues in education. The event attracted more than 150 members.

Addressing the theme “Post-Pandemic: Rebuilding Inclusive Communities in Education,” the conference featured addresses by Dina Gilio-Whitaker, an American Indian Studies scholar and environmental justice advocate, and Liz Kleinrock, an antibias, antiracist educator.

The opening night, Dec. 3, began with acknowledgments from MTA members that land across Massachusetts was originally the home of Native American tribes. Educators identified themselves, as well as which tribal nation lived in their area.

EMAC Chair Candace Shivers asked members to think back on the difficult year they’ve experienced but also consider encouraging moments.

“We’ve lived through some of the most challenging times most of us can remember,” she said. “But I’ve had to, and I’m sure you’ve also had to, think about things and focus on things we can be grateful for.”

In her address, Gilio-Whitaker, a descendant of the Colville Confederated tribes, emphasized the importance of language choices. She explained that words can have multiple contexts and that Native Americans should ideally be referred to in association with their specific tribal identifications, rather than as “Indigenous” or “BIPOC.”

Assimilation into a larger whole is not the goal, she reminded participants, given the history of government-forced relocations and other tactics aimed at eliminating native people. Gilio-Whitaker is an author and a journalist, and her first book deconstructed stereotypes of American Indians.

Kleinrock, an elementary teacher and a consultant, said it is important for educators who identify as Black, brown and Asian to be centered in antibias and antiracist work in their school communities. But administrators should not assign work to educators based on their identity, said Kleinrock, who was born in Korea.

“If my school is thinking about new initiatives, or antiracism, or thinking about how to incorporate ethnic studies or culture into our classrooms, I want my experiences to be heard and I want them to be valued,” she said. “But I don’t want the expectation that come May, for API heritage and history month,



I will take on all of that work because I identify as Asian.”

Educators should also be thinking about the context of their lessons to make sure they are inclusive, she said. They should ask themselves: Are we broadening reading materials to include more representation of different perspectives and writers, but only including texts that have a traumatic framework? Kleinrock has re-examined her own classroom choices and broadened her selection of books, reflecting not just representation but also celebration of diverse cultures and backgrounds.



Liz Kleinrock

“Nobody, including myself, wants to be recognized for the worst things done to them,” she said. “There needs to be a balance.”

Among the titles now in use in her class: “Eyes that Kiss in the Corners,” by Joanna Ho; “My Papi Has a Motorcycle,” by Isabel Quintero; “We Are Water Protectors,” by Carole Lindstrom; and “Harlem Renaissance Party,” by Faith Ringgold.

Gilio-Whitaker, an adjunct professor at California State University San Marcos, talked to the audience about ethnic studies and how Critical Race Theory tends to consider a black-white dynamic. It can explain how racism is experienced by Native Americans but not how tribal nations have been systemically dispossessed of land. This is a process that continues today, she noted, citing as an example the effort by the Trump administration to remove the land rights of the Mashpee Wampanoags.

For Native Americans, the framework of discrimination is not necessarily around race, but concerns an understanding of settler colonialism. She recommended a recent documentary, “Exterminate All the Brutes,” by the filmmaker Raoul Peck, which provides that context.

The use of racial descriptions or terms, such as BIPOC, is not preferred by many Native Americans or Alaska Natives, she said.

“It can inadvertently erase native people by subsuming us into this multicultural framework,” she said. “It’s too close to assimilation.”

In breakout activities during the conference — which was financially supported by MTA Benefits — members focused on practical ways they could broaden the representation in their curricula and classroom discussions and make schools more inclusive.

Sessions included “Intersectional Climate Justice Advocacy,” “Demystifying Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” and “Achieving Racial Justice: Islamophobia and Muslim Students.”

The latter program was led by Fatuma Mohamed, of the Council on American-Islamic Relations Massachusetts, and Amira Al-Subaey, at that time representing the Muslim Justice League. They shared survey data and anecdotes about Massachusetts students and parents who sought help for incidents of intimidation and bullying.

In one case, a 14-year-old student was harassed for wearing a hijab at school. She finally stopped wearing it. When she reported that a boy had told



Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Please turn to **EMAC**/Page 15

# Sessions focus on activism and key education issues

By Jonathan Ng

A series of workshops for MTA members that is devoted to union building and leadership skills is getting underway — an event aimed at addressing pressing issues that face educators in their schools and on their campuses.

The 2022 MTA Winter Union Skills Conference sessions will enable members to connect their work as educators to their activism as unionists. The conference will be held virtually and will run from late February to March 17.

Workshops will focus on traditional bread-and-butter priorities such as negotiations, employee rights and member organizing, as well as issues of particular relevance to current issues, including how to talk about race and racial justice issues. Session topics will be wide-ranging, encompassing strategies for effective communications, training for local treasurers, getting involved in school committee elections, and grievance fundamentals.



As *MTA Today* went to press, preparations were underway for a Feb. 26 plenary session featuring Stephanie Price, a member of the Oklahoma Education Association, and filmmaker Yael Bridge, who produced the documentary “The Big Scary ‘S’ Word,” an examination of the American socialist movement. The plenary session will be recorded and will be posted on the MTA website.

Some of the many subsequent sessions will focus on how members can become more active in their union,

strategic planning for local leaders, and training for public higher education stewards.

On March 3, a session called “Building and Retaining Leadership Teams” is aimed at strengthening the pipeline within locals for leadership positions, including how to identify members who have potential to become leaders and how to encourage activism.

On March 14, one of the most important aspects of negotiations — how to evaluate claims from an

Across the various dates, locals are encouraged to have groups of members participate in workshops based on their roles and interests.

administration that it can’t afford more benefits or salary increases — will be discussed in “Economics of Bargaining.” The session is intended primarily for members in preK-12 settings.

Across the various dates, locals are encouraged to have groups of members participate in workshops based on their roles and interests. In addition, the conference is an opportunity for members who have not held an officer position to learn more about these roles and their specific functions in the union.

To register, please visit the *Events and Conferences* section on [massteacher.org](http://massteacher.org). Registration will continue throughout the conference.

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# Educators reflect on two tough and traumatic years

Continued from Page 7

racial and societal issues that were exacerbated by the isolation brought on by the pandemic. My classroom, office hours and advising appointments became a therapeutic outlet for many students who struggled to stay motivated amid the uncertainties.

I soon realized that the lack of long weekends or typical holidays — combined with serving as a lachrymatory for emotional encounters with students — had left me drained physically and emotionally. I longed for in-person encounters with colleagues and friends and the opportunity to see the faces of my students without the masks. I am still waiting as this pandemic drags on.

■ ■ ■

*Peg Holloway is a bus driver for the Worcester Public Schools and a member of the Educational Association of Worcester.*

They closed the schools on March 16. I remember the date because it's my birthday. Some of the drivers kept working, bringing homeless people to shelters and delivering Chromebooks to schools for students to pick up and use while they were working remotely.

I drive students who are in special education programs. They were the first ones to go back to the schools, in September 2020. We did small groups that went in for two days.

So I'd drive one group on Mondays and Tuesdays and another group on Wednesdays and Thursdays. We drove three or four kids at a time and slowly added kids.



Peg Holloway

All the kids would come with their masks, and the parents were really good about making sure the kids did that. Having time off to think about what was happening in the world, people everywhere were scared about going out, about going to work. A lot of drivers were nervous, but we had a job to do. These students needed to be at their programs.

We needed to protect ourselves. We have a strong union, and the union made sure that the city worked with us to get what we needed.

■ ■ ■

*Tom Meyers, a retired social studies teacher, is a former Andover Education Association president who served for more than two decades. He also is a Senate District Coordinator for the MTA.*

The role as an SDC has been a dream job because it keeps me active in the two things that I'm most interested in: public education and democratizing the workplace through labor union activism.

When the pandemic hit, it obviously changed the way we all worked. With Zoom, the major disadvantage is that you're not picking up on human emotions, inflections, body language and voice. It's not the same intensity.



Tom Meyers

One of the advantages of working in the pandemic via Zoom is you can bring people in from all over the place for meetings, and one of the things that we've been able to do in the Merrimack Valley is coalition work. It's really nice to see locals from different school districts coming out to support each other at rallies and at school committee meetings for fair contracts. In the summer, when the COVID-19 numbers went way down, I was able to get out and do some door knocking and was able to get to some of the festivals in Lawrence, where I collected quite a few commitment cards for the Fair Share Amendment. It's important for us to articulate why the FSA is important to public education.

Despite Zoom and some limitations on in-person gatherings, what brings joy to me is that I'm still doing work that is aligned with my values and is meaningful. It's fundamentally working to improve education and that provides a lot of fulfillment.

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# Statements by candidates for NEA Director seats

The MTA is holding an election for two seats on the NEA Board of Directors. The Massachusetts seats will be filled by a vote of the active membership in March and April, in tandem with NEA Representative Assembly state and regional delegate elections. All seats are for three-year terms

beginning Sept. 1, 2022, and expiring Aug. 31, 2025, in accordance with the NEA's fiscal year.

Ballots will be provided to all MTA/NEA active members who are eligible to vote.

Candidates were given the opportunity to submit biographical statements and photos. Submissions

received in compliance with the MTA's deadlines are printed on this page.

*For more information, contact John Connelly of the Division of Governance and Administration at 617.878.8305 or [jconnelly@massteacher.org](mailto:jconnelly@massteacher.org).*

## John Bracey — Belmont Education Association

I come from a long line of educators, union members, and activists, who have instilled in me a respect for union work, solidarity, and fighting the hard fights for justice. My work as a unionist is heavily informed by this upbringing.

As a public school educator in Massachusetts, I've spent the past decade teaching Latin to middle



John Bracey

and high school students. During this time, I have served as a union building representative, a delegate to multiple MTA Annual Meetings, and a member of several union committees and action teams.

I am a proud member of the progressive group Educators for a Democratic Union. I also present workshops on racial justice and equity for educators around the country.

Here in Massachusetts, I first came to understand the power of our unions through the No on 2 campaign.

Through phone banking, testifying at the State House, and marching in the streets, I came to know

the strength and passion of our rank and file. That level of solidarity won us decisive victories against powerful opponents and is the key to winning the battles that lie ahead.

I advocate for social justice and equity in education. I promote policies that will lead to substantive, systemic, and material improvements in the lives of educators, students, families, and communities. I fight against the authoritarian forces who place profits ahead of our health and safety.

It would truly be an honor to serve on the NEA's Board of Directors. I humbly request your vote.

## Betsy Preval — Cambridge Education Association

As an NEA Director, I have had the honor of lobbying our national representatives in the House and Senate to support a more socially just education system and to improve working and learning conditions for



Betsy Preval

educators and students, immigrant rights, voting rights, and access to health care.

I am currently serving on our Board Legislative Committee.

I am deeply passionate about using our legislative platform to make transformational change. I am also a member of the Executive Board of the NEA Black Caucus, where we organize within and challenge the NEA to ensure racial justice is at the center of our collective work.

Outside of my role as a director, I am serving on the NEA Task Force on Assessment, as Eastern Regional Director for the NEA Black Caucus, as Chair of the MTA's Government Relations Committee, and as an active member of my local's Educators of Color Coalition, Political Action Committee, and collective bargaining team.

Thank you for your consideration, and I hope I've earned your support.

## Janelle Quarles — Classified Staff Union, UMass Boston

As a member and leader for the past 15 years, my heart has been with the Massachusetts Teachers Association. In my position as an Enrollment Specialist at the University of Massachusetts Boston, I have had the opportunity to work with students, staff, faculty, and families as we strengthen the learning experience for all.

I have served as President of the Classified Staff Union for the last eight years. In this capacity,



Janelle Quarles

I have had many chances to represent our ESP members in higher education. Whether it be contract negotiations, workplace conditions, grievances, or expanding membership within our local association, I have been committed to amplifying the voices of my members.

At the state level, I was elected as your At-Large Ethnic Minority Director and served on the MTA Board of Directors for two terms. I participated with the MTA ESP Committee, Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee, Equal Opportunity Council, and MTA Higher Education Leadership Council, and I have represented Massachusetts as a member of the NEA Resolutions Committee for the last five years.

In each role, I applied my knowledge and skills to improve our state affiliate. I am proud to have been a member of these teams.

At this point in my leadership journey, I am ready to represent you at the national level as your next NEA Director. As an MTA member, I am convinced that we need to engage in dialogue — not demands. Historically, I have built a reputation as someone who is unafraid to speak up; I am confident that I am prepared for this new challenge to represent you.

Respectfully, I ask for your support and vote as your next NEA Director. Thank you for your commitment to our students and learning communities.

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The MTA provides individual retirement consultations to assist members. *Proof of membership must be submitted when requesting retirement services. This schedule is in effect from September to June except at MTA's Quincy headquarters, which is staffed during the summer and school vacations.*

*All consultations are held by appointment only during the hours listed. Members are advised to call selected MTA consultants in advance to schedule an appointment.*

**WORCESTER** — Edward Nelson: first Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., MTA Central Office, 12 East Worcester St., second floor, Worcester; call 774.239.7823 or email enelson@massteacher.org.

**QUINCY** — Harold Crowley, Peter Mili and Raymond Thompson: Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., MTA, 2 Heritage Drive, 9th Floor, Quincy; 617.878.8240 or 800.392.6175, ext. 8240, or email hcrowley@massteacher.org.

**FITCHBURG** — Karen Melanson: second Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Fitchburg Teachers Association office, 245 River St., Fitchburg; call 978.660.4359 or email kmelanson@massteacher.org.

**HOLYOKE** — Ron Lech: third Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., MTA Western Office, 55 Bobala Road, Suite 3, Holyoke; call 413.893.9173 or email rlech@massteacher.org.

**LYNNFIELD** — Barbara Callaghan: third and fourth

Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., MTA Northeast Office, 50 Salem St., Building B, Lynnfield; call 978.660.4171 or email bcallaghan@massteacher.org.

**PITTSFIELD** — Ward Johnson: second Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., MTA Berkshire Office, 188 East St., Pittsfield; call 413.443.1722 or email wjohnson@massteacher.org.

**RAYNHAM** — Raymond Thompson: third Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; and Lawrence Abbruzzi: second Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; MTA Southeast Office, 756 Orchard St., third floor, Raynham. Contact Thompson at 617.347.4425 or rthompson@massteacher.org; or contact Abbruzzi at 508.824.9194 or labbruzzi@massteacher.org.

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## EMAC Conference focuses on rebuilding inclusive communities

Continued from Page 9

her she looked like a terrorist, she was mocked in the cafeteria by his friends.

In a recent survey, 43 percent of students said they had witnessed someone being bullied for being Muslim. And 40 percent had experienced teachers or staff making offensive comments.

Al-Subaey said: "Those interpersonal instances of racism and Islamophobia are not in a vacuum. Those are deeply connected to the systems, structures and institutions that have racism and Islamophobia embedded in them."

Addressing members, MTA leaders said that rebuilding inclusive school communities is a priority. Following activism from the union, the state has agreed to provide nearly \$400 million in one-time federal funds for public education. The funding includes \$10 million for diversifying the public education workforce, MTA Vice President Max Page noted.

MTA President Merrie Najimy said the work of building inclusive

"Building, maintaining, and repairing relationships is a lifelong endeavor," said MTA President Merrie Najimy. "It is what allows us to connect our humanity to others."

communities is ongoing. "Building, maintaining, and repairing relationships is a lifelong endeavor," she said. "It is what allows us to connect our humanity to others."

The MTA aspires to be a union of antiracist educators and antiracist unionists, Najimy continued, adding: "We must understand the interconnectedness of structural and individual racism and the multiple forms of racism that impact different racial and ethnic groups, including Islamophobia."

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- The NEA Guaranteed Issue Life Insurance Plan can help your loved ones cover your final expenses such as funeral and burial costs. No medical exam is required, and you can get coverage of either \$10,000 or \$20,000.

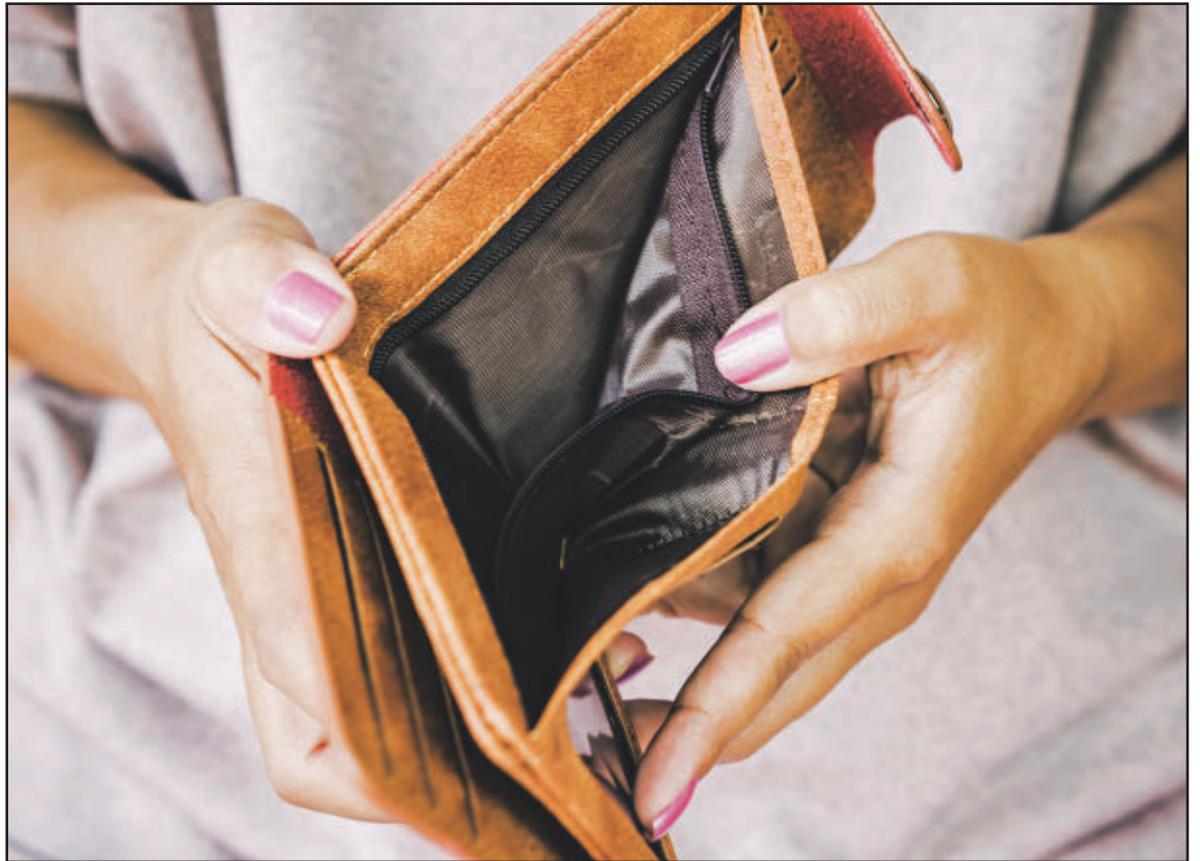
■ ■ ■

**Mistake #2: Not starting to save early enough for retirement.** It's never too early to start saving for retirement. The earlier you start, the more time you'll have to save, and the more money you might be able to stash away for your future.

Let's say you save \$4,000 each year, with a 6 percent return compounded annually, until you turn 62. If you start saving at age 22, your investments could yield up to about \$650,000. But if you wait until you are 32 to start saving, your investments could yield up to only about \$335,000.

NEA Member Benefits provides several tools tailored for NEA members to help you see where you stand.

- Take the *five-minute retirement checkup* to figure out if you're on track.



Let's say you save \$4,000 each year, with a 6 percent return compounded annually, until you turn 62. If you start saving at age 22, your investments could yield up to about \$650,000. But if you wait until you are 32 to start saving, your investments could yield up to only about \$335,000.

- Check out the *comprehensive retirement income calculator*, which includes state pension data, to see what your retirement might look like.

- Download your free copy of *An Educator's Guide to Retirement Planning* to get an overview of state pension plans, Social Security and the various considerations unique to educators. There is also a two-page checklist to help you assess your situation.

■ ■ ■

**Mistake #3: Not having an emergency fund.** It's important to plan ahead for unexpected situations — such as a medical emergency or job loss — so you won't be caught off guard.

Experts recommend that you aim to set aside at least three to six months of living expenses to cover necessities such as the mortgage or rent, utility bills, phone, internet, prescriptions and more.

Through the *NEA Smart Money Account*, you can easily link your checking or savings to a federally insured account to potentially earn a higher return. Your money is easily accessible when you need to use it.

■ ■ ■

**Mistake #4: Not planning for life after you are gone.** Expressing your wishes through legally binding estate documents is an important way to help protect your loved ones and assets.

To get started, make sure to consult with a financial professional to draft an authenticated will, as well as trust and estate planning.

In addition, be sure to name beneficiaries for your insurance coverage and retirement accounts. Include their names, Social Security numbers, and the allotment you're leaving to them. Remember to update your beneficiaries and allotments as your life changes, as needed.

*To find the resources referenced in this article, please visit [neamb.com/life-insurance-protection/avoid-these-five-money-mistakes](http://neamb.com/life-insurance-protection/avoid-these-five-money-mistakes).*

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### **Tewksbury Teachers Association fights to win fair contract**

Educators who belong to the Tewksbury Teachers Association have been trying to negotiate a new contract since early 2021. In recent months, they have participated in a series of actions to demand fairness, with support from fellow union members in other locals. On Feb. 10, more than 200 TTA members and allies packed a School Committee meeting. Above, members raised their hands as they sought to speak. At right, educators stood up to make their position clear. Amid educators' efforts to be heard, officials ordered the room cleared.

Photos by Jonathan Ng



## **Strong opposition blocks charter plan**

Continued from Page 3

withdrawing all support for the charter school. Once the bank dropped its support, other businesses and organizations withdrew letters of support submitted as part of the application.

With support for the proposal withering and the NBCSOS poised to sustain its community organizing, the application was withdrawn in early February by key proponents including Meg Mayo-Brown, a former Fall River superintendent of schools; Jack Sbraga, a former president of Bristol Community College; and Omari Walker, director of the New Heights Charter School in Brockton.

The NBCSOS has pledged to remain active in ensuring that students have access to the education that they deserve and are shielded from persistent efforts to undermine public schools in the region.

“Our public schools have work to do. They always will,” the NBCSOS said in a statement. “The history of public education in this country is steeped in systemic racism, and our communities were not spared.”

The coalition added: “Increased resources and opportunities for all students have to be at the forefront of this work. As such, NBCSOS will remain vigilant in our focus on investing the funds our public schools deserve in service to every student.”

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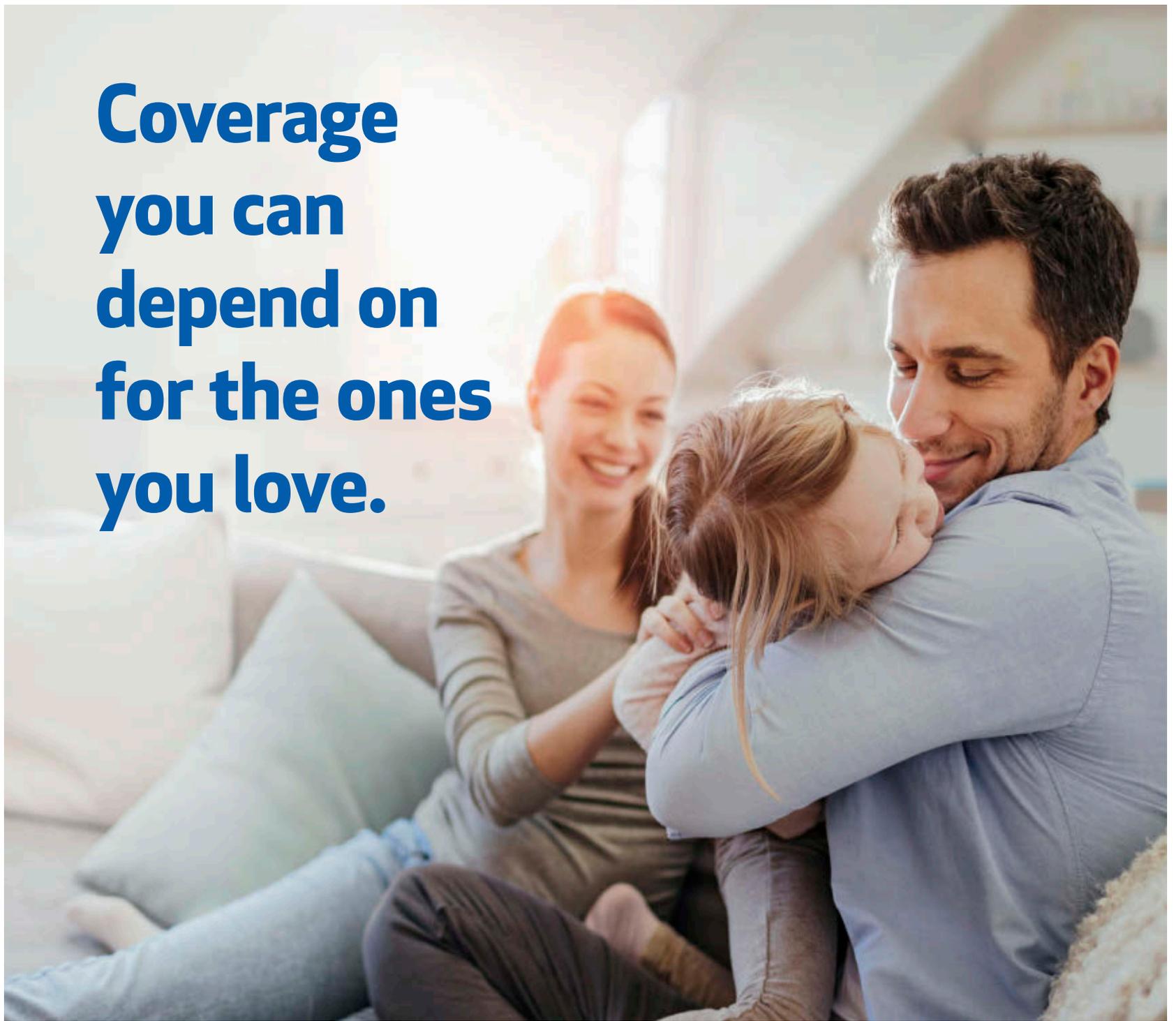
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## ESPs to discuss contracts and working conditions

Continued from Page 8

conditions and terms of employment that face ESPs in preK-12 settings and classified staff in higher education. The session will focus on contractual improvements that are most important to members and facilitate sharing best practices across locals.

Among the MTA locals that have successfully negotiated new contracts is the Shrewsbury Paraprofessional Association. In January, the association secured a new three-year contract that includes annual boosts in pay for members.

Meredith Charles, owner of Drama Out of the Box, will present a session on the “art of communication,” drawing on improv as a technique. With educators and students wearing masks indoors, body language and tone have become even more important, said Charles, who taught in the Waltham Public Schools for 18 years.

“The workshop is designed around the idea of improvisation, which is really being in the moment, and taking things as they come to better understand what’s happening — but also to be more observant of people you’re communicating with and how you’re coming across,” Charles said.

*Please watch [massteacher.org/esp](http://massteacher.org/esp) for more information about this year’s conference.*

## Annual Meeting and preconvention information

The 2022 MTA Annual Meeting of Delegates is currently scheduled to be held on May 20 and 21 at the Hynes Convention Center in Boston. Preconvention meetings for the elected delegates will be held in advance of the meeting to give delegates the time to review materials that are critical for their decision-making. As *MTA Today* went to press, those sessions were not yet scheduled, and a final decision was pending on whether to hold the preconventions — and the Annual Meeting itself — in person or virtually. Visit [massteacher.org/precons](http://massteacher.org/precons) for updates. Information on decisions and scheduling will be posted on the MTA website as it becomes available.

### Classifieds

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## Obituaries

**Marie Banks, 104**, of Quincy. Was an English teacher for 20 years at North Quincy High School. Dec. 12.

**Judith M. Butterfield, 80**, of Rutland. Was an English teacher for more than 30 years at David Prouty High School in Spencer, retiring in 2001. Oct. 31.

**Martha P. Callahan, 72**, formerly of Beverly and Windham, New Hampshire. Was a physical education teacher for the Wakefield Public Schools. Nov. 8.

**Judith Chandler Chute, 83**, of Cohasset. Was an elementary teacher in the Milton Public Schools. Sept. 27.

**Louise H. Coggeshall, 71**, of New Bedford. Was a teacher at the John B. DeValles Elementary School in New Bedford for 37 years. Oct. 4.

**Kathryn A. Craib, 75**, of Upton. Taught at Upton Regional Elementary School for over 35 years. Sept. 20.

**Laura B. Crocco, 86**, of Falmouth, formerly of New Bedford. Was a teacher for 35 years at the Mullen-Hall and North Falmouth elementary schools. She served as treasurer of the Falmouth Educators' Association. Nov. 26.

**Janet M. Erickson, 89**, formerly of Fitchburg. Before retiring, taught at the Thomas C. Passios School in Lunenburg, the Ashburnham Street School in Ashburnham and the Reingold Elementary School in Fitchburg. Oct. 4.

**Amy L. Fitzgerald, 55**, of Holyoke. Was an educator for 30 years and served as principal at the

Maurice A. Donahue Elementary School in Holyoke. Dec. 5.

**Charles Francis, 82**, of East Bridgewater. Was an English teacher in both Randolph and New Bedford. Nov. 9.

**James M. Gangemi, 92**, of Williamstown. Worked in the Williamstown Public Schools for 36 years as a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent, retiring in 1992. Nov. 23.

**Diana S. Geigis, 87**, of Falmouth. Was a teacher in Stoughton for 22 years at the Chemung Elementary School, now the Helen H. Hansen School. Oct. 27.

**William P. Grady II, 79**, of Westwood. Taught at Brookline High School for 29 years, retiring in 2006. He founded a program for at-risk students called Opportunity for Change. Oct. 22.

**Edmund J. Hill, 76**, of Norton. Was a math teacher at Taunton High School. He also taught math at Newbury College and Bridgewater State University. Dec. 1.

**Adele Hoffman, 97**, of Newton. Was a special education teacher for 20 years for the Needham Public Schools, retiring in 1995. Dec. 5.

**Joan M. Lucey, 88**, of Oxford, Mississippi, formerly of Worcester. Was a teacher in the Worcester Public Schools until her retirement in 1996. Nov. 23.

**Christine Marchand, 69**, of Methuen, formerly of Woburn. Was an elementary teacher in the Woburn and Methuen public schools for 35 years. Oct. 19.

**Linda J. Meredith, 72**, of Fairhaven. Was a special education teacher at Fairhaven High School for 35 years. Oct. 8.

**Cheryle S. Normandin-Nasser, 73**, of New Bedford. Taught at the Job S. Gidley School in Dartmouth for 35 years. July 7.

**Thomas R. O'Brien, 90**, of Whitinsville. Was a math teacher in the Worcester Public Schools for 36 years, retiring as the department head of mathematics at North High School. Nov. 27.

**Johanna T. O'Hearn, 70**, of Lowell. Was a library media specialist at Lowell High School and the Tenney Grammar School in Methuen. Dec. 6.

**Sandra G. Olansky, 84**, of Newton. Was an art teacher at Fox Hill Elementary School in Burlington. Nov. 27.

**Anne P. O'Leary, 84**, of Arlington. Was a second-grade teacher in Burlington for over 40 years. Dec. 7.

**Linda M. Ostaski, 71**, of Milford. Was an art teacher at the Richer and Jaworek elementary schools in Marlborough, retiring after 25 years. Nov. 21.

**Louise C. Reed, 86**, of Weston. Was an elementary teacher in the Weston Public Schools, the Wayland Public Schools and in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Oct. 30.

**Brian M. Vieira, 71**, of Somerset. Was a music teacher for 37 years for the Somerset Public Schools. Dec. 2.



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## Activism helps win ARPA funding for education

By Scott McLennan

Following a sustained push by educators from preK through higher education, the Legislature crafted a bill to provide nearly \$400 million from federal COVID-19 relief funds to public schools and colleges, allowing them to begin to address structural deficiencies that affect the health and safety of students and staff.

The funds, received through the American Rescue Plan Act, can be used to address building and maintenance issues such as improving inefficient HVAC systems. They also can be directed to programs intended to increase educator diversity and alleviate student hunger on college campuses.

Altogether, higher education received \$137.3 million in the package signed by Governor Charlie Baker in December, while public school systems received \$242.1 million. Ventilation improvements for preK-12 schools statewide got \$100 million, while dozens of individual school districts were able to get line-item amounts for various improvements.

Among the districts on the list were Amherst, which received \$100,000 for student mental health services; Hopkinton, which got \$300,000 for HVAC improvements in school and town buildings; and Melrose, which will receive \$150,000 for accessibility improvements for two elevators at the high school.

Still, a large portion of the \$5.3 billion in ARPA funds available to the Legislature to spend remains unallocated and available. In February, MTA leaders sent a letter to legislators outlining educators' goals for further appropriations from the pandemic relief fund and surplus state revenue. Specifically, the MTA is calling for:

- \$50 million to revive a version of the Tomorrow's Teacher Program, which provides scholarships to public higher education students who commit to teach in a public school for four years.
- \$50 million to expand the educator pipeline via loan repayment support; the program could cover up to \$50,000 in expenses associated with an undergraduate or a master's degree, or a licensure program, for current students and recent public higher education graduates who commit to working in public schools.



Books at Bridgewater State University's Maxwell Library suffered from mold damage as a result of deteriorating building conditions.

Reducing or eliminating the burden of college debt for people entering public education careers is expected to help satisfy an urgent need to diversify the educator workforce.

In addition, in response to the 14 percent to 15 percent drop in enrollment at community colleges and state universities, which especially involves Black and Latino students, the MTA proposes allocating \$335 million in fiscal 2023 to fully cover tuition and fees for lower-income students who are attending community colleges or in the first two years of attending a four-year university. The funding would allow students to put Pell and other grant resources toward other college expenses.

The MTA also has requested additional ARPA funds for schools and campuses to continue to address health and safety issues associated with facilities and other structural problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the extent to which public school and college buildings lack sufficient ventilation. MTA members from across the state have chronicled the acute physical needs of the buildings in which they and their students work and learn every day. Mold, broken windows, water damage, severely cracked walls, floors and ceilings, and leaking pipes and roofs are visible in many public school and campus buildings.

The MTA launched a campaign calling on members to submit photos of the poor conditions of their workplaces. The pictures were shared on social media and submitted to state legislators as they were debating how to appropriate the pandemic relief funds.

In some cases, reporters followed up on the documentation of working conditions that compromised educators' and students' health and safety.

The Bridgewater State University chapter of the Massachusetts State College Association publicized the mold and ventilation issues that plague the campus's Maxwell Library. People working in the library were experiencing respiratory problems and during hot, humid stretches in the summer, mold grew on books, furniture and elsewhere in the library. *The Boston Globe* reported on the school's unwillingness to upgrade the library's HVAC system.

Shortly after that story ran, the Legislature approved the ARPA bill, and Bridgewater State University's president announced that most of the \$5 million available to the campus from the legislation would be used to fix the library's ventilation system. With further advocacy from the local union, the administration committed to a timeline.

"It was a long-fought battle through member-driven advocacy, but in the end, we won," said Irina Seceleanu, president of the Bridgewater State MSCA chapter.

With funds being distributed, locals are continuing to press administrators to address health and safety issues in meaningful ways.

Major investments are called for, according to MTA President Merrie Najimy. "MTA educators, parents and students made a powerful case to legislators to provide funding to address building deficiencies that are a result of decades of disinvestment in public education," Najimy said. "We need transformative investments in our public schools and campuses that will lead to a recovery rooted in racial and economic justice. The funding allocated through this ARPA bill is a tremendous victory and presents us with some of the resources needed to meet the urgency of this moment."

# THE MTA Advantage

The MTA Advantage is a publication of MTA Benefits, a subsidiary of the Massachusetts Teachers Association

## The Extensive Mental Health Effects of COVID-19: How Can We Cope?

**O**ur children are suffering. An October 2021 research review published by the clinical medical journal *Pediatric Clinics of North America* found consistent evidence that children and adolescents are experiencing increased anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 era. The study authors recommend that health care providers and communities in general provide additional anxiety and depression screening and resources for youth.

But it's not only kids who are at increased risk.

A study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cited an increase in depressive symptoms among adults, from 24.5 percent in August 2020 to 30.2 percent in December of the same year. According to another recent study in the medical journal *The Lancet*, adult depression has nearly tripled during the pandemic, with researchers from the Boston University School of Public Health estimating that depression now affects 1 in 3 American adults.

In another study, researchers at the Intermountain Healthcare Heart Institute in Salt Lake City decided to review the medical records of more than 4,500 people who were screened for depression symptoms during appointments with primary care doctors. Screening results prior to and after the pandemic were included.

The results? Nearly 4 in 10 people had reported ongoing or new depression symptoms during the first year of the pandemic. People with depression symptoms were also nearly three times as likely to use Emergency Department services for anxiety symptoms.

"We are starting to talk more about mental health with COVID-19, and I think this brings awareness maybe to some of the trickling effects," said epidemiologist Heidi May, the lead Intermountain researcher.



Doctors such as Jeffery Huffman, director of the Cardiac Psychiatry Research Program at Massachusetts General Hospital, are additionally concerned about mental health and the phenomenon of mind-heart-body connection. Huffman is worried that depression has been associated in research with increased risk of fatal heart attacks and strokes. He is predicting a possible increase in these pathologies in the coming years.

The news is not all bad, however. Researchers are highlighting the role of prevention and the lifestyle factors we do have control over. Self-care, healthy diet, sufficient sleep, physical activity and social connection can go a long way in decreasing mental and physical health risks. Huffman also reminds us that therapy and medication can help, when needed.

"Depression is pretty clearly established as a medical condition that has effective treatments," Huffman said.

Researchers at the University of Florida took a deeper look at effective coping tools in their March 2021 study, "Thriving during COVID-19: Predictors of psychological well-being and ways of coping." Those researchers found that a sense of agency and social supports during the experience of loneliness were the most impactful factors in how people coped with pandemic-era stressors.

A sense of agency can provide a sort of psychological boost when other supports or resources may not be available. The researchers cited activities such as spearheading home projects, going for walks, cooking, organizing or cleaning, phoning friends, writing letters, taking time to rest, or reading with children as acts of agency.

(continued on page 2)



# Protect your paycheck with disability insurance

**M**any Americans are out of work — and not because of the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, tens of millions of people are sidelined every year by an accident, illness or injury that causes a disability.

It's more common than you might think. More than 1 in 4 of today's 20-year-olds will suffer a disability that keeps them out of work for at least a year before they retire, according to the Council for Disability Awareness.<sup>1</sup>

That's a long time to go without a paycheck. In fact, research by Unum shows that nearly two-thirds of workers could cover their bills with existing savings for only three months or less if they lost their primary income.<sup>2</sup> Once the savings account is empty, 37 percent of those surveyed say they'd turn to family or friends, 36 percent would dip into retirement savings and 35 percent would start charging on credit cards — all short-term solutions, at best, with potentially serious long-term implications. (The percentages add up to over 100 because some people chose more than one option.)

Disability insurance can help provide financial protection against this scenario by replacing a portion of your income if you're sick or hurt and unable to work.

According to Unum's survey, 85 percent of workers think employers should offer disability insurance. But only about half of employees say their company offers it, and just more than one-third are enrolled in coverage. Baby boomers are particularly unlikely to have disability insurance; 73 percent of workers born between 1946 and 1964 say they don't or are unsure if they do.

One-third of employees stated that they don't have coverage because they're healthy and don't need it, and the number is even higher for younger work generations. Forty-two percent of millennials and 52 percent of people who are part of Generation Z lack coverage. That's despite statistics showing the frequency of disabling injuries and illnesses, even for workers 40 or under. Unum's survey showed two-thirds of workers who filed a disability claim didn't think they'd ever use their coverage.

The next-most-common reason for not having coverage is cost: 29 percent of all employees and 39 percent of baby boomers say they can't afford it.



The most affordable way to get disability insurance is through work, and the competitively priced MTA Disability Plan — designed specifically for MTA members — can help educators get the coverage and peace of mind that they need.

During the MTA Disability Plan open-enrollment period, which runs from March 28 through May 13, members of local associations that offer this program can enroll or change their benefits. Members may choose a short-term disability plan with two elimination period options and/or a long-term disability plan with a benefit of 60 percent of the member's covered weekly salary. Both accident and critical illness insurance are available during open enrollment as well.

Forty-five percent of employees surveyed by Unum who do have disability coverage say they value the financial protection for themselves and their families. If you're concerned about how you'd take care of yourself or your family if you can no longer work, MTA Benefits' disability insurance through Unum can help protect your income. To find out if your local participates, contact your local president. Local presidents who are interested in offering this program to their members can learn more at [mtabenefits.com/disabilityinsurance](https://mtabenefits.com/disabilityinsurance).

<sup>1</sup> <https://disabilitycanhappen.org/disability-statistic/>

<sup>2</sup> Online survey of 1,000 employed consumers by DYNATA, conducted on behalf of Unum, April 1-6, 2020.

## The Extensive Mental Health Effects of COVID-19: How Can We Cope?

(continued from page 1)

The key is to engage in an act of will. We may be limited in terms of finances or resources, but such small acts can create a sense of autonomy in a changing world. The research shows that those with a sense of agency fare better in terms of mental health resilience.

Social supports can come in the form of FaceTime conversations with family or friends, spiritual or church groups, service to others, telehealth therapy, or

online support groups. The format is not as important as the sense of connection. A broad range of research supports social connection as a protective factor for mental health.

Humans are pack animals. We struggle in isolation. This era requires that we be mindful in making sure social supports are in place.

Another great option is altruism. Making sure a lonely or elderly neighbor or friend has resources, a phone check-in or a provider referral can help mitigate risk in our community while also supporting our own need for social connection and creating a sense of personal meaning. That's a win-win. After all, we are all in this together.



**Editor:** Carolyn Cassiani  
The MTA Advantage is published three times a year as a supplement to MTA Today by MTA Benefits, Inc.

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# Tip Sheet

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## A time for renewal and change

The new year often brings a sense of renewal and change. We are all hoping to find a semblance of normalcy in 2022. Why not make it a memorable year by stepping out of your comfort zone to explore new destinations? Treat yourself to a fun solo adventure or make it a group event and invite some family or friends along for the ride.

**The Access Nationwide Discounts program** offers MTA members a variety of travel resources. Get up to \$60 in savings at Walt Disney World Resort and join in their ongoing 50th anniversary celebration! Celebrate with dazzling decorations and new looks for Mickey, Minnie and friends. Head over to Universal Orlando Resort and save \$30 on admission while immersing yourself in the world of movie magic. Make sure to stop at the Universal CityWalk located in the center of the Universal Orlando Resort to experience the best in casual and fine dining, concert venues, shopping, miniature golf, a 20-screen cineplex and more.

Or take a trip to California and stroll along Main Street, U.S.A., at Disneyland Resort. Enjoy classic rides such as Space Mountain, the Matterhorn Bobsleds and Peter Pan's Flight — or simply relax and watch the parade and fireworks at the end of the night. Set aside time and go to Universal Studios Hollywood, a leading global entertainment destination. Film buffs will want to grab some Butterbeer from Hogsmeade village at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter or, for those feeling brave enough, try Jurassic World — the Ride! Members save up to \$25 at Disneyland Resort and Universal Studios Hollywood.



The next step is deciding on lodging. When you book through Access, you'll get up to 60 percent cash back deposited directly to your card within 48 hours of making reservations. In the Orlando area, choose from Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge, Disney's BoardWalk Inn, Hyatt Place, and more. Looking for a place to stay near Disneyland Resort? Try Disney's Grand Californian Hotel and Spa, Disney's Paradise Pier Hotel or Disneyland Hotel. If you are headed to Universal Studios Hollywood, the Kimpton Everly Hotel, Fairmont Miramar Bungalows and Casa Del Mar are nearby options.

MTA Benefits takes the hassle out of finding a rental car for your trip. Both **Avis Car Rental** and **Budget Car Rental** offer 25 percent off rentals, plus you can enjoy additional offers such as dollars off, a complimentary upgrade or a free weekend day. You'll also receive a free membership to Avis Preferred or Budget Fastbreak so you'll travel better, save time and enjoy the fastest and easiest rental experience.

Take the stress out of planning and choose **TNT Vacations Powered by Funjet Vacations**, where most trips are all-inclusive. Pick from more than 900 destinations, including the U.S., Mexico, Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. In addition, members have thousands of hotel choices and more flight options, including charter and value flights from major gateway cities. TNT travelers receive exclusive offers such as Dream Vacation Care, which provides 24-hour assistance from more than 1,000 in-destination experts. Furthermore, TNT's Price Match Plus guarantees that members are getting the most competitive value with their vacation package.



**Collette** has been a leader in guided travel since 1918 and offers tours across all seven continents. You can choose from river cruises, rail journeys, land tours, small-group tours, family trips and more! Featured expeditions include Colors of Morocco, Spectacular South Africa, Cultural Treasures of Japan and The Plains of Africa Kenya Wildlife Safari. Explore the rolling hillsides and dramatic coastline with the Shades of Ireland tour. Kiss the famous Blarney Stone at historic Blarney Castle on one day and see the majestic 700-foot Cliffs of Moher on another. Watch sheepdogs in action at a working farm during the day and sleep like royalty on the grounds of a castle at night. Plus, take a tour of historic Dublin whether you visit St. Patrick's Cathedral or do some shopping on Grafton Street. All itineraries include sightseeing, entertainment, museum admission, hotels and meal options from local restaurants. Visit [www.mtabenefits.com](http://www.mtabenefits.com) to find a complete list of itineraries. Members save up to \$400 on their next trip with Collette.

Don't leave yourself unprotected on the road — get equipped with rental car insurance. Purchasing coverage before arriving at the rental counter gives you additional time to conduct research and better understand the options available. For \$6.25 per day, be prepared with the **Members Auto Rental Insurance** program, which also covers lost or stolen bags.

**Travel Insured International** gives members the ability to stay protected under their flexible Worldwide Trip Protector plan. You'll be covered for school year extension, trip cancellation, trip delay, rental car damage, baggage delay and more. TII has earned an A-Plus rating from the Better Business Bureau and aids in supplying you with superior security.



Your health should never be overlooked, especially when traveling. **MASA Medical Transport Solutions** provides worldwide air and ground ambulance transportation services for members at home, at work or traveling the world. Those with coverage through MASA will receive a bill for services rendered and that bill will be sent to MASA for payment.

For details on all programs and discounts, visit [mtabenefits.com](http://mtabenefits.com).

# EIA is your independent agency for value and service

## Homes with higher replacement costs may benefit from Hanover's Prestige coverage package

The Hanover Insurance Group, Inc., has launched Hanover Prestige — a high-value personal lines market for home, auto and condominiums.

Hanover Prestige offers insurance protection, high-quality care and service, along with flexibility and choices for customers with broader asset protection needs. Coverage options can be easily customized for an account or on an individual policy level.

## How can Educators Insurance Agency help?

EIA can tailor coverage to each customer's needs by adjusting limits that are usually locked in by most carrier policies, such as limits for other structures on a property — including a shed, fence or detached garage — or limits for contents and personal possessions. There are also multiple coverage options available for auto insurance, which can be tailored specifically for each vehicle on the policy.

## What unique coverages may be available?

For home policies, Hanover Prestige offers:

- Guaranteed replacement cost with a cash settlement option, allowing customers to choose when and where to rebuild in the event of a total loss.
- Higher water backup coverage with limits available up to the Coverage A value of the home.
- Service line coverage of \$20,000 for damage to underground pipes that run from the street to the home.
- Loss-of-use coverage, if the home is uninhabitable due to a covered loss, which is provided at the actual loss sustained, with no cap on the dollar amount or time limit.



Hanover Prestige also offers a specialized home evaluation process and designated claims and underwriting teams. In addition, The Hanover has relationships with several vendors through its Partners in Protection program, which offers customers access to discounts on home security and water leak defense systems, suggestions for local contractors, and jewelry replacement or purchase.

## Get a quote in just a few minutes

Educators Insurance Agency is a local independent agency based in Worcester. Experienced and licensed agents work with MTA members every day to help serve their auto and home insurance needs. EIA partners with various insurance carriers to offer comprehensive coverages that meet an individual's specific needs. Additionally, the EIA team can review your account to determine which discounts you may be eligible for, such as the MTA group discount.

**To obtain your free, instant homeowners quote, please visit:**

[www.educatorsinsuranceagency.com/instant/quote.aspx](http://www.educatorsinsuranceagency.com/instant/quote.aspx)

You can also visit our website, [www.educatorsinsuranceagency.com](http://www.educatorsinsuranceagency.com), to request quotes, find more information about our agency, and read customer testimonials.

Please give EIA a call at **888.908.6822**. We would love to speak with you!



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All program and pricing information was current at the time of publication (February 2022) and is subject to change without notice. To find out what may have changed, please call MTA Benefits at 800.336.0990.