

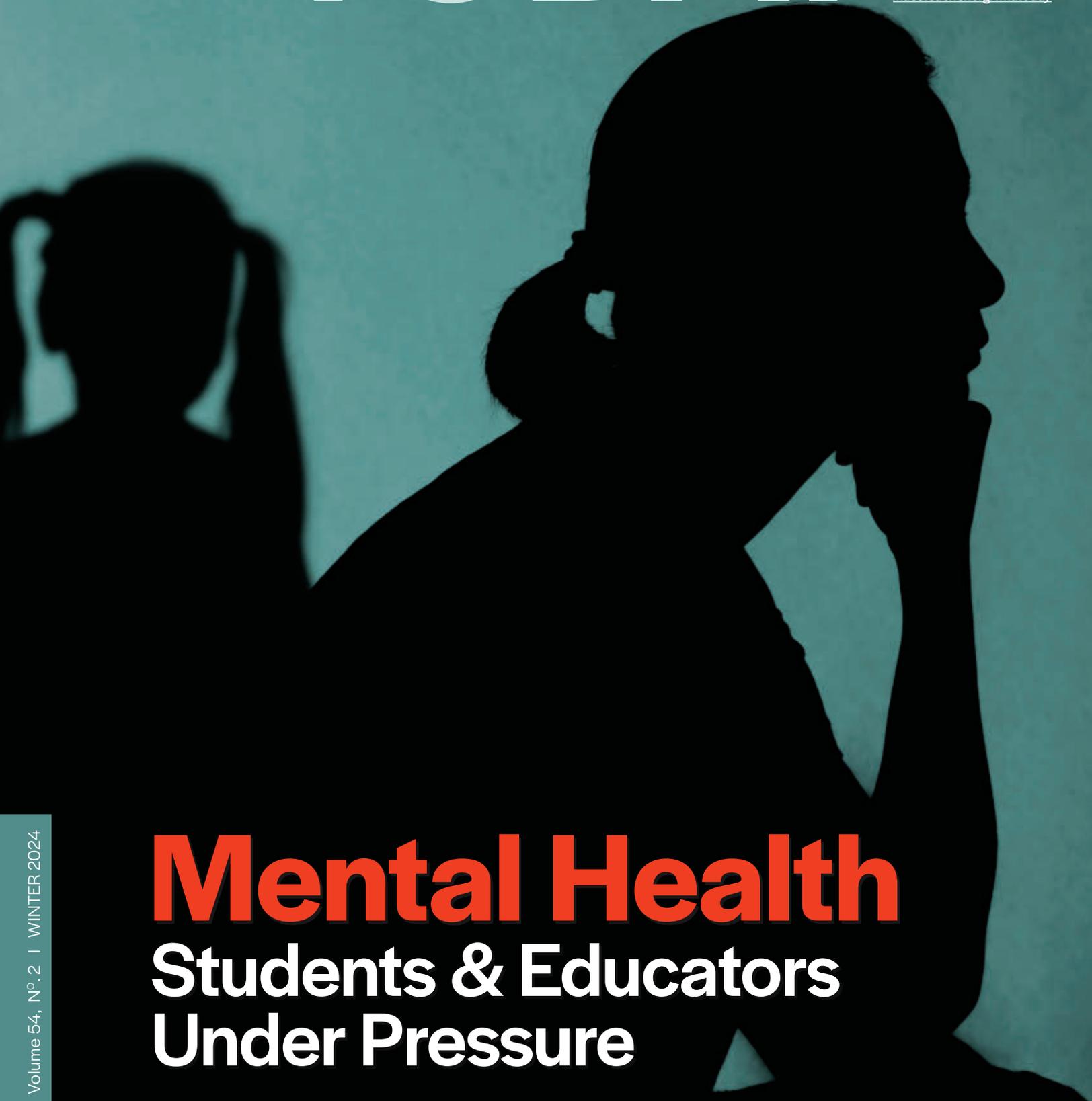
**MTA**

A publication of the  
Massachusetts Teachers  
Association

**TODAY**



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**Mental Health**  
Students & Educators  
Under Pressure

Volume 54, N° 2 | WINTER 2024



**Gina Potorski-Dahl, a teacher and member of the Chicopee Education Association, said districts need to listen to people who work in the buildings to help address student stress and mental health.**

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## MTA TODAY

Massachusetts Teachers Association  
2 Heritage Drive, 8th Floor  
Quincy, MA 02171-2119  
617.878.8000  
[mtatoday@massteacher.org](mailto:mtatoday@massteacher.org)  
[massteacher.org](http://massteacher.org)

**Max Page,** President  
**Deb McCarthy,** Vice President  
**Mike Fadel,** Executive Director-Treasurer

**Mike Fadel,** Publisher  
**Amanda Torres-Price,** Communications Director & Editor  
**Mary MacDonald,** Editor & Writer  
**Scott McLennan,** Writer & Photographer  
**Jonathan Ng,** Photographer  
**Veronica Sosa-Dunetz,** Graphic Design  
**Laura Mullen,** Staff Assistant

### MTA TODAY DIGITAL

**Carlos Avila,** Developer & Strategist  
**Sarah Nathan,** Content Manager  
**Bob Duffy,** Video & Photography

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This edition of MTA Today reflects a redesign and new approach to content based on a member survey. Let us know what you think about this issue by emailing [mtatoday@massteacher.org](mailto:mtatoday@massteacher.org).

REDESIGN BY VERONICA SOSA-DUNETZ





# MENTAL HEALTH

## Addressing Mental Health Issues in Education

By **Mary MacDonald**

Photographs by **Eric Haynes**

**E**ducators talk about the joy and passion they have for teaching, in creating lessons and watching as that creativity connects with students in a classroom. But in recent years, many have felt undermined and discounted in their profession.

Many educators now say they're experiencing a malaise about the teaching and learning environment in their schools. They describe classrooms that have turned into testing centers, with curriculum and lessons focused on the content most likely to end up on the MCAS and other standardized tests, and healthy outlets for students, including recess, shortened or eliminated.

They say their students have become more disengaged and more prone to lashing out in anger or frustration. Elementary school students are throwing chairs, not just tantrums. Older students have told counselors and educators that the presence of police in schools weighs heavily on them, and unfairly focuses on students of color.

It's all adding up to stress and pressure and anxiety – an unfolding mental health crisis. Students are missing school in greater numbers, according to state data. Since the pandemic, the number of students being disciplined has risen in several categories, including fights. Turnover among educators has increased, according to a recent study.

These circumstances are not something that can be attributed solely to an absence of critical staff members, the COVID-19 pandemic, digital devices, social media or standardized testing, according to educators, but a mix of all of them. A panel of experts delved into these issues, and proposed 26 specific solutions, in a new MTA WikiWisdom report: “Classroom Solutions to the Mental Health Crisis in Our Schools.”

Individual locals, and some districts, are responding in comprehensive ways. Taunton, for example, has strengthened professional development surrounding mental health and social-emotional learning for staff and parents. A district mental health team works with various schools. The purpose is to develop interventions that work.

Ask MTA members and educators what they think should change to make things better and most have specific recommendations.

The first, cited by many, is for state officials and district leaders to simply listen to them. For all of their experience and expertise, professional educators are often ignored when policies are set, said Gina Potorski-Dahl, an English teacher at Chicopee Comprehensive High School and a member of the Chicopee Education Association.

“Teachers, paraprofessionals, ESPs, custodians, clerks, cafeteria workers are

the experts,” Potorski-Dahl said. “Ask them what needs to be done. Stop asking people who haven’t been in a school in decades. Stop asking people who don’t know what the climate of the building is, or the climate of education is, and ask the experts.”

**S**tudent voices, as well, deserve to be heard. Theresa Bryant, a longtime adjustment counselor and a member of the Springfield Education Association, now on leave for work as a social justice organizer, working with the district’s Diversity, Inclusion and Racial Equity Initiative, said she learned how negatively impacted students were by the presence of police in school buildings, and surveillance cameras, when they spoke to her.

“Student voices, especially students of color, their voices are often silenced,” Bryant said. “Because people feel that students don’t have the wisdom or the knowledge to talk about what their needs are. And that ties into the whole existence of educators of color, too, who are devalued and discriminated against.”

## “Very often, what we’re seeing now is an increase in frustration and the inability to handle that frustration for children.”

DONNA GRADY President of the Franklin Education Association

Adequate and appropriate staffing in schools quickly rises to the top when educators are asked what can help alleviate the stress that educators and students alike are experiencing. That may look different depending on the grade level and subject taught, as well as the needs of students. Over the past several months, several MTA locals that are engaged in bargaining have sought more school psychologists, counselors and paraprofessionals, and improved pay and working conditions for them.

The No. 1 recommendation in the WikiWisdom report is to bring more licensed mental health professionals into schools, including by embedding in

contract language the proper ratio for students to mental health professionals. The national recommendation is one psychologist for every 500 students; and one counselor for 250 students.

All of these professionals play a role in helping students who are in distress.

Donna Grady, who is president of the Franklin Education Association, and a kindergarten teacher, said her district doesn’t have enough paraprofessionals. How important are they? In her school, four kindergarten classes share three paraprofessionals. Which means that 5-year-olds who need to go to the bathroom or have trouble with an activity have to wait if their class lacks one. That’s

**Gina Potorski-Dahl, an English teacher at Chicopee Comprehensive High School and a member of the Chicopee Education Association.**





**REBECCA FULLER**  
Sharon Teachers  
Association

The impact of standardized tests is being felt too. In kindergarten, students used to have up to eight weeks to learn routines and establish relationships with each other. Then that became compressed as the pressure built to have students on-task in learning, complete with expecting small children to write on Chromebooks.

“We’re not operating like it’s kindergarten,” she said. “We’re operating like it’s first or second grade. Kids aren’t physically or cognitively able to do that.”

**M**ental health training and education, for schools and parents, has become an increasing focus of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and professional associations that specialize in health care. The CDC in December published a six-point action guide for schools and district leaders, aimed at educating students about mental health.

A national survey of teenagers in 2021 by the CDC found increased reports of sadness, particularly among young women. Fifty-seven percent of girls reported they felt sad every day for at least two weeks in the previous year, according to the New York Times. The survey also found high rates of depression and suicidal thoughts among gay, lesbian and bisexual youth.

The National Association of School Psychologists has a training program aimed at crisis response in schools, which could include physical as well as psychological components. Beginning before the pandemic, many youths were reporting mental health challenges, said Ben Fernandez, a lead trainer in the NASP program, and a school psychologist in Virginia who has led training in Massachusetts.

Rebecca Fuller, co-president of the Sharon Teachers Association, has become more focused on the mental health of her students. She knows that if they aren’t in a good place, a safe place, in their own minds, they aren’t able to learn.

She tries to ratchet down their self-expectations, to relieve the pressure. Even in fourth grade, many of her

leading to increased frustration among children.

The pandemic – which greatly reduced the amount of time young children spent socializing with other children – is one of the impacts now being seen in classrooms.

“They’re little, so they want what they want,” Grady said. “Very often, what we’re seeing now is an increase in frustration and the inability to handle that frustration for children. Kids are melting down. We’re evacuating classrooms for safety and for the dignity of the children.”

**A**n evacuation involves someone leading the other children out of the classroom so the teacher can resolve the issue affecting the child in distress. It’s for everyone’s safety. It’s happening more frequently, said Grady, a 35-year veteran of local schools.

“What we’re seeing is much more physical. Kids flipping tables and chairs.” Grady said she suspects the causes include the pace of curriculum, which has accelerated, as well as the pandemic, which didn’t allow young children to socialize, to learn how to resolve differences.



**“ Student voices, especially students of color, their voices are often silenced.”**

**THERESA BRYANT**  
Springfield Education Association

students put too much pressure on themselves.

“I say: ‘Are you doing your best?’ I say: ‘Every day your best will look different, depending on what’s happening outside of school’. If they had a tough time sleeping or a fight with a parent or sibling, their best will be different, which is okay.”

Underscoring these conversations is that in many schools, the day is increasingly focused on tests in a few subjects. The pressure of MCAS has seeped into even the youngest grades.

That hyperfocus has led districts to adopt standardized curriculum and pacing – in which all students in each class will be studying the same material at the same time – and purchase edtech programs that promise that standardized scores will increase if students and educators spend hours online.

Cynthia Roy, who teaches biology at Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical School, has taught students in an MCAS-tested subject for more than 14 years.

On top of the pressure that a high-stakes standardized test places on students, schools that are focused on scores have cut back on creative and healthy outlets for students – including electives, art and recess. Even lunch is compressed. Is it any wonder students are acting out?

Roy has heard students describe school as a test center, or prison. The MCAS has eroded the morale of educators and the well-being of students in ways that may not seem obvious.

“For both students and educators, we’re in a really oppressive environment right now because of standardized testing,” she said. What works are the very things that districts are eliminating.

“Mental health workers, wrap-around services, art, electives. All of these things we’re talking about are absent from our schools now. We need to actually invest in the things that we know work.” **T**

To read the MTA WikiWisdom report, please visit <https://massteacher.org/wikiwisdom>.



# MENTAL HEALTH ON CAMPUS

By **Scott McLennan**

The return to campuses following the pandemic was by no means a return to “normal.”

Understaffing at public colleges and universities that had been an issue before the height of the COVID-19 crisis is now even worse. But the students returning to college are demonstrating a far greater need for social and emotional support and access to mental health services.

That strain on staff and faculty creates its own pressure.

Cory Albert Griffin, director of the Employee Counseling and Consultation Office at UMass Amherst, said campus unions can play an important role in amplifying the concerns voiced by faculty and staff.

“Understaffing is a huge theme I hear about, coupled with the loss of institutional knowledge after COVID. That is coupled with students now arriving with noticeable losses in social and emotional learning,” Griffin said. “The unions can play a role in making sure we don’t end up with top-down approaches to these problems. The administration needs to be listening to staff as well as to students.”

Tyler Bradley, a residence director at UMass Amherst, is among those saying that understaffing is making it more challenging to provide support to students in crisis, and he called student mental health his “biggest challenge.”

Students, Bradley said, are increasingly expressing that they feel under pressure to perform well, and that seeking help or support would somehow give the appearance of failing. Additionally, many students slip into isolation when they become overwhelmed.

Bradley said that colleges and universities need to be responsive to students in crisis because many young people are worried about raising these concerns with their own families.

But a challenge for universities remains the so-called “great resignation.” The national wave of departures that occurred as employers called back workers when COVID cases initially fell, hit the UMass residential staff, Bradley said.

“I’m working to get staffing back to full capacity,” he said. “Right now, I’m wrestling with how to prioritize the workload in a meaningful way. We’ve



been training staff on having intentional conversations with students. We don’t want to just be ‘checking the box’ if a student is in crisis.”

Making sure that student mental health is receiving proper attention is daunting, but not impossible.

Last fall, Berkshire Community College faculty member Paul Johansen and counselor Lisa Mattila wrote a newspaper column that advocated for all colleges and universities to follow the lead of BCC and dedicate services to support student mental health.

BCC added staff to its counseling center, connected students to other resources in the community and included mental health experts from the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities among those taking part in suicide prevention strategies.

Johansen was a plaintiff in a lawsuit against Yale University that forced the Ivy League school to improve student mental health services. Johansen, a Yale graduate, joined a movement of alumni and students to hold Yale accountable for failing to address student mental health following the suicide of a student in 2021.

“College is stressful and can be a stressful time of life,” Johansen said. “It’s during the time of traditional college age that schizophrenia can show up for the first time in someone who never had a previous episode. At Yale, they confused wellness with psychiatric treatment. They beefed up wellness programs, but yoga is not going to help someone experiencing clinical depression.”

By contrast, with far fewer resources than Yale has, BCC responded in a meaningful way to the rising demand for student mental health services that began even before the pandemic hit, proving that colleges and universities can play a meaningful role in addressing the student mental health crisis.

“I am impressed by what BCC has available to students,” he said. “There already was an anti-stigma campaign happening before the pandemic, and the college provided support during the height of the pandemic when COVID was decimating the college experience.”

# HOW DO YOU TAKE CARE of yourself during the school year?

Understanding that educators are under increased pressure, the MTA posted on Facebook and asked people to share specific ways that they care for themselves.

By **Mary MacDonald**

**“Zero-guilt mental health days.”**

**“I have a large network of friends who I talk with on a regular basis.”**

**“Don’t answer or look at work emails after 3 p.m.”**

**“Don’t take work home.”**

**“Set limits about how much time I will work on weekends.”**

**“I spend time in nature on the weekends to nourish my soul.”**

**“Limit social media.”**

**“I take my lunch, no exceptions.”**

**“Leaving school on time, every day, no exceptions.”**

**“Exercise regularly – I walk, ride my bike, practice yoga ... cross-country ski and snow shoe and lift weights.”**

**“Morning meditation. Take a lunch break with work friends as much as possible.”**

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# THRIVE

*Thrive Act* would replace MCAS with comprehensive evaluation.

By **Mary MacDonald**



**T**he *Thrive Act* is more than a call to replace the MCAS-based high school graduation requirement. It would assure that local communities retain control of local school systems and establish a community-led response when improvements are needed.

MTA members are strongly advocating for its passage, emailing their representatives and senators. To date, more than 1,300 MTA people have sent letters to their representatives on Beacon Hill, encouraging them to act on the legislation.

The *Thrive Act* would accomplish some of the same goals of a ballot question now progressing toward the November 2024 statewide ballot, by replacing the MCAS-based graduation test, one of the most punitive aspects of MCAS. But the act is much more comprehensive.

In addition to replacing the standardized test-based graduation requirement, the legislation would eliminate state receiverships and reinstate democratic control to communities and school committees. Massachusetts has three districts that are under state control: Holyoke, Southbridge and Lawrence.

The act also would establish a commission to create a new, whole-child system of assessing schools.

**O**n the graduation requirement, it would replace the MCAS exam as the arbiter of student mastery of the state standards with a requirement that allows students' districts to certify that they have satisfactorily completed coursework showing mastery of the skills, competencies and knowledge required for graduation.

The ballot question, meanwhile, is showing evidence of strong statewide support.

Educators, parents, community members and volunteers collected 101,511 certified signatures endorsing the ballot initiative. Signatures were collected from every community in the Commonwealth.

Following up on a successful Oct. 4 public hearing on the *Thrive Act* at the State House, a Virtual Day of Action was held on Jan. 30, drawing together advocates to learn more about its objectives and mobilize support.

In several communities, local leaders are writing letters to the editor, expressing public support for it. Although introduced in the state House and Senate in January 2023, the bill remained in committee as MTA Today went to press.

Joe Spremulli, president of the Norton Teachers Association, wrote an op-ed published Feb. 1 in the Sun-Chronicle of Attleboro, sharing the purpose of the legislation and how it would help students.

"Thousands of educators like me support the *Thrive Act*, a bill currently in the Legislature that would create, among other things, a fair and rigorous evaluation system for graduation that focuses on the whole child," Spremulli wrote. "Teachers want information that will help us understand our students as people, data that is as nuanced as they are, data that the MCAS cannot supply."

**“Teachers want information that will help us understand our students as people, data that is as nuanced as they are, data that the MCAS cannot supply.”**

JOE SPREMULLI  
Norton Teachers Association

In a separate interview, Spremulli said the *Thrive Act* provides for the conversations that school leaders need to have. "We really need to talk about the assessments we're using, how we're evaluating our schools, how we're evaluating our students. I like the idea of a commission, coming together and saying, let's design a system that's going to look at our students as whole people as they move forward and meet the challenges of the 21st century."

**M**TA Vice President Deb McCarthy, a former fifth-grade teacher in Hull, said the high-stakes nature of the high school graduation test has turned schools into testing warehouses. The volume of signatures collected for the ballot question indicates support for removing a one-time test as a sole measure of accomplishment, she said.

"The people are letting us know that all students deserve an education that is well-rounded and focused on students – not a one-time test score," she said.

MTA President Max Page said educators are the professional experts who matter most, and know that the MCAS has narrowed curriculum and over the years has unfairly prevented thousands of students from graduating.

"The MCAS should not determine who gets a diploma," Page said. **T**

For more information on the *Thrive Act* please visit [massteacher.org/testing](https://massteacher.org/testing).



PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HAYNES





# Moving to Maintain Mental Health

By **Courtney Barber**

If you live in the Northeast, you are vulnerable to the winter blues or sometimes even Seasonal Affective Disorder. This is often due to decreased sunlight exposure and vitamin D levels during the winter months. The new year is a great time to fortify our self-care routines to help combat those winter blues. Movement is one of the most impactful components for maintaining our mental health.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity weekly for adults. Exercise can release endorphins, create feelings of well-being, relieve stress, increase confidence, decrease a multitude of health risks and invite social opportunities. Exercise can also help greatly in preventing or decreasing symptoms of anxiety, depression and fatigue.

When you feel depressed or anxious, moving is sometimes the last thing you

feel capable of doing. It is, however, critically important since it is linked to a host of positive neurochemical and health effects. The good news? Research shows us that even small efforts count.

New research indicates that even as little as 10 minutes of daily cardiovascular activity can yield positive health benefits. We also should note that while we may think of sports, running and other vigorous activities as the only way to get these benefits, there are opportunities for functional fitness and physical activity throughout the day. Aiming for an active lifestyle is a great approach.

Lawn care, cleaning, playing with your children or grandchildren, walking your dog, dancing and family hikes through the woods all count as movement! If you have physical limitations, chronic pain or a disability, remember that there are always adaptations. Chair yoga or tai chi, adapted weight training and many other

**If you live in the Northeast, you are vulnerable to the winter blues or sometimes even Seasonal Affective Disorder.**

tools are now available online or in your community.

Whatever your fitness level, ability level or current relationship with your body, talk to your doctor or medical provider about implementing lifestyle changes. And remember, the movement is for you! You will be much more likely to regularly incorporate more movement into your daily life if you include the most essential ingredient: fun. **T**

**Barber is a mental health counselor, health writer, wellness educator and the director of behavioral health at [MyRosalie.com](http://MyRosalie.com). Barber holds a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling and a bachelor's degree in health arts and sciences.**

# THE MTA Advantage

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

## Financial Well-Being

**A**m I supposed to have six months of living expenses in my savings account? How do I get out from under this mountain of debt? How would I pay my bills if I'm unable to work? Am I ever going to be able to retire?

For many people, uncertainty about the future and their financial security cause a significant amount of stress. Financial stress is immediate and can reverberate. Not knowing how to pay the monthly bills or pull yourself out of debt can lead to excessive worry.

Although finances can drive stress and anxiety, financial security can contribute to good mental health. Knowing you have a solid safety net in place should your circumstances suddenly and unexpectedly change can reduce some of the uncertainty in life's surprises. MTA Benefits offers several programs to help members improve their financial security and protection. So, while you can't always control the unexpected, there are a few financial steps you can take to safeguard your well-being.

### Disability Coverage

If you're out of work and savings dry up, problems can compound and escalate quickly: How do you pay your rent or mortgage, or medical bills, without a paycheck? MTA disability insurance could provide a benefit to you if

you're unable to work due to an injury or illness, including issues related to mental health. Developing a protection plan, though, also has the potential to improve one's mental health. Taking control of your finances and mitigating future risk can create peace of mind, knowing that you and your loved ones can continue to enjoy your standard of living.

Disability and life insurance plans also can provide you with protection against the risks presented by major life events — such as illness, injury and death — which have the potential to destroy a financial plan. This protection can help you feel calmer and better prepared should the unexpected occur.

Since 2001, the MTA disability plan has paid out more than \$39 million to members when they needed assistance, helping to reduce anxiety and stress through life's challenges. Whether the need is maternity leave or an extended leave because of an illness or injury, the MTA disability insurance plan can

replace a portion of your income, allowing you to make student loan or mortgage payments, plan for children to go to college, and prepare for a secure future.

### Debt and Student Loans



Carrying debt can take a heavy toll on your mental health. Seventy-seven percent of American households have debt, according to a study conducted by Forbes Advisor. And 54 percent of respondents with debt stated they always or often feel stressed because of it. That stress can manifest itself physically, leading to trouble sleeping or more frequent illnesses, and oftentimes strains relationships.

It might feel impossible to pay off a large amount of debt, whether it be credit card debt, a personal loan, student loan or something else. The truth is, it is possible to break free from debt — and do so without paying exorbitant fees to unscrupulous companies or by destroying your credit scores. MTA members have access to debt counseling through Cambridge Credit Counseling, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit. In working with them, you can create a plan to pay off your debt and improve your financial situation so that you can focus on living rather than worrying.

continued on page 16





# Treating hearing loss can make your life better

**H**earing loss often happens gradually. People may not even realize at first that they're not hearing sounds the way they used to. Or they may think that while it isn't as good as it used to be, it's not bad enough to warrant a visit to a health care professional. That could be a mistake.

Treating hearing loss means much more than improving hearing. It can have a significant impact on many aspects of health and lifestyle, including relationships, mental health and overall quality of life.

## Improved relationships and social life

If you have hearing loss, you may often need to ask people to repeat themselves. Or perhaps you've started to shy away from attending social events because you find it difficult to follow conversations. Treating hearing loss can open the door to better relationships.

One-in-two users of hearing aids reported their willingness to talk and engage improved due to their devices, according to MarkeTrak 2022, a comprehensive survey conducted by the Hearing Industries Association. Forty-eight percent of respondents

said their ability to participate in group activities has improved.

The gains are not just limited to group social settings. Nearly half of hearing aid users cited improved communication with their spouse or partner.



## Better mental health

When you can't hear well, everyday activities such as socializing, working, volunteering or enjoying hobbies can be more challenging. These activities can even become stress-inducing and lead to feelings of isolation.

Hearing loss has been associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety, especially among people who don't currently own hearing aids, according to a cross-sectional study done using data from a 2017 National Health Interview Survey. But the good news is hearing aid use may lower those odds. Among the 65 percent of hearing aid users who

wish they'd gotten their hearing aids sooner, they cited better mental and emotional health, and a better social life, among the top reasons.

## Enhanced quality of life

The impacts of hearing loss can be far-reaching, but so can the benefits of treatment. Among hearing aid owners who got their devices in the last five years, nearly two-thirds say their hearing aids regularly improve their quality of life.

Improvements were even noticed by individuals whose spouse or partner was the one who started wearing hearing aids. For example, 43 percent of respondents said their relationship was better, or a lot better, since their spouse or partner started wearing hearing aids.

MTA members have access to hearing care through Hear In America® which provides savings from the average retail price for high-quality hearing aids.

If you're experiencing hearing difficulty, please take advantage of this program. Call Hear In America® at 1.855.252.7639 to schedule a hearing exam with a nearby provider or visit [www.hearinamerica.com/mta](http://www.hearinamerica.com/mta) to learn more.



Editor: **Carolyn Cassiani**  
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2 Heritage Drive, 8th Floor, Quincy, MA 02171-2119  
Tel: 800.336.0990 • Fax: 617.557.6687  
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# Tip Sheet

## Five ways to support your mental health with MTA Benefits

All discounts listed in the Tip Sheet can be found at [mtabenefits.com](https://mtabenefits.com).

As the colder months settle in, many of us will experience a notable shift in our mood. In fact, 38 percent of respondents reported feeling a decline in mood during the colder months, according to the American Psychiatric Association's November 2022 Healthy Minds Monthly poll, taken from October 2019 through October 2021. But don't fret. Here are five ways you can help uplift your mental, emotional and physical well-being – all tailor-made for MTA members.

These approaches may be the antidote you need for the winter blues!

### 1. TAKE A YOGA CLASS

Yoga offers myriad of benefits for both the body and mind. Through a blend of physical postures, mindful breathing and meditation, it builds strength and promotes overall well-being. Beyond the physical improvements, it also serves as a powerful stress reliever, providing mental clarity and emotional resilience. The meditative aspects of yoga can help produce heightened self-awareness and a sense of inner peace. MTA Benefits provides members with access to several yoga and fitness studios, all at a discounted rate. Options include The Yoga Loft, Yoga Anita and Yoga with John.



### 2. BOOK AN ACUPUNCTURE SESSION

Acupuncture is a healing practice in existence for more than 3,500 years and has been reported to help treat conditions and ailments such as migraines, high blood pressure and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). But its benefits also extend to include stress reduction, a major component of fostering mental wellness. MTA Benefits offers discounted sessions at two practices: Denise Patnod, in Cambridge, and Emma Lee, in Northampton. Whichever practice you choose, expect to find some needed relief and a greater sense of overall wellness.

### 3. SIGN UP FOR VIRTUAL THERAPY

About half of the 60 million people grappling with mental health conditions in the United States do not receive treatment, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. However, virtual therapy can help combat this undertreatment through its convenience and accessibility.

The United Concierge Medicine (UCM) behavioral health program allows MTA members to connect with a therapist in as little as 24 hours. The program through UCM must be adopted by your local association for members to participate. However, MTA Benefits soon will introduce an individual option for mental health services, which will allow members to access these services more quickly than through traditional, brick-and-mortar locations.

continued on page 16



# Tip Sheet



continued from page 15

## 4. TAKE PRESCRIBED MEDICATIONS

The high price of certain medications can often be a hindrance for people while accessing the mental health treatment they need. That's why discount prescription drug programs can make a world of difference. MTA members can take advantage of the SingleCare Savings program, a comprehensive solution that gives members access to necessary prescriptions, with savings of up to 75 percent. Other program perks include zero deductibles and no claim forms.

## 5. LEARN (OR TRY) SOMETHING NEW

Taking on a new hobby or learning a new skill have been proven to boost mental health and make people's lives feel more purposeful. Other great benefits include deepening your relationships with others, feeling happier



and boosting self-confidence and immunity. In the Discount Directory, members will find several activities and learning resources to choose from, including pottery classes at Mudflat Pottery Studio in Somerville and courses at the Professional Training Institute in Needham.

Prioritizing mental health during winter is crucial, and MTA Benefits offers a diverse range of discounts to help members do so. **Find all the discounts listed in this article, and even more resources, at [www.mtabenefits.com](http://www.mtabenefits.com).**

## Financial Well-Being

continued from page 13

We know that student loan debt, whether your own education loans or Parent PLUS loans, can be overwhelming. Cambridge Credit Counseling also offers student loan counseling services to members, to help them create a plan that works for their budget. Cambridge Credit Counseling can explain what your forgiveness options are for education debt. In the past few years alone, its counselors have helped hundreds of educators receive tens of thousands of dollars in student loan forgiveness. An easy first step to learning more about repayment options is to join a free webinar. Visit [www.mtabenefits.com/student-loan-webinars](http://www.mtabenefits.com/student-loan-webinars) to register for an upcoming session.

### Planning is Key

Being debt-free, or simply creating a plan to be more fiscally responsible is incredibly helpful for mental health, but it won't last if you don't create a plan for the future. How will you ensure you won't be greatly burdened by debt again? Have you created a budget? Do you know how to set yourself up now for success in retirement? The guidance of a financial planner is a crucial stop on the journey to financial security.

People often put off the search for financial planning services because they don't know how to choose a reputable company that isn't trying to sell them a product or charge excessive fees. MTA Benefits' financial planning partner, Stacey Braun Associates, has extensive experience in assisting union members with financial planning services. The advisers at Stacey Braun are fiduciaries and do not try to sell their customers any products. Their only goal is to assist you with your financial management needs – whether that be budgeting, estate planning, investing or retirement preparation. The cost is \$140 per year, which includes three hours of planning services, access to their proprietary website and a 24-hour email help desk. This is a significant discount from the average cost of financial planning services in the U.S., which is \$300 per hour.

There is an undeniable connection between financial wellness and mental health. Let MTA Benefits and its partners provide you with the services you need to improve both. Visit [www.mtabenefits.com/financial](http://www.mtabenefits.com/financial) for information about all of the programs mentioned in this article.





## Make 2024 the year you feel better prepared for a financial challenge.

The right insurance can provide the peace of mind that illness and loss of income can take from you. MTA Benefits offers you and your family a comprehensive and competitive benefits package that will meet your needs now and in the future. Let us help you optimize your benefits coverage to better safeguard your financial well-being.

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Choose from a 14-day or 30-day elimination period
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## Upcoming Benefits Open Enrollment March 25 - May 17

**To learn more or to enroll:**  
Schedule an appointment with a benefit counselor by scanning the QR code, calling 866.998.2915 or visiting [www.myenrollmentschedule.com/mta](http://www.myenrollmentschedule.com/mta).



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# Contract Fights Lift Wages, Profile of Paraeducators

Newton and Andover move toward living wages for ESPs.



By **Scott McLennan**

**T**he contracts that emerged after educators in Andover and Newton went on strike shined a light on the outlandishly low wages paid to paraeducators and to the vital services they provide school districts.

The fact that Andover and Newton, two wealthy communities, had been offering paraeducators starting salaries of \$24,500 and \$27,000 respectively shocked many when they heard those figures.

The Andover Education Association voted to go on strike on Nov. 9 and reached

an agreement with the Andover School Committee on Nov. 14. In Newton, the city's school committee and the Newton Teachers Association bargained for more than 16 months before the union took a strike vote. The action lasted for two weeks, concluding with a contract agreement on Feb. 2.

Throughout their unions' respective job actions, the instructional assistants, or IAs, in Andover, and the behavioral therapists and teaching aides, known as "Unit C" in Newton, shared stories about the challenges they faced on the job, the

**Contracts being settled increasingly address the issue of whether Education Support Professionals are earning a living wage.**

**Picket lines in Newton drew community supporters alongside members of the Newton Teachers Association fighting for a fair contract.**

necessity to have multiple jobs to make ends meet and the difficulty districts had in filling the positions because of the low pay being offered.

Throughout the state, contracts being settled increasingly address the issue of whether Education Support Professionals are earning a living wage.

“Over the years, the role has changed drastically,” said Karen Torres, an IA in Andover for 17 years, who served on the AEA’s bargaining team.

**W**hen she started the job, the expectation was to help classroom teachers set up projects or grade tests, Torres said. But with students needing increased support for social and emotional needs, as well as help meeting academic expectations, the IAs became the frontline workers for delivering special education services.

“The responsibilities grew. The compensation did not. And the recognition did not,” Torres said.

Holly Currier, an IA who served on two consecutive AEA bargaining teams, said

the union started a living-wage campaign in 2020. Despite doing everything possible to challenge the school committee’s low-wage offers, the union could not get the committee to budge.

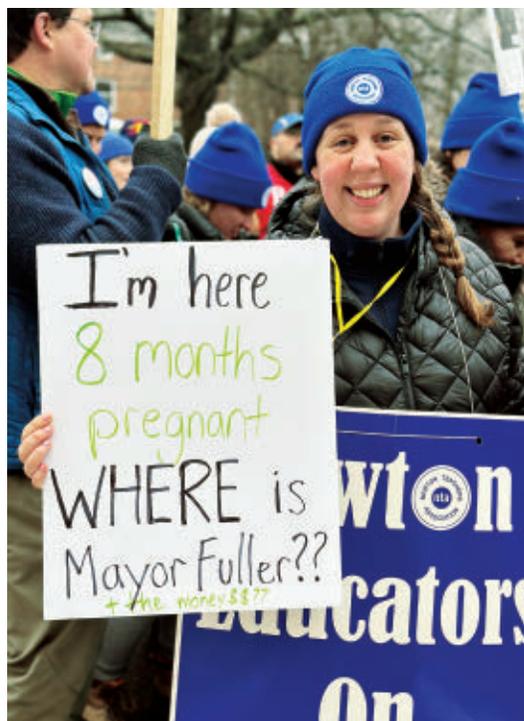
“The law is not designed in a way to empower us,” Currier said.

The fight to boost wages for instructional assistants took on more significance the more Currier thought about her own mother, also an IA in Andover.

“I saw how many people retired and were not able to live,” Currier said. “My mum is heading toward retirement, and I want her to have a chance, just a shot, at maybe retiring with some level of dignity that was not possible before.”

By the final year of the contract secured in Andover, starting salaries for IAs will be \$39,142, up from \$24,537. The top pay step for IAs at the end of the contract will be \$50,103, almost \$10,000 more than before.

In Newton, Unit C members were outspoken about the need to boost wages. Many of the behavioral therapists and teaching aides told of having master’s degrees in the areas of expertise they





**Students played a vocal and visible role at rallies held during the Andover Education Association's fight for a fair contract. That support helped instructional assistants, or IAs, make big gains at the bargaining table.**

**AEA President Matt Bach led negotiations for a contract he describes as "transformational" for the district. The union improved paid family leave and wages and protected teaching time.**

needed to work with students in need of significant support. Yet most members said they needed to work multiple jobs to survive and explained how the low pay made it difficult for their schools to fill vacancies.

**T**he Unit C pay scale varies depending on a position's number of hours and location. As a result of the new contract, many full-time Unit C members will see starting wages in March 2027 of \$36,778, representing a 30 percent hike. Additionally, Unit C members will receive the same pay raises negotiated by other NTA units (a total of 12 percent over the four-year deal) plus elimination of some wage steps and additional annual payments of \$250 to \$500 over the contract's life.

Janette Patel, an NTA bargaining team member who represented Unit C educators, said she remains concerned that in the middle school where she works, the positions going unfilled will

still only have about \$30,000 as a starting salary in the second year of the new contract.

"We are missing five aides in our school and recruitment is extremely difficult," Patel said. "Administrators complain that when they offer jobs to suitable candidates, those candidates are shocked at the low wage and don't want the job. Even with this contract, the starting wage has not increased sufficiently to attract applicants. We are left with the same problem – low wages."

Valerie Brunache Lewis, who also represented NTA Unit C members at the bargaining table, agreed that attracting applicants will remain a struggle. But Brunache Lewis saw progress in the contract settlement.

"It's a step in the right direction, with so many improvements made overall," Brunache Lewis said. "And it's also a victory that the community is now more aware of the role that Unit C plays in the schools." **T**



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DT240224

# Bringing *Cherish* campaign to cities and towns

By **Scott McLennan**

**T**he Higher Ed for All coalition has begun gathering resolutions of support for the *Cherish Act* from municipal bodies, such as city councils and school committees, to demonstrate the broad community support it commands for greater state investment in public higher education.

The version currently before the Legislature would make public higher education more accessible by increasing financial support for students and reducing their need to take on debt. The bill also protects the quality of public higher education by establishing wages and benefits to attract and retain highly qualified faculty and staff. The staffing levels are also directly tied to providing enough support for students to ensure they graduate on time.

Importantly, *Cherish* returns responsibility for maintaining campus buildings to the state, so individual colleges and universities do not take on debt that then is passed along to students in the form of higher fees.

HEFA activist Nellie Taylor said the escalating fees charged to students, on top of tuition, by public colleges and universities are “inappropriate.”

“When city and town councils show their support by passing resolutions in favor of the pillars of Higher Ed for All, and specifically the *Cherish Act*, they show our state legislators how important it is to restore financial accessibility of our public colleges and universities,” said Taylor, who helped present a *Cherish* resolution to the Amherst Town Council.

The Amherst council approved the resolution on Feb. 5, the same date that the Attleboro School Committee passed it.

The Boston City Council became the first elected body in the state to support the *Cherish Act*, passing its resolution on Jan. 31.

The bill is currently under review by the Joint Committee on Higher Education, which has until March 1 to report back to the full Legislature.

The resolution highlights the important role that public colleges and universities must play to counter the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision last summer to end affirmative action in college admissions. College enrollment and completion rates in Massachusetts remain lower for Black and Latino students than for many students of other races and ethnicities, widening an opportunity gap.

The HEFA resolution further makes clear that the time is right for Massachusetts to boost spending on public higher education, given the approval of the Fair Share Amendment in 2022. That amendment generates more than \$1 billion annually for public education and transportation.

The issues that *Cherish* addresses resonate deeply with Julie McNeill-Kenerson, a staff member at Massasoit Community College and double graduate of UMass Boston, where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

“I can remember thinking as a ‘city kid’ from a working-class family, that maybe college just wasn’t meant to be for someone like me. But ultimately, I thought it was worth it to apply, to go, and to begin that journey and finish those degrees,” McNeill-Kenerson said. “Yet, I still have thousands upon thousands of dollars in student loan debt compiling interest, a salary that does not meet today’s living wages, and working conditions that are not nearly what I would envision to be ideal. I want something more for my students, for my colleagues, for my community and for myself.” **T**

To learn more about the *Cherish Act*, please visit [massteacher.org/cherishact](https://massteacher.org/cherishact).

## Union Coalition Pushes Lawmakers to Pass Supplemental Budget

Facing intense pressure from unionized, public-sector employees — including thousands of MTA members working at public colleges and universities — state legislators passed a supplemental budget on Dec. 4 that provided funding for more than 95 contracts stuck in legislative limbo. Lawmakers attempted to punt the supplemental budget into 2024 as the House and Senate disagreed on spending for shelter for families in need. Union activism forced legislators to settle the matter before leaving Beacon Hill for winter break. Without the budget, 50,000 public-sector employees would not have received negotiated pay raises, including community college faculty and staff whose last raise was in 2020. **T**

For more information, visit [massteacher.org/budgetactivism](https://massteacher.org/budgetactivism).

## MTA’s Past Comes to Life Through History Project

The MTA launched the MTA History Project in 2023 to collect, archive and share with members stories, artifacts and lessons from its 178-year history. Through this project, stories about the MTA’s past struggles and successes will be made available on the website under [Our History](#) in the About MTA section, as well as through member messages and, eventually, at a university-based archive.

As part of this initiative, the vast majority of digitized copies of MTA publications were released to the public domain, covering the period from 1848 through 1976. They are available on the [HathiTrust website](#) by searching for the Massachusetts Teachers Association under “collections.” Members are encouraged to take a look at them.

Much has changed through this history. Gone are the days when MTA publications were supported with ads from the oil industry and Coca-Cola, and when union leaders extolled the virtues of corporal punishment or had to debate whether women would be allowed to join. However, many concerns and priorities have remained consistent. Members have long demanded a voice in how to make schools — and now colleges — work better. Members have long fought for respect. The MTA looks forward to making more of these stories available in the future, and to collecting stories from members as part of this initiative. **T**

For more information, visit [massteacher.org/history](https://massteacher.org/history).



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Plot Plan Fee	\$244	<b>\$125</b>
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**Total MTA Member Savings: \$3,163**

\*\$3,000 in discounts for conventional loan as compared with standard Massachusetts conventional mortgage fees and closing costs.  
\*\* Loan Origination Fee is inclusive of the following fees: Origination, Processing, Commitment, Application and Underwriting. Borrower shall not pay any other fees that go directly to lender for processing a mortgage/loan.



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Certain loans that may be arranged through a third-party lender are excluded from MTA savings.

# De'Shawn Washington

Lexington Education Association Member, is Massachusetts Teacher of the Year.

By **Mary MacDonald**

Photograph by **Jonathan Ng**



**D**e'Shawn Washington almost became an accountant, having initially chosen a career path in finance and business. But once he started working with young students as a college student, he followed a passion for teaching and public education. Now all of Massachusetts is taking notice.

Washington, who has taught for seven years, recently was named the 2024 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year. He is the first Black male educator named to that honor since the awards began. A teacher of fourth grade students at Maria Hastings Elementary School, Washington spoke recently with MTA Today about the recognition and the power of supportive colleagues.

“It’s all about the passion, right? Teaching is a calling. I’m very fortunate to be in education and be in this work today.”

Like many new teachers, he didn’t start out great; he had a rocky first year. After starting in Boston and then taking a position in Lexington, he grew professionally with the help of mentors and collaboration with peers. “You have to learn through experience,” said

Washington, 32. “I was very fortunate to receive wise counsel, exemplars, people coming in and modeling: What it means to do an open circle. How to run a morning meeting and how to incorporate games into your morning meeting. How to do check-ins over the course of the day, to ensure kids are doing well and having a good time in your class. Having a ‘Scholar of the Day’ in your classroom, where you can celebrate students and their achievements over the course of the day.”

A graduate of UMass Boston with a bachelor’s degree in accounting and master’s degrees in special education and elementary education, Washington now is pursuing a doctorate at Vanderbilt University. His scholarship focus is on how to incorporate community into a classroom.

**I**n Lexington, he balances the demands of the job with help from supportive union colleagues. It’s important for teachers to be able to count on fellow educators, Washington said, even as they gain more experience. It’s important to know when you need to

ask for help. And veteran educators need to look out for new teachers. “The type of support shifts, but you need support regardless. This is not a one-person job.”

The rarity in education for children being taught by a Black male educator in an elementary school is something he thinks about. It’s important for children to see Black males in these leadership roles.

“It starts with having the Black students in the classroom seeing their future selves as an older person, as a teacher, in a classroom. Then there’s the impact of the lived experience, what you share with your colleagues and your grade-level team and your district. You come in with another lens on lived experience.

“Being a Black male in an elementary class allows kids to see Black men in leadership – kids seeing Black men in opportunities for empowering, inspiring and learning. It shifts what you see on the outside, or what might be seen on TV, versus what you see in front of you.” **T**

**For an in-depth video interview of Washington, please visit [massteacher.org/2024TOY](https://massteacher.org/2024TOY).**

# 2024 NEA Director Elections

**T**his year, the MTA is electing three members to seats on the NEA Board of Directors.

Two seats are for three-year terms beginning Sept. 1, 2024, and expiring Aug. 31, 2027, in accordance with the NEA fiscal year. The third seat is to fill an unexpired term, beginning upon election and expiring Aug. 31, 2025.



**Christine Mulrone**

Framingham Teachers Association

For the two seats for a full, three-year term, two MTA members presented the requisite nomination papers with member signatures by the deadline and have been declared elected to the NEA Board of Directors. Christine Mulrone, of the Framingham Teachers Association, and Nicole Prevost, of the Quincy Education Association, have been elected as two of the MTA's NEA Directors, for three-year terms beginning Sept. 1 and ending Aug. 31, 2027.



**Nicole Prevost**

Quincy Education Association

Per NEA Bylaws and MTA election policy for these seats, if the number of

candidates does not exceed the number of seats to be filled, the election is waived, and the candidates declared elected.

MTA's NEA Directors also serve as members of the MTA Board of Directors, as MTA Annual Meeting Delegates and as delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly during their terms.

For the seat to fill the remainder of an unexpired term, two members have been nominated by presenting the requisite papers. Brian Fitzgerald, of the Wareham Education Association, and Kyle Gekopi, of the Wellesley Educators Association, are the candidates. The seat will be filled by direct vote of the active membership in March and April, in tandem with NEA state and regional delegate elections.

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

For the contested seat, candidates' biographical statements and photos are on page 26 of this issue of *MTA Today*. ¶

**For further information, please contact John Connelly of the Division of Governance and Administration by calling 617.878.8305 or emailing [jconnelly@massteacher.org](mailto:jconnelly@massteacher.org).**

## ANNUAL MEETING & PRECONVENTION INFORMATION

Each year, Annual Meeting delegates receive information and materials at preconvention sessions that are critical to their decision-making on organizational matters. This year's preconvention meetings will be held virtually on Monday, April 8 and Wednesday, April 10 at 4:30 p.m. in advance of the 2024 MTA Annual Meeting of Delegates.

The Annual Meeting will be held on Friday, April 26, and Saturday, April 27, at the MassMutual Center in Springfield. Delegates will receive preconvention information and registration materials as soon as they become available. ¶

## NOMINATIONS OPEN FOR THE 2024 MTA HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS AWARDS



The MTA Human Relations Committee is soliciting nominations for the 2024 MTA Human and Civil Rights Awards, which honor individuals and groups for showing extraordinary dedication to civil rights and human relations.

The awards will be presented on Friday, June 14, 2024, at the 2024 Human and Civil Rights Awards celebration. The location of the awards ceremony will be at the Beechwood Hotel in Worcester, MA.



For further information, please email Jennifer Freeling, Director of the Division of Governance and Administration, or Olivia Osiecki, Executive Assistant to the President, Vice President, and Executive Director-Treasurer, at [mtagovernance@massteacher.org](mailto:mtagovernance@massteacher.org).

**Nominations are due by March 22, 2024.**

The application is available at [massteacher.org/hcr](https://massteacher.org/hcr).

# Statements by Candidates for NEA Director Seat for Partial Term

## Two members are running for a seat on the NEA Board of Directors for an unexpired term.

### MTA CHORUS TO OPEN ANNUAL MEETING

MTA members who are interested in joining the MTA Chorus this year may contact [mtagovernance@massteacher.org](mailto:mtagovernance@massteacher.org). You will be notified of the rehearsals when they are scheduled. The chorus will perform at the 2024 Annual Meeting of Delegates, which will begin April 26 in Springfield. **T**



**BRIAN FITZGERALD** Wareham Education Association

Every member in every local. At every level. In every region. That's who a Massachusetts director on the

NEA Board should represent, and that's what I'll do. I've worked with dozens of locals in three different counties as an MTA Board member, Senate District Coordinator and Plymouth County Education Association president. As Wareham's local president, I've faced the issues that confront so many of us. I've worked alongside too many members to believe all are served with a simple agenda or set of buzzwords. Some moments call

for a clenched fist; others an open hand.

Different members have different needs: that's why I co-wrote a 2023 NEA business item equipping educators against attacks from religious pretexts and authored new language in our NEA Resolutions to explicitly recognize members' rights to strike. As county president, I've arranged member trainings on retirement, educator licensure and work in local unions. A new PCEA scholarship supports future educators and conducts a modernized celebration of standout colleagues that honors who we are.

A modern union embraces accountability and transparency. I keep a public record of my MTA Board votes (found at

<http://tinyurl.com/MTAregion41C>). I'll do the same as an NEA Director. I don't believe in surprises or secrets: Every member I serve will know exactly what I'm doing. After a recent controversial MTA vote, I was thrilled to hear from members who agreed, and disagreed, with the outcome. I responded to every member who contacted me - something I invite you to do at [weabrian@gmail.com](mailto:weabrian@gmail.com).

Our union is the sum of contributions of thousands of professionals. The power and success of our union only grows when every member and every member's ideas, voice and work are welcomed. I ask for your vote for an NEA Director who will do just that. **T**



**KYLE GEKOPI** Wellesley Educators Association

Our democratic union is where transformative change is born. Collectively, we MTA members

and our allies have passed the Fair Share Amendment, won equitable funding for K-12 public education, defeated the expansion of charter schools, and engaged in civil disobedience by reclaiming our right to strike. We are dreamers. We are doers. We are national leaders.

Our work is unfinished. I have been a proud union sibling and educator for 15 years. I have served as a union steward, secretary, benefits director and now the President

of the Wellesley Educators Association.

Time and again, I am reminded that power was not derived from the contract or the law, but from democracy, organizing and member action. Last year, the WEA successfully concluded a contract campaign that increased ESP salaries by 27%, expanded prep time, won just-cause for our ESP staff and expanded parental leave to 12 weeks for all parents, regardless of gender. Member education, solidarity and action were the only tools that worked.

We also must live our values. Last year, MTRS spent over \$200 million of our retirement money on service fees to Wall Street. This is a national problem, stemming from a lack of

member engagement and predatory financial practices. I have attended five Representative Assemblies sponsored by corporations who are hostile to unionism, to small-town America and to consumer health. We must re-invest our hard-earned money into social systems that work to genuinely expand racial, social, financial and educational equity.

If elected to the NEA Board, I will work tirelessly to build solidarity alliances across affiliates, and educate members on how to exercise their collective power to further breathe life into our education workers' movement. I thank you for reading and ask you to send me to the NEA to get to work for us! **T**



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## IN BRIEF

### Upcoming Book by Retired Member Examines Schools and Testing

Kathy Greeley, a longtime educator in Cambridge and a member of the MTA Retired Members Committee, has written a memoir that will be published in April by the University of Massachusetts Press. The book, "Testing Education, A Teacher's Memoir," recounts the impact of education reform over a nearly 40-year career that began in the early 1980s. Endorsements for the book come from authorities including MTA President Max Page, MTA Vice President Deb McCarthy and authors Diane Ravitch and Deborah Meier. Greeley writes: "I have worked with many talented, motivated teachers who care deeply about their students. But I recently realized that many of them have only known schools as they are today, stuck at that far, data-driven end of the spectrum. For newer teachers, having hours of standardized testing is the norm. Expecting kindergarteners to read is the norm. Giving homework to first and second graders is the norm. Teaching third graders how to write a literary essay (typed on the computer) is the norm. Scripted curriculum is the norm. Jumping from one seeming silver bullet to another is the norm. But it doesn't have to be."

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## LAST WORD

### **Caroline Coscia**

“ **President of FSU chapter at UMass Boston, senior lecturer in political science**

My concern for my campus is the increasing numbers of part-time associate lecturers. Instead of opening lines for tenure track and hiring more lecturers, the university is hiring the lowest level, called an associate lecturer, and some are being hired to teach three to four courses.

They have no benefits. They have no just cause, nothing for three years. They are contract, semester by semester. You have to work four semesters to get some sort of protection. The pay is, give or take, \$5,200 for a semester course.

You would think, as a community, that the administration would want to have a great relationship with the faculty because we are the ones in the classroom. But they like to try to divide us by rank and they try to keep costs down.”

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