

Teachers' Union President: Say 'No to Censorship, and Yes to Teaching the Truth'



National Education Association President Becky Pringle delivers a keynote address at the union's representative assembly in early July.

Moses Mitchell/National Education Association

When Becky Pringle took the virtual stage at the National Education Association's annual representative assembly last week to deliver her first keynote speech as the largest teachers' union's president, she had a lot of ground to cover.

Her members had just endured a grueling year of pandemic teaching, during

which [teachers' stress levels spiked](#)

and morale plummeted . The union is now supporting efforts to resume full-time, in-person instruction in the fall, after months in which teachers' unions were blamed for keeping schoolhouse

doors closed .

Also, a national fervor over how teachers talk about racism and the country's

painful past has

recently

taken root in statehouses across the

country

, and the NEA has begun

[taking steps to defend its members](#)

And on top of that, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, the nation's schools are grappling with how to dismantle deep-seated inequities between white students and students of color.

“In this moment, as we reflect on the obvious challenges and the often hidden or yet to be discovered opportunities, we must continue to imagine the possibilities,” Pringle told thousands of delegates in her speech. “We, the NEA, will lead a movement that unites not just our members, but the entire nation to reclaim public education as a common good, and then transform it into something it was never designed to be—a racially and socially just and equitable system that prepares every student, every one, to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.”

Pringle recently spoke to Education Week about the union's efforts to rethink school policing, the debate around critical race theory in the classroom, and resuming in-person instruction in the fall. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The NEA board of directors proposed a new business item that will [explore the role of law enforcement in education](#)

, which was approved by delegates. How do you feel about armed police officers in schools?

It was a comprehensive new business item that centered the safety of all of our students and centered race equity and economic equity. We know that our Black and brown communities are over-policed, which means our schools are over-policed. And we know that we have to create a safe environment that's conducive to teaching and learning.

So we are planning, through that new business item, to work on ensuring that all educators—from teachers to support staff to [school resource officers] to our bus drivers—are trained in restorative practices, which helps to not only center equity and safety, but also to value and respect all of the cultures that come into our classroom and work with the community and our students to ensure that when they come into our schools, they feel safe, they feel valued, they feel respected. We have a lot of work ahead to do all of those things so that our kids have a safe place where they can learn and grow and thrive.

An Education Week survey found that nearly a quarter of district leaders, principals, and teachers [don't believe that systemic racism exists](#)

. What do you make of that?

Well, as with anything else, when we talk about it, then we learn more. That's why we are focused on honesty and education because all of us need to do that continuous learning. We know that not everyone sees the systemic racism that exists within all of our social systems. So you will hear me talk about the structural racism across systems, not just the education system, because everything impacts our students' ability to learn.

We're talking about housing, and you know the history of redlining. We're talking about the economic system, and you know the economic injustice in this country. We know that our Black and brown and Indigenous communities don't have that kind of access to health care that others do, more privileged people do. All of those systems impact our students' ability to learn. And so those are the kinds of things that we are trying to make sure that all of our educators—and not just our educators, the entire community because we need everyone helping—continue to learn about, that structural racism that's built into all of our social systems. They compound on each other in ways that impact and limit access and opportunity for our kids. And so we just have to continuously make sure that everyone—educators, parents, community, all of them—have that information so that we can do better for our kids.

Now, more than 25 states have proposed efforts

to restrict how teachers talk about race in the classroom. What do you see as the NEA's role in those debates?

We're going to continue to talk about honesty and education. And here's why. We know that, first of all, our students are amazing, and they're smart. And we know how important it is to make sure they have the knowledge, skills, and ability to be those critical thinkers, to be able to come together and collectively solve so many of our societal problems. For that to happen, they have to have access to all of that information. They have to not only know the history of this country, but they also need to have the chance to develop their critical thinking skills in a way that they can come together to try to solve those problems.

If we don't allow them to have those difficult conversations about race and racism in this country, then they won't be prepared to do that. And so we'll continue to do that. Of course, we will continue to work with our educators and make sure that they have the ability to lift up their voices and to fight for their right to be honest in the education that they teach. We'll continue to work to make sure they

have those rights. We will continue to assess the legislation that's proposed, as well as the laws that have passed, which are very different in different states, to ensure that it's not limiting that right. For us, it is about saying no to censorship, and yes to teaching the truth. And that's what we're going to continue to do.

You've said before that the union is considering legal action over the restrictions. Could you expand on what that would look like?

We're considering all possibilities. We're in the process of making sure that we clearly understand the depth and breadth of the laws. They look very, very different. It's not only about the laws themselves, but also about the laws in those specific states that impact the curriculum in those states. It's a state-by-state analysis, and we're in the process of doing that. And we're going to just leave every avenue open, because we will defend our educators' right to teach the truth. We will do that.

In hindsight, do you feel like the union could have or should have come out stronger against this movement earlier?

We have been fighting against this since it started. We have supported our locals and state affiliates who are on the front lines of the attack in speaking up. And this is not new. We know that this is an attempt to not only stoke fear and division, but to draw attention away from the fact that the politicians pushing these laws have failed our schools. They have not, for decades, provided the kind of resources we need so that we can have those safe and equitable schools.

We're not confused by that. We know what's behind these laws, and we know why they're doing it. And we've been fighting that for certainly as long as I have been a leader within NEA. Every time they attempt to bring up some other way to divide us, and to stoke fear and to take [away] that light shining on them and what their failures have been, we will be there to call it out, to speak up, and to fight back.

As we look toward the next school year, given that COVID-19 is still circulating and [some states have prohibited mask mandates](#)

, are you concerned about the ability to have safe in-person instruction?

I'm not. I have worked really hard to ensure that we are ready for the fall to welcome back all of our students. The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention], I believe, will be issuing new guidelines shortly, and we have continuously said that we are following the science. We are looking at the guidelines that the CDC is using and working together to ensure that their students and educators are safe.

We don't know what the new strains will bring. But we've learned so much this year, and we're continuing to learn. We were so appreciative of the president prioritizing educators to be vaccinated. The vast majority of our teachers and other staff are vaccinated, so they feel safer to go back to school.

And with the additional funding for [COVID-19] testing, we'll be able to stay open and isolate cases quickly. And we will avoid any shutdowns in the future.

Would you support vaccination mandates for teachers or students?

The majority of our teachers are vaccinated. [[An NEA survey done in May](#)

found that 86 percent of members have had at least one shot, and only 9 percent don't plan to get vaccinated.] And the ones who aren't, we've really worked hard to educate them and provide them with the resources. What we learned early on was that [the vaccination process] was confusing, and they weren't able to get access. And so we worked on that. We did see [a gap in \[the vaccination rates of\] white teachers and Black teachers](#)

. We've targeted that, and with our recent survey [results], we've closed that gap, which is phenomenal. But it's working directly with those communities to try to bring down that hesitancy and make sure they have access and opportunity.

I'm not concerned about the mandates for the teachers, honestly. With [the vaccination rate] being so high now, for the most part, we're just talking about folks who can't because of a medical condition.

With the students, our position at the NEA has always been that the more people, including students, who are in that education environment are vaccinated—not just for COVID, but all of those vaccinations—the more healthy the entire community will be. And that continues to be our position. As with everything else, it is early to do that. [Only those 12 and older are currently able to be vaccinated.] We have to wait, follow the science. They're hard at work doing that testing [for youth vaccination] and just observing it, too—giving it time to see if there are any adverse impacts. And that's what we did in the past [with other vaccines], and then we talked about whether or not mandates were appropriate. At this point, we just don't know yet.