

## NEW LEADERS

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# THE INSIDER

THE PUBLICATION FOR AFT-WEST VIRGINIA MEMBERS

From the desk of...

AFT-WV President Kristie Skidmore



Hello! It has been a little over a month since I was elected to lead our great union and it has already been a whirlwind of activity.

For those members who haven't met me yet, I want to share a little about myself and my background. I was a Title I reading specialist at Coalton Elementary in Randolph County. I was in my 30th year of teaching before stepping away from the classroom to run for the office of AFT-WV president. I have served as the local AFT president for the past 7 years, and have also served as local secretary, vice-president and a building representative.

I'm honored to represent my fellow AFT-WV members, and excited for the future of our union. While we face many challenges in public education, we also can have great strength when we channel our energy and unify for our common purpose. Our power is each other, together!

If we haven't met yet, I hope to see you at a union meeting or event soon. Remember, YOU are the union! Attend a local meeting, share our PEIA petition, or ask a colleague to join AFT...member engagement makes our union stronger!

Wishing you and your loved ones a magical holiday season and healthy and happy new year!

In solidarity,

*Kristie*

## PEIA, student discipline among AFT-WV legislative priorities

The 2025 legislative session, which will not begin until February due to the inauguration of a new governor, is filled with unknowns, as numerous new legislators were elected in November and new leadership will be heading up many of the committees.

Based on the work of activists at the 2024 AFT-WV Legislative Summit (see full article on p. 3), addressing employee health insurance was already a legislative priority. After the passage of the PEIA plan for fiscal year 2026 by the Finance Board in December, the issue has reached critical status.

Earlier this fall, AFT-WV and the West Virginia Education Association launched a joint campaign to call on legislators to take action during the 2025 session and stabilize PEIA. Ultimately, a dedicated funding stream for PEIA is needed and the legislature is the only entity that can identify and appropriate the money.

Since November, AFT-WV and WVEA have been asking for members to make their voices heard, with an on-line petition campaign (scan the code at the bottom of this page and sign!) and two legislative calls to action during the November and December interim sessions. AFT-WV and WVEA local presidents have presented to



AFT-Marshall Co. president/ AFT-WV vice-president Josh Gary (seated, left) poses with MCEA president Stephanie Brown and the Marshall County Board of Education after passage of the PEIA resolution.

local boards of education and secured the passage of a resolution in support of our efforts to stabilize PEIA in almost every county. Additional activities are being scheduled for the coming months, and we encourage education employees to participate in

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SIGN ONLINE PETITION

SCAN  
AND SIGN  
THE PEIA  
PETITION!

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## New state leaders elected, activists honored at AFT-WV Convention

Charleston was the site for the 2024 AFT-WV Convention, where activists approved the 2025 Legislative Agenda (see p.3), approved resolutions, and elected a new leadership team for the union.

Delegates voted for the union's new leadership for the next three years. Kristie Skidmore was elected as the new president of AFT-WV. Skidmore is the long-time president of AFT-Randolph and has served on the Executive Board since 2017. Elected as other officers of AFT-WV were Josh Gary, vice-president (Marshall), Justin Altizer, treasurer (Lincoln), and Angie Turkelson, secretary (Putnam). Elected as executive board members-at-large were: Lynnea Atkinson (Jefferson), Andy Bird (Putnam), Meg Britt (Kanawha), Brittany Dolly (Clay), Jake Fertig (Kanawha), John Foley (Marion), Tracy McClanahan, (Cabell), Tena McElwain, (Monongalia Service), Greg Merritt (Wood), Amy Neal (Cabell), Michelle Tenney (Randolph), Carol

Roskos (Monongalia), Amelia Wolfe (Wood), and Stacey Strawderman, Ex-Officio (Retiree).

The awards ceremony is always a special time to acknowledge members who work hard for their union and communities. Three members were honored with the Apple Award for "making a difference" in their union and community: Andy Bird, Bill McCloud and Debbie Arthur. Fred Albert was presented with the Lifetime Service Award to recognize his years of leading the union on the local and state levels. AFT-Cabell was recognized with the Pride of the Union Award for working locally to pass their school levy after its failure in the spring.



Newly-elected officers and executive board members are sworn in during the AFT-WV Convention.

The Judy Hale Leadership Award for vision, commitment and leadership was presented to newly-elected president Kristie Skidmore. Al Shanker Awards, for courage and conviction, were presented to Senator Mike Caputo for his career in public service, and to the Wetzel County AFT and WVEA locals, for their joint grievance win.

## AFT-WV and WVEA Merger Update

AFT-WV and WVEA have been participating in ongoing discussions about merging the two groups into a single entity for approximately two years now.

Many meetings and activities have occurred during this period to solicit local leader opinion as well as rank and file member feedback on a potential merger. This input is helping guide the two organizations to determine what the priorities, structure, and governance of the new potential organization should look like.

Both executive boards and governing bodies have unanimously approved the values statement for the new organization and a special convention was held February 24, 2024, where delegates also approved the values statement. The values statement identifies the core beliefs and tenets of a potential new organization.

This approval allowed the leadership to proceed with the next steps of creating the foundational documents and business plan needed for operation.

Last March, activists from both organizations met to participate in a day-long session regarding ideas for a newly-created organization. A separate meeting was also held for the two staffs to meet and discuss how each operate now and potentially in a merged union.

In October, AFT-WV and WVEA commissioned a researcher to conduct online focus groups of each group's members, as well as non-members to obtain their opinions on their current membership (if they belonged to an organization) and what they would like a potential new union to prioritize. The groups also gave their opinions on a possible new name and logo for a new merged union. Additionally,

a survey was conducted of a larger pool of participants to assess their opinions on a myriad of topics related to a merger.

The leadership will continue to meet in the new year to work out details, and a special convention will convene on March 29, 2025 for each organization, where the delegates will vote on the merger. The hope is to have the new organization in place by September 1, 2025. That is a lofty goal and there is much work that still needs to be done but we are collectively making progress toward the date.

Both organizations believe our combined forces will better position us to advocate for education employees, and public education as we move into the future.

### AFT activists meet to determine legislative priorities

AFT-WV members from across the state came together for the 2024 Legislative Summit, held September 15-16 at the AFT-WV office in Charleston. The purpose of the day and a half event was to draft the union’s priorities and goals for the 2025 legislative session.

After enjoying an evening of fellowship at Friday’s reception, members got right to work on Saturday morning, reviewing last year’s legislative session and recommitting to the overarching issues that remain most important to education and public employees. Long-term funding for PEIA, salaries and addressing student discipline were among the top priorities identified.

The group also selected positive education bills that, despite having bipartisan support, did not reach passage during the previous session. AFT-WV hopes to work with the sponsors of these bills to create the momentum for passage this year.

The group’s recommendations were used to draft a concise Legislative Agenda, which was approved by delegates at the 2024 AFT-WV Convention in November in Charleston. To read the full 2025 Legislative Agenda, visit [www.aftwv.org](http://www.aftwv.org).



Attendees at this year’s Legislative Summit work on proposals in break out groups.

### AFT-Wetzel Co. and Wetzel Co. Education Association members team up for big grievance victory

Congratulations to AFT-Wetzel County and the Wetzel County Education Association for a settlement win in late September for a joint grievance involving 67 members!

The issue involved the mandated use of a specific electronic platform (Schoolgy) for their lesson plans. The organizations felt the mandated use of this platform, which could be viewable publicly via the internet, violated state law regarding lesson plan requirements. Additionally, it raised other concerns like student data privacy for lesson plan modifications noted for specific students that may be contained within the lesson plans.

The leadership and staff representatives for both organizations met with the superintendent prior to the Board of Education meeting on September 24th and were able to reach an agreement on the issue. It was agreed that use of this electronic platform for lesson plans would not required if the organizations dropped the grievance.

Additionally, there were numerous educators attending the Board of Education meeting on the same evening

in favor of the employees’ position on the issue. The president and vice-president of the Marshall, Wetzel, Tyler Central Labor Council/ AFL-CIO also attended the Board meeting in support of the grievants and were planning to speak on the issue had the settlement not been reached.

AFT-WV Staff Representative Frank Caputo and WVEA Representative Lisa Summers seamlessly handled the monumental task of a 67-person grievance.

“This was a great win for the teachers of Wetzel County and a perfect example of the strength of both organizations working together. It was a true team effort, both from the local union leadership and the state organization reps,” explained Caputo.



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## Your union: Helping you with student loans

We hear about it all the time in our student debt clinics: Our members who are struggling to pay off their student loan debt simply don't know who to turn to for help or are overwhelmed at the where to even start.

Meet Summer—an online resource, started by student loan borrowers who wanted to help others avoid bad information and bad actors in the student loan market. Summer harnesses the expertise of public policy experts to optimize borrower options, and it uses technology to make the process easy and secure. The AFT trusts Summer to help our members navigate the student loan repayment landscape.

Using Summer's online student loan management platform, AFT members who enroll in this free member benefit can:

- Enroll in income-driven repayment plans and manage annual income recertifications for these plans;

- Complete the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Employment Certification Form and manage the PSLF certification and application process;
- Find other options for loan forgiveness programs, including state- and occupation-based loan forgiveness, and get assistance in applying for them; and
- Talk through options with Summer's borrower success team so they can understand how to best maximize their loan repayment and forgiveness options.

Thousands of AFT members have already joined Summer, reducing their monthly payments by hundreds of dollars a month and saving tens of thousands over the life of their loans!

Are you ready to get your student loans under control today? Summer's got your back! Enroll for free today at <https://www.aft.org/benefits/summer>.

## AFT Benefits: Scholarship opportunities for members and dependents

AFT has two scholarship programs available to help members and their children achieve their educational dreams.

The AFT Robert G. Porter Scholars Program offers four 4-year, \$8,000 post-secondary scholarships to students who are dependents of AFT members, as well as 10 one-time \$1,000 grants to AFT members to assist with their continuing education.

The 2025 Porter Scholars application period is now open and the application deadline has not been announced yet, but typically is March or April.

Because AFT is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, members are also eligible to

apply for the Union Plus Scholarship Program.

Since 1991, the Union Plus Scholarship Program has awarded more than \$4.2 million to students of working families who want to begin or continue their post-secondary education. Award amounts range from \$500 to \$4000. Applications are due before 12 PM on January 31, 2025.

There have been several winners from West Virginia of both scholarships in the past few years.

For more details and eligibility requirements for both scholarship programs, visit <https://www.aft.org/member-benefits/education-learning-opportunities/scholarships>.

## PEIA, discipline

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the various opportunities planned as they arise.

“While we were able to score a few small positive changes with the version of the plan passed by the PEIA Finance Board, it's still a plan that is financially devastating for many education and public employees. The solution to this issue lies solely in the hands of our legislature, and if we want the legislature to address PEIA, we must make our voices heard. Contact your legislators and have a real conversation with them about how this hurts you and your family,” explained AFT-WV President Kristie Skidmore.

Another legislative priority will be student behavior and discipline. AFT-WV has witnessed an alarming increase in disruptive behavior as well as the number of teachers and service personnel who are being physically assaulted by students.

A student discipline bill almost passed during the 2024 legislative session but fell short in the final hours of the session. At the December interim meetings, AFT-WV member Morgan Elmore from Randolph County testified before the Joint Committee on Education about the escalation of violent behavior by students, detailing the constant physical assaults she has experienced by children as young as pre-K level.

“Behavioral disruptions impact every child in our schools, not just the student who is acting out. It's also becoming a reason that many education employees are leaving the profession. During the upcoming legislative session, we hope to work with lawmakers to get a bill across the finish line that will help both educators and our students, explained Skidmore.”