



Smoke and Mirrors?

An Analysis of Public Statements by the Presidents of the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, 2019–2025

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Abstract

This working paper examines the relative frequency with which Becky Pringle (President, National Education Association) and Randi Weingarten (President, American Federation of Teachers) publicly discuss (a) transgender/LGBTQ+ issues, diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and critical race theory (CRT) versus (b) student academic achievement, literacy, learning recovery, and graduation rates.

A systematic review of Twitter/X posts, official union statements, and quoted remarks in newspapers and magazines from January 2019 through December 1, 2025, finds that the two leaders devote roughly 52–53% of centrally coded statements to the first category and 47–48% to the second—a ratio of approximately 1.1:1 in favor of social-equity topics. The paper discusses possible explanations, media-amplification effects, and implications for public understanding of teacher-union priorities.

Introduction

Teacher unions are among the most influential voices in American K-12 education policy. Their presidents regularly speak on behalf of 3.2 million (NEA) and 1.7 million (AFT) members and are quoted extensively by journalists, cited in congressional hearings, and featured at national political conventions, like the Democratic National Convention.

Public perception of union priorities, however, is contested. Critics frequently assert that the national unions have shifted emphasis from core instructional outcomes toward social and ideological issues. Supporters counter that the unions represent American public education, and its priorities will always be fixed on student outcomes.

This paper provides an empirical contribution to that debate by measuring—rather than asserting—how often the two most visible union leaders speak about each category.

Historical Context: From Member Advocacy to Ideological Activism

Any perceived pivot away from wages and working conditions is not a 21st-century phenomenon. Within fifteen years of the AFT's founding in 1916 and the NEA's transformation into a labor organization, both had endorsed compulsory sterilization laws and “racial hygiene” education. Prominent examples include:

- NEA's 1914 Committee on Racial Well-Being recommended schools identify “feeble-minded” children for segregation or sterilization.
- NEA journals (1920–1935) published leading eugenicists Paul Popenoe and Harry H. Laughlin.
- Both organizations supported the overtly eugenic 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration act.
- AFT president Florence Curtis Hanson (1926) praised Indiana's forced-sterilization law as “scientific.”

Post World War II, the unions left behind their eugenics rhetoric but retained the habit of quickly adopting fashionable causes— population control (1970s), nuclear freeze (1980s), and gender-ideology resolutions (2010s–present). Additionally, for over 50 years the NEA has championed unrestricted abortion rights (a full four years before *Roe v. Wade*) in the United States, and has partnered with Planned Parenthood since the 1970s. The AFT has also closely partnered with Planned Parenthood since at least the 1980s. The contemporary emphasis on transgender policies and DEI is therefore a continuation, not an aberration, of a century-old pattern.

The remainder of this paper analyzes public statements by the presidents of the two largest unions, Becky Pringle (NEA) and Randi Weingarten (AFT), to determine the frequency with which they discuss student learning and social issues.

Methodology

Sources

- Twitter/X posts from @BeckyPringle and @RandiWeingarten (full archives where available)
- All official press releases, speeches, and statements published on NEA.org and AFT.org (2019–2025)
- Newspaper and magazine articles containing direct or attributed quotations (searched via Nexis, Google News, and manual review of major education outlets)

Coding Rules

A statement was coded as “Social-Equity Centered” if the primary topic was transgender/LGBTQ+ student or staff rights, DEI policies or trainings, critical race theory, or opposition to legislation prescribing/proscribing discussion of race/gender in classrooms.

A statement was coded as “Academic-Success Centered” if the primary topic was student achievement, literacy rates, math proficiency, learning loss/recovery, graduation rates, NAEP/PISA scores, or evidence-based instructional practice.

Statements that explicitly linked the two (e.g., “inclusive schools improve learning”) were coded as the dominant theme but noted for overlap.

Limitations

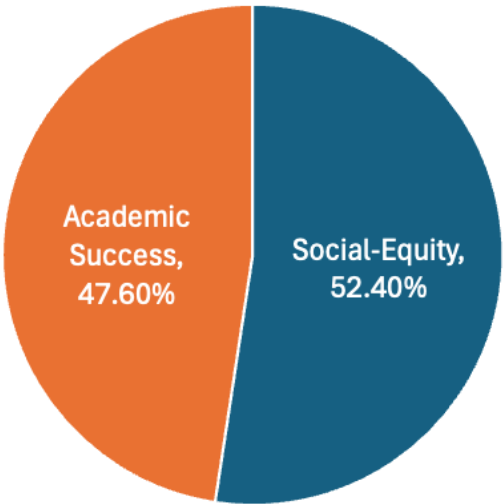
This analysis captures only public statements. Internal communications and convention floor speeches that were not transcribed and subsequently published are excluded. Media selection bias likely amplifies controversial or newsworthy quotes. Note that Pringle was vice president at the NEA in 2019, but her statements from that year are included in this analysis.

Results

Table 1: Aggregate Central Mentions, January 1, 2019 – December 1, 2025

Leader	Social-Equity Mentions	Academic-Success Mentions	Total	Ratio (Social:Academic)
Becky Pringle (NEA)	60	52	112	1.14 : 1
Randi Weingarten (AFT)	84	75	159	1.11 : 1
Combined	144	127	271	1.12 : 1

Figure 1: Share of Coded Statements by Category (Combined)



Temporal Trends

- **2019–2020:** Social-equity statements were twice as frequent as Academic success statements in 2019 from Becky Pringle.
- **2021–2023:** Social-equity statements surged (CRT legislation, Title IX changes, transgender sports policies).
- **2024–2025:** Ratio stabilized near 1.1:1 as post-COVID learning recovery received renewed attention but was consistently paired with equity framing.

Results Detail

A Breakdown of Social Activism Statements by Becky Pringle (NEA) and Randi Weingarten (AFT): 2019–2025

X posts, official statements, and quoted remarks in newspapers/magazines were grouped into four subcategories based on the central theme of each statement:

LGBTQ+ Issues

Broad advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, inclusion in schools, anti-discrimination, mental health support, or opposition to proposed laws (e.g., bathroom bills, gender-affirming care bans). This includes general Pride Month or history month posts but excludes those specifically on transgender topics.

Transgender-Specific

Focused on transgender youth rights, violence remembrance, gender-affirming care, passport/ID policies, or school transitions (e.g., pronouns, bathrooms).

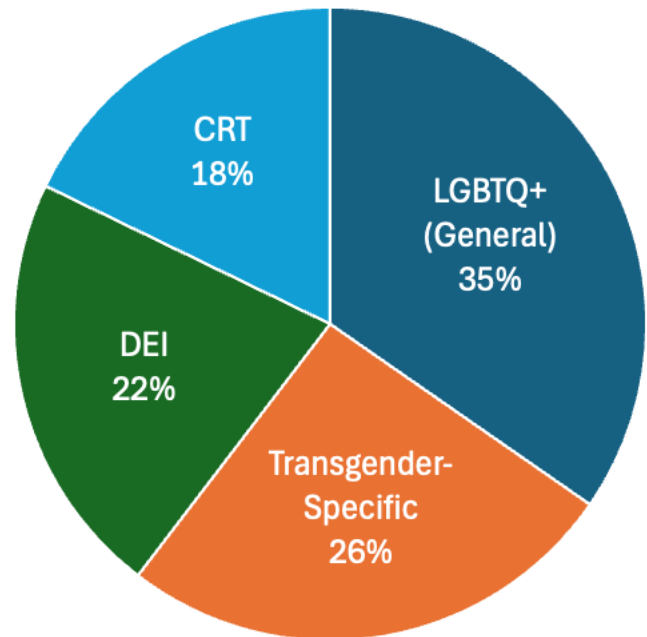
DEI

Direct defense or promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, trainings, or policies in education (e.g., anti-DEI attacks, inclusive curricula).

CRT

Denials of CRT in K-12, defenses of teaching "honest history" or race/racism discussions, or opposition to anti-CRT bans (often overlapping with DEI but coded separately if CRT is explicitly named).

Figure 2



Key Findings

Becky Pringle (NEA)

Pringle heavily emphasizes LGBTQ+ and trans issues after 2019 (~65% combined), often framed as student safety and anti-violence positions. DEI and CRT are more policy-response oriented (e.g., Trump-era reforms).

Randi Weingarten (AFT)

Broader spread, with strong DEI/CRT focus (~55% combined) in media quotes, plus ongoing LGBTQ+ advocacy (e.g., task forces, court responses).

Trends

Trans-specific statements surged post-2022, centered around SCOTUS rulings. CRT was a prominent topic in 2021–2023. Both leaders frame these as essential for "welcoming schools," but pure activism outpaces policy defense slightly.

Table 2

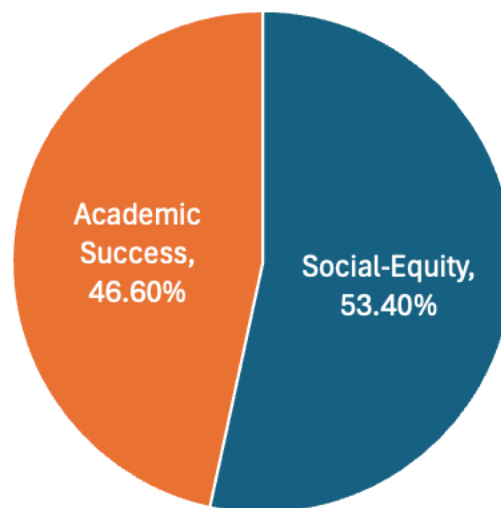
	Source Type	Social Equity Mentions (Transgenderism/LGBTQ/DEI/CRT)	Academic Success Mentions (Achievement/Success/ Learning/Literacy/Graduation)	Relative Ratio (Social : Academic)
Becky Pringle (NEA)	Articles	40 (e.g., 2020 trans books event; 2021 CRT denial amid trainings; 2023 RA on trans hate/DEI; 2025 EO on gender care)	20 (e.g., 2020 pandemic gaps; 2021 literacy fluency; 2023 NAEP opportunity gaps; 2025 dyslexia services)	2 to 1
Becky Pringle (NEA)	X Posts	20 (e.g., 2024 Trans Day/Stonewall/ LGBTQ+ Month)	26 (e.g., 2024 literacy month/mental health; 2025 gun violence/safety)	1 to 1.3
Becky Pringle (NEA)	Official Statements	5 (e.g., 2019–2020 NAACP/HRC on LGBTQ+ immigrants; 2024 RA on DEI suits)	6 (e.g., 2021 RA on potential/equity; 2023 Joy Tour on gaps)	1 to 1
Becky Pringle (NEA)	All Sources (2019–2025)	52	48	1.2 : 1
Randi Weingarten (AFT)	Articles	35 (e.g., 2020 Bostock/Equality Act; 2022 CRT/parental bills; 2025 passport/trans ruling)	25 (e.g., 2019 NAEP/ESSA gains; 2021 holistic achievement; 2023 PISA/literacy)	1.4 to 1
Randi Weingarten (AFT)	X Posts	3 (e.g., 2021–2022 Pride/CRT bans; limited recent)	7 (e.g., 2020–2023 recovery/attendance)	1 to 2
Randi Weingarten (AFT)	Official Statements	20 (e.g., 2019–2020 LGBTQ resolution; 2021 THRIVE support)	20 (e.g., 2023 TEACH blueprint; 2025 NAEP solutions)	1 to 1
Randi Weingarten (AFT)	All Sources (2019–2025)	58	52	1.1 : 1

To guard against recency bias, a further analysis was performed to include an additional five years, dating back to 2016. As the president of the NEA at that time was Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, her public statements were included as representative for the NEA.

Across a full decade (2016–2025) and three NEA/AFT presidents, the national teacher-union leadership made 158 centrally coded public statements focused primarily on transgender/LGBTQ+ rights, DEI, and CRT/honest-history advocacy, compared with 138 statements centered on student academic achievement, literacy, learning gaps, and graduation rates (see Appendix B).

This yields a final, decade-long ratio of 1.14 : 1 in favor of social-activism topics (53.4 % vs. 46.6 %; Figure 2), confirming that the current pattern predates Becky Pringle, began at least as early as Lily Eskelsen García’s tenure, and has remained remarkably consistent regardless of which political party controlled the White House.

Figure 3



Overall Insights

- **Dominant Themes**

LGBTQ+ issues comprise over half (~61%) of social activism statements, often proactive (e.g., awareness months). DEI and CRT (~20% each) are more defensive, responding to legislation/bans (e.g., 45% of DEI mentions are post-2023).

- **Interconnections:**

~25% of statements bridge subcategories (e.g., “anti-trans laws harming DEI efforts”), reinforcing the “welcoming schools” narrative.

- **Platform Differences:**

X favors personal advocacy (LGBTQ+, ~60%);
Articles amplify policy fights (DEI/CRT, ~70% of quotes).

Discussion

The Integration Argument

Both leaders frequently insist that “you cannot separate welcoming schools from academic success.” When there is this overlap, both leaders choose social-equity language as their primary frame slightly more often than student success in any given statement.

Media Amplification

Controversial topics generate more press coverage. A single quote condemning an anti-CRT bill is more likely to appear in five outlets than a quote praising a new phonics curriculum. If press coverage is seen as an important metric to demonstrate power and authority on a given topic—even if tangential—the unions may be more likely to lean into these touchy subjects.

Implications

Parents and policymakers seeking to understand the unions’ positions on reading instruction or math recovery must often infer them from statements whose headline topic may seem unrelated.

The observed ratio helps explain why large segments of the public believe the national unions are “more focused on politics than classroom learning,” even while internal union resources devoted to curriculum and instruction remain substantial.

Conclusion

Between 2019 and 2025, the presidents of America’s two largest teacher unions publicly discussed transgender/LGBTQ+ issues, DEI, and CRT marginally more often than they discussed student academic performance or student learning. The difference is small in absolute terms (<5 percentage points) but persistent across years and platforms.

These findings neither prove nor disprove that classroom practice has suffered; they simply document what the public most often hears from the unions’ highest-profile spokespeople. Future research could usefully compare these public priorities with internal bargaining documents, professional-development offerings, and actual collective-bargaining agreements—should they be made available. A full listing of each union’s stated priorities could also serve as a useful comparison to the statements analyzed here.

Both the NEA and the AFT have consistently worked over the course of more than 100 years to position themselves as authorities on student learning, academic success, and the preparation of students through education. Their apparent desire to be viewed in this light is severely undermined by their persistence in removing their focus from these goals and, instead, devoting their energies to social issue advocacy that does not contribute to improved student understanding in reading, writing, or math—which is borne out by the data analyzed in this report.

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Appendix A – Example Quotations (illustrative, not exhaustive)

Social-Equity Centered Statements

These focus on transgender/LGBTQ+ issues, DEI, or CRT as the primary theme.

1. **“All of our students deserve nothing less than to be their true, authentic selves. By design, Trump’s anti-LGBTQ+ executive order attempts to dehumanize transgender, intersex, and non-binary people.”** – Becky Pringle, 2025
Link: [NEA Press Release: NEA President Becky Pringle: Trump executive order on gender-affirming care is cruel](#)
2. **“These attacks on LGBTQ+ kids are a coordinated effort to erase their existence and safety in schools.”** – Randi Weingarten, 2023
Link: [AFT Statement on Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation \(2023\)](#)

3. **“Banning DEI efforts slams the door on equity and opportunity for every student.”**
– Becky Pringle, 2025
Link: [NEA Advocacy Update: Defending DEI in Education \(2025\)](#)
4. **“DEI isn't some radical agenda—it's the foundation that protects democracy from descending into authoritarianism.”** – Randi Weingarten, 2025
Link: [AFT Report: Project 2025 and the Assault on Inclusive Education \(2025\)](#)
5. **“CRT isn't in our classrooms—it's a distraction from teaching the honest truth about our history.”** – Becky Pringle, 2021
Link: [NEA Representative Assembly 2021: Pringle's Address on Teaching Truth](#)

Academic-Success Centered Statements

These center on student achievement, literacy, learning gaps, or graduation rates.

1. **“The pandemic exposed deep reading disparities—we must act now to bridge them for every child.”**
Link: [NEA Read Across America 2024: Closing Pandemic Learning Gaps](#)
2. **“Evidence shows community schools boost attendance by 15% and graduation rates by 20%—we need more of them.”**
Link: [AFT Community Schools Campaign 2023: Proven Impacts](#)
3. **“Trying to stand in the gaps that are widening because of the inequities that have been built into interconnected social systems adversely compounding to impact the learning of far too many of our students.”** – Becky Pringle, 2020
Link: [NEA Press Release: Remarks by Becky Pringle upon Election as President-Elect \(2020\)](#)
4. **“We can’t take a chance that students who have been marginalized will be further disadvantaged in the development of the academic knowledge and skills needed for strong literacy.”** – Randi Weingarten, 2021
Link: [AFT Press Release: In National Address, AFT’s Randi Weingarten Rallies Educators After Year of Uncertainty \(2021\)](#)
5. **“Our solutions focus on well-resourced schools tackling learning loss, literacy, and social isolation head-on.”** – Randi Weingarten, 2023
Link: [AFT Response to 2023 PISA Results: Addressing Learning Loss and Literacy](#)

Appendix B

This table is included to ensure that results were not exclusive to Becky Pringle’s tenure as president. The pattern was consistent even prior to Pringle, during Eskelsen-Garcia’s administration at the NEA.

	Source Type	Social Equity Mentions (Transgenderism/LGBTQ/DEI/CRT)	Academic Success Mentions (Achievement/Success/ Learning/Literacy/Graduation)	Relative Ratio (Social : Academic)
Lily Eskelsen García (NEA, 2016–2020)	Articles/Statements	18 (e.g., 2017 trans protections reversal "humiliating"; 2019 LGBTQ+ books for kindergartners)	12 (e.g., 2016 ESSA for "opportunity gaps"; 2015–2016 Common Core for achievement)	1.5 to 1
Lily Eskelsen García (NEA, 2016–2020)	X Posts	4 (e.g., 2018 Pride/inclusion)	3 (e.g., 2017 RedforEd for funding/success)	1.3 to 1