



# UPDATE

American Federation of Teachers Local 604, AFL-CIO

www.aftlocal604.org

December/January 2023-24

## One down, one to go

# Invest in Kids defeated

By Bill Briggs, President of Local 604

After months of speculation on whether the Invest in Kids program would sunset or be extended, we now know that it's dead. Local 604 and the IFT invested a lot of time and effort into making sure state funds stay with public schools and do not go to schools—private, Catholic, or charter—who do not live by the same standards we must follow. In other words, schools that do not have to educate every child who enters the doors.

Even with the taste of success fresh in our minds, we cannot rest. Why? We still do not have a solution to the Tier 2 pensions problems. Both the IFT and IEA have been working together to scale back the harshness of the program that went into effect on January 1, 2011.

With Tier 1, teachers in Illinois can retire at age 55 with 35 years of experience in the system and no penalty. A Tier 2 member may retire at age 62 with at least 10 years experience but will receive retirement benefits reduced by 6% for every year the member is under age 67. In other words, this individual would work seven additional years with a pension reduced 30%.

In the last Update, we detailed discrimination, like schools that would not “employ teachers or admit students who are homosexual or bisexual.” But it did not end with discrimination. Catholic schools are not legally obligated to implement all services recommended on an IEP.

IFT president Dan Montgomery said, “Educators and the unions that represent them will always fight for our public schools and the students they serve. There is a nationwide push to divert public dollars from our public schools through vouchers and voucher-like programs like tax credit scholarships and education saving accounts.”

He went on to say that by allowing the program to sunset, “Illinois lawmakers chose to put our public schools first and end the state program that subsidized private, mostly religious schools, many of which have discriminatory policies.”

To help convince legislators to follow through on Governor JB Pritzker’s platform promise to end the program, Local 604 members sent over 1,000 postcards to representatives Natalie Manley, Lance Yednock, and Anthony DeLuca and state senators Patrick Joyce and Meg Cappel.

Valley View, the largest Local 604 council, sent out hundreds of cards from their members. Council president Renee Calabrese said, “I am glad to see that lawmakers finally did what is best for all of our students in Illinois by ending the Invest in Kids voucher program. Students and staff in Illinois can’t afford to have already underfunded public schools receiving less due to a system that is designed to have funds intended for public education funneled to non-public schools. Thank you to all my members from the Valley View Council and all of our IFT members who took the time to fill out postcards to send to lawmakers last month.”

So, what does this mean? The \$75M a year in tax revenue that was ear-marked for Invest in Kids can be put toward the 80% of Illinois public schools that are not adequately funded. It also means that those who were donating and receiving huge tax breaks can continue to donate, just directly to a school they want to support.

With this albatross gone, the Illinois legislature, next Spring, should concentrate on creating a more level playing field for Tier 2 members. Although it is not realistic to believe it will go away, our elected officials can make this pension plan more attractive.

Now, many of Local 604’s councils have the majority of their members in Tier 2 pension plans. Statewide, it’s about 50/50. But by 2026, the projections show 85,154 in Tier 2 and 77,921 in Tier 1; and by 2032 the difference is 113,410 to 49665.

Remember, it is never too early to contact your state representatives and senators to express your concerns and demand something positive be done.

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**2** Democrats Strong in November Election  
By Bill Briggs

**3** Teachers’ Retirement System Graph

**4** Hazardous Conditions  
By attorney James Ridge

## School boards front & center

# Democrats strong in November elections



Bill Briggs

Until they watched the evening news, many in Illinois forgot that November 8<sup>th</sup> was election day in some states. For me, it was great not being attacked with the political ads ruining my favorite TV shows. That doesn't mean, though, that key issues were not being decided in other states that could have a major impact on the 2024 campaigns.

Three positive results and one questionable action emerged from the process. Yes, I was happy with the results, but when I saw what was continuing to happen in the school board elections, it reinforced that we cannot rest and that elections matter.

After a CNN poll that showed Trump leading Biden 49%-45%, some Democrats were concerned about how the voters would respond. Yes, the same poll took a different turn if and when Trump is convicted in any of the current legal issues he has; Biden gained 6% points.

But the poll also made me wonder about their validity. I recently read that to be valid, at least 1,000 people needed to be contacted with 5,000 the most accurate. It has only been within the last 15 years that cell phones were included when pollsters reached out. I, for one, have never been contacted nor do I know of anyone who has.

With all of the bed wetting and hand wringing, how did the voters react to the recent polls?

+And respond they did. In Ohio, a referendum against a woman's right to choose was soundly defeated, like in every other state where the GOP has attempted to ban or limit abortion rights.

+In Kentucky, Democrat Andy Beshear won by over 6 percentage points over the state attorney general who had the backing of Trump, Mitch McConnell, and other high-profile Republicans. It is also a state that Trump won by 26 points.

+In Virginia, political pundits thought GOP Governor Glenn Youngkin would use the results of a positive election to push his claim he would be a solid alternative to Trump against Biden. That did not happen as he failed to recapture the Senate and lost control of the House.

-And with these positives, inevitably there had to be at least one negative. In Mississippi's largest county with a large minority base, they ran out of ballots with a hotly-contested race for governor. The AP reported that it was unclear how many people left without voting, but the incumbent Tate Reeves was re-elected.

As we have seen recently, school board elections are becoming more political. Book banning, transgender bathrooms, and pronoun preference have all been in the news, especially in GOP-controlled states. *USA Today* reminded me of what former White House strategist Steve Bannon reported: "the path to save the nation began at the school board level."

What did he mean; start local and build so that if Trump is elected in 2024, their initiative—Project 2025—can be put into place. According to Johnathan Swan in his July 17<sup>th</sup> *New York Times* article, this frightening plan "would perform a swift takeover of the entire executive branch under the maximalist version of the unitary executive theory—a theory proposing the president of the United States has absolute power in the executive branch—upon inauguration." Scary, right!

Last year, Local 604 and the IFT were involved in some key races with a strong success rate, but that is in the past. We need to realize what is happening now.

In Denver, the school board race spending climbed to roughly \$1.9 million with three seats on the ballot. All over the country, parents were concerned about what type of schools their children would be attending and who would be making the decisions that would affect their education.

And for the most part, candidates that we could support were successful. They avoided the hot-button issues the right likes to throw out and, as *USA Today* reported, concentrated on recovering pandemic-era learning loss, finding ways to retain quality teachers, offering ideas to entice more into the teaching field, or vowing to keep politics off the board.

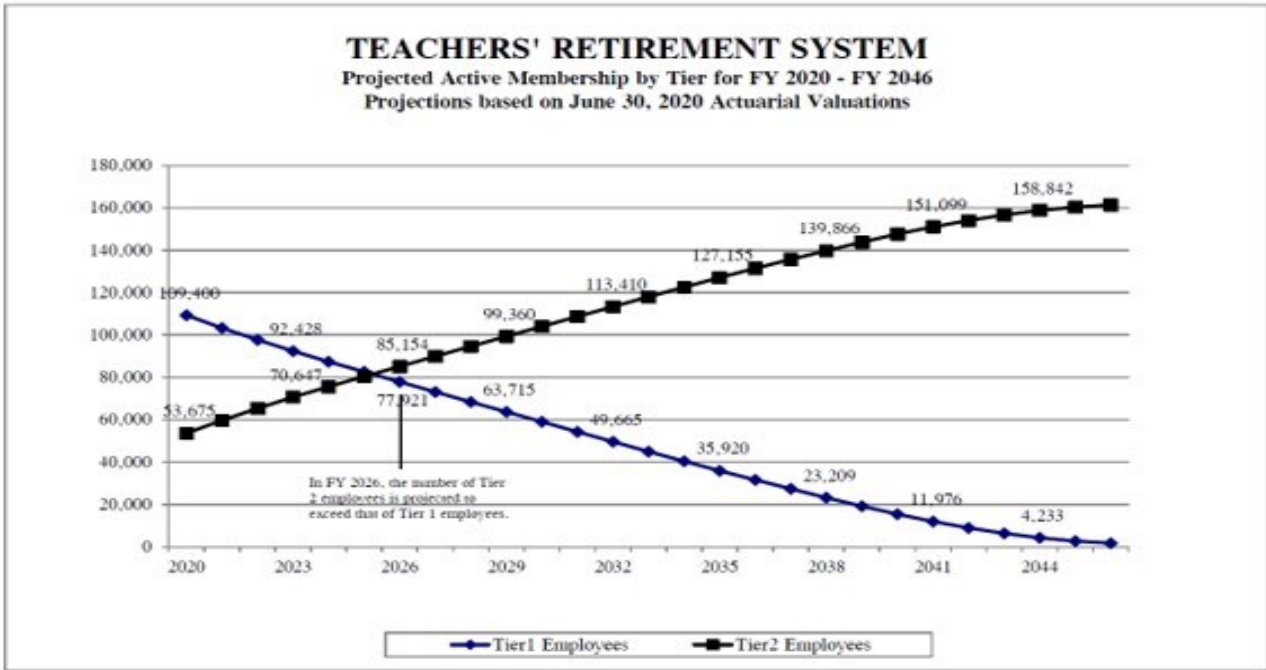
AFT President Randi Weingarten reacted to the election results, "These results underline what families have been telling us for the last two years: They don't want culture wars; they want safe and welcoming public schools where their kids can recover and thrive." She continued, "Where extremists peddled fear, voters wanted hope. Where extremists tried to smear and divide, voters demanded real solutions."

But the norm going forward has been paved. Inherently divisive topics will continue to surface in future school board elections. From mask mandates and accommodations for transgendered individuals to equity initiatives and rewriting the history of enslaved Americans, our work is cut out for us.

We have gone through at least one decade of bashing of public education. We have seen communities that were once proud of their schools turn their backs on the children. Some have even asked, "why should I have to support the schools? I don't have anyone attending them."

So, before we rest, it is time to take a good look at all the good we do and take a page from our coaches. We need to be vocal about the importance of public education, the American backbone that built the middle class.

It's not an impossible task, but it cannot be put off because we are too busy. It needs to be front and center.



Source: Illinois Commission of Government Forecasting and Accountability Special Report on Pensions, July 2021: <https://cgfa.ilga.gov/Upload/FinConditionILStateRetirementSysJuly2021.pdf>

## AFT Local 604 Scholarships

For information on the Jacqueline B. Vaughn scholarship as well as Paul O. Johnson and the new, College Student scholarships, please go to [www.aftlocal604.org](http://www.aftlocal604.org) ... go to Resources ... scroll down to Scholarships. **Deadline is February 1, 2024** for the applications to be in our office or post marked by that date.



## Fannie May Candies For AFT Local 604 Members

Fannie May Discount is now 20%  
You can use them at any Fannie May store for any items.

You can enjoy this savings ALL year long. They're perfect for the holidays, birthdays, anniversaries or any other special occasion. Just mail your check made payable to AFT Local 604 for the total amount and include \$1.00 postage/handling fee to the address below if you want us to mail to you or stop by the local office to pick up for no additional expense to you.

Please indicate which gift card(s) you would like.

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PHONE: 815/725-0402

# Your rights under the workers' compensation act

by James M. Ridge, attorney at law

## Workers' Compensation for Parking Lot Cases with Hazardous Conditions

Winter is here again besieging facilities with ice, snow and melting pools of water. Every year, thousands of teachers are injured in slip and fall accidents. One in every five of these falls results in significant injury such as broken bones or head injuries. A slip and fall injury occurring because of a hazardous condition, either in a parking lot or in an interior entrance/hallway, may constitute a work injury. These cases are decided on a factual basis, and you should consult with an attorney to discuss compensability. Please remember that immediately following a work accident your employer will turn over the information to an insurance company. An adjuster will investigate the claim to work on the employer's behalf to deny the claim. Avoid providing them with recorded statements as they are coached to ask you nuisance questions which are designed to under mind your claim.

**After a slip and fall on ice and snow, always follow these three important steps:**

### Report The Fall

A slip and fall on ice and snow often leaves no trace, other than the damage to your body. Insurers often use this fact to their advantage. The best thing you can do for your claim after the accident is to immediately notify the school/property owner. Be careful about what you say and do after a slip and fall accident! Even simple phrases like "I'm Ok," or "I didn't see that there" could be used against you, so keep quiet as best you are able. If you need

to describe the accident, stick to the facts.

### Gather Evidence

Take photographs of the icy condition that caused your injuries. If anyone witnessed your fall, take note of their contact information, and ask them to provide a statement. Find out if any surveillance cameras were in the vicinity of your fall and request copies of the footage. Remember that if you wait too long, the evidence will disappear.

### Seeking Medical Attention

The only way to tell if your injuries are serious and how to help them get better is to seek medical care. Seeing a medical doctor is important for your physical recovery, as well as important for the success of your legal claim.

### Getting help for your slip and fall accident.

Slip and fall accidents often lead to considerable medical bills and time away from work. To receive compensation for medical expenses and lost wages, injured individuals often choose to file a claim against the person or company responsible for the conditions that caused the accident. A great first step in pursuing a potential claim is to contact an experienced lawyer at Ridge & Downes for a free claim evaluation.



For more information on your rights contact:

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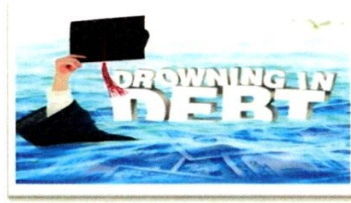
Free consultations in Joliet and other areas throughout Illinois.





# STUDENT DEBT RELIEF VIRTUAL CLINIC

## Upcoming Dates



Please choose the Student Debt Clinic that best meets your needs:

- **Full Clinic** – This 90-minute program will introduce Income Driven Repayment (IDR) Plans, Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), legislative updates, and next steps for you.  
If you are a recent college graduate, or if you took Parent Plus Loans to help your child graduate recently, this Full Clinic is the program for you.
- **PSLF Clinic** – This 45-minute program will dive deeper into Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and answer questions you have about the forms. This program is geared towards people who have already entered into an Income Drive Repayment plan and need help with the PSLF process.
- **Q & A Clinic** – This open session is to ask specific questions about your situation. Understand that this not a one-on-one session. There is no formal presentation to this session; it is targeting those who are already in IDR and/or PSLF plans but need answers.

FULL CLINIC	PSLF CLINIC	Q&A CLINIC
Wednesday, January 24, 5 pm	Wednesday, January 31, 5 pm	Wednesday, January 31, 6 pm
Monday, February 26, 5 pm	Wednesday, February 28, 5 pm	Wednesday, February 28, 6 pm

*\*\*More clinics will be scheduled for future months.*

These **UNION BENEFIT** programs are available not only to teachers but also to ANY educational employee.

These clinics are **FREE** to our card-signed union members as a benefit of being part of the IFT. You are encouraged to bring your union peers with you. **All of these clinics are held over Zoom.**

Sign up for one of these clinics by emailing Stella Kapusta ([skapusta@ift-aft.org](mailto:skapusta@ift-aft.org)) or calling the AFT Local 604 office at (815) 725-0402.

*Please have available:*

- Your laptop computer
- Your latest loan servicer(s) statement and/or online account information
- Type of loan(s) held
- Type of repayment plan(s) enrolled

## Local 604 Retiree Council

By Phil Staley, Local 604 Retiree Council President

As you are undoubtedly aware, many fellow union organizations are currently fighting for member rights. While the Screen Writers, Actors, and UAW fight nationally for their members, several of our local organizations are actively involved in similar work to benefit theirs. Although union membership is on the rise through new organizing efforts, one area Local 604, the IFT, and AFT sees a decline in membership is through retirement. As a retiree, you are a valuable resource in the fight to support current working members, along with the ongoing fight for the benefits you fought so hard to earn. All Local 604 members are encouraged to continue membership into retirement.

Many current retirees remember the recent fights to protect/keep our pension benefits even though they may not have been retired at the time. These attacks continue. The IFT is a leader within Illinois in the fight to maintain pension rights and restore the rights lost to many of our current members. The AFT addresses retiree issues on the national level including working to restore Social Security Benefits where many members nationwide have earned full benefits but are not receiving them.

Again, we encourage members who are retiring to continue their membership in Local 604. This includes continued enrollment in the IFT, AFT and other organizations currently receiving your dues. As a member of the retiree's council, you are invited to attend 604 Retiree Council programs offered to build and create new relationships, inform members of matters geared toward retirees, and support political efforts on issues at the state and national levels.

At our previous Retiree Council monthly meetings, we heard from representatives from Social Security/Medicare, the Teachers Retirement Service (TRS), and a presentation, "Identity Theft" by the Will County States Attorney.

Future programming dates will include:

### March

Tuesday, March 12, 2:00 p.m.

AFT Local 604 Office

Program: "Spring Birding" presented by Ellen Green, Wild Birds Unlimited, 1149 Essington Rd, Joliet

### April

Tuesday, April 9, 9:00 a.m. (Tentative date depending on availability)

Joliet Junior College, 1215 Houbolt Road, Joliet

Program: Herbert Trackman Planetarium Program & Tour of Cronin Schoolhouse

### May

Tuesday, May 14, 10:00 a.m.

Lake Renwick Heron Rookery Nature Preserve, 230 W. Renwick Road, Plainfield

Guided Tour of Lake Renwick

We encourage our current retiree members to join us in these upcoming events.

The Retiree Council also intends to host retirement meetings this spring for retired and soon to be retired members of SURS, IMRF and TRS. These meetings will be held throughout the Local 604 represented area in the late afternoon/early evening to accommodate those interested in attending.

If you are set to retire this year, please contact the AFT Local 604 Office at 815-725-0402, and let us know of your intention.



## PSRP Conference in Springfield

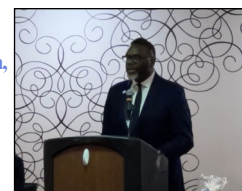
Paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRP) provide essential services at public schools and universities. They include secretaries, bus drivers, food service workers, maintenance workers, custodians, library assistants, playground aides, IT professionals, special education assistants, and more!

An event that offered professional development and union-skills workshops, keynote speakers, and opportunities to network and socialize with union colleagues from around the state.



Left, Dan Montgomery, President of IFT, spoke at the conference.

Right, Brandon Johnson, Mayor of Chicago, spoke at the conference



"I attended the workshop, *It Starts with Us*. Helping students to heal and thrive was presented by two awesome ladies, Cameron Sweeney and Benita Twillie. This workshop had great feedback from those that were there and for me to hear about the traumas as well as solutions was very enlightening for me.

Understanding the different traumas that kids experience helps me to understand why a child may act out. A lot of their traumas are psychological. Violence, abuse, childhood experiences, living with foster parents, neighborhood safety, community violence, bullying, racism and household dysfunctions.

We must be able to try and regulate stress. If any of the signs affect you personally, think about what it does to a child. Prolonged stress affects your body and mind for years.

You must understand what helps **you** to regulate stress; neutralizing relationships, recognize vulnerability, self-care, exercise, medication, and social support.

For the children we will need a program to eliminate/deal with classroom stress, bullying, etc. Maybe increase staff, set boundaries, initiate rules, make rescheduling flexible to help improve childhood experiences. Once we try some of these solutions, that should help students thrive instead of being stressed and traumatized.

I was impressed with this workshop, and I would love for them to present it to our staff and paraprofessionals. I had a great time."

By Sarah McLaurin, Joliet 204 Paraprofessional & Council President

**Pictured below in front row left to right:**

Phil Perkins, LaMellis McCormick, Sofia Thomas, Anne Oberman, Donald Thomas, Janet Mitchell, Carlotta McLaurin, & Yolanda Zenawick

**Back row:** Adam Harding and Kim Crowe, both are Field Service Directors at Local 604

**Missing in photo:** Sarah McLaurin





