



# UPDATE

American Federation of Teachers Local 604, AFL-CIO

[www.aftlocal604.org](http://www.aftlocal604.org)

February/March 2026

## Continue to make a difference By: Bill Briggs, Retiree

For over a month, you have been back to work doing what you do best, caring for the future of our nation even as the stresses that you face almost daily continue to grow.

For some, like the staff at Edison School in Kankakee, it meant moving the entire school to different locations. Over the holiday break, the district learned that the building was not safe for continued use, so students and staff were moved to new buildings January 13.

To the district's credit, students and their teachers were kept together. For younger ones, this consideration means a lot. And Kennedy Middle School welcomed them with open arms.

Hardly a day goes by that some tragic news hits the air about ICE action in mostly Democratic cities and states. One can only imagine the stress this fact puts on schools with minority populations. Imagine attempting to educate children whose main concern is will a parent, grandparent, sibling be home when the school day is over.

I could go on with the obstacles you face day-to-day, but I want to offer a different direction. Let me quote a famous saying and justify it in your case.

"To whom much is given, much is expected."

What, you might ask, have I been given. The answer is quite simple, those bright faces you face five days a week throughout the school year.

The impact you make cannot really be measured in test scores although many see that as the be all and end all. What you do is to make every child feel safe, believe there is hope for the future, and eventually, it will work out.

I realize this might sound simplistic, but if not you, who? Does this responsibility put additional pressures on the staff, yes, without a doubt. But isn't that why we went into education, to make a difference.

Take, for example, this little story you might have heard already. After a major storm near a seashore, a little child can be

seen picking up starfish, one-by-one, and throwing them back into the water. Finally, an older man says, "why are you doing this; you are not really making a difference." Without skipping a beat, the child responds, "to this one, I changed its life."

Think about it. You are like this child because no matter what the circumstance is, you can make a difference even though we might not ever receive reinforcement that you did so.

Probably to no surprise, I have been accused of having a Pollyanna attitude, and I happily accept that view. Because for me, I cannot image walking into a classroom every day without wanting to make a difference no matter what is presented to me.

Recently, I saw a program about Arizona teachers and the severe problems they face. What was said is, "primarily a worsening teacher shortage is driven by low pay (ranking near the bottom nationally), high cost of living, burnout, large class sizes, increased student behavior issues with little support, and unsustainable workloads."

Damn, sound familiar! I mention this only to reinforce that you are not alone.

So now what as you head into the roughest months of the school year, keeping their attention while you do what you do best, educate.

An easy task, not, but the rewards cannot be measured in dollars.

And with this idea, remember that your Union, Local 604, the IFT, and AFT, continue to put your issues to the forefront. We continue to fight to correct those problems you face daily. Why, because you do make a difference.

Not happy with the direction our country is headed; make a difference by voting to keep those who support us in power or to remove those who do not.

Be like that child with the single starfish.

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# The Fight for Full Funding



Dan Mercer



In 2017, Illinois enacted a law that changed how the state funds its public schools. The law calls for all schools to reach 90% of adequate funding by 2027. School districts are divided into four tiers. Tier 1 districts have the lowest adequacy rates and receive 50% of any additional funding each year. Tier 2 districts are below 90% adequacy and receive 49% of the additional funds. Tiers 3 and 4 are districts with adequacy rates of 90% or higher and they receive the remaining 1% of additional funds. Except for 2021 when funding remained at 2020 levels, the state has added at least \$300 million each year to work toward the 90% adequacy goal. However, that amount is insufficient to achieve the goal by 2027. The amount needed to achieve full funding is estimated to be an additional \$5.4 billion.

Local 604 represents educational employees who work in 52 different public school districts, 3 community colleges, 2 cooperatives and 1 area career center. Twenty-five of our 52 public school districts have current adequacy levels under 90%, which is 48% of the districts where we have members. However, over 73% of our members work in those districts, so inadequate funding is affecting a significant majority of our members as well as the students and communities they serve. Here's a link to a tool created by the Chicago Teachers' Union to access funding adequacy data for Illinois public school districts: <https://ebf-lookup.streamlit.app/>.

Currently, two bills that would bring K-12 public schools up to the funding levels required by the 2017 law have been introduced in the Illinois Legislature. State Senator Graciela Guzmán introduced SB3701 in the Senate and Representative Will Davis introduced HB5409 in the House. Both bills call for the state to fund “mandated categorical” such as counseling and social work services, nutritional programs and transportation—all of which the School Code requires, but which currently receive no state funding.

In addition to public school funding, more revenue is needed for higher education, public services and crucial improvements to Tier 2 pensions. The Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) is advocating for full funding of all these needs. To achieve that, our state needs to address its structural revenue deficit by changing its tax code. Voters rejected a 2020 measure 53% to 47% that would have changed the state's flat income tax to a progressive one in which those with greater ability to pay would do so at a higher rate. We must amplify the need for a change and build support for it if we hope to address this problem.

The idea of a “millionaire tax” which would collect 3% on income over \$1 million per year is being supported by many, including Illinois Speaker of the House Immanuel “Chris” Welch and in 2024, 60% of Illinois voters were in favor of an advisory ballot measure calling for such a tax.

IFT leaders and members took our message to Springfield twice in recent months, on October 29, 2025 and again recently on February 17, 2026. We are asking our members to join in the fight for full funding by engaging in demonstrations of support for the remainder of the school year. The first Friday of each month—March 6, April 3 and May 1—is a target date to show support. There are lots of ways you and your councils can participate—demonstrations of solidarity like rallies, walk-ins, wearing union shirts, and taking pictures to post on social media in support of the fight for full funding. For more information and resources on this topic, visit <https://www.ift-aft.org/fairfunding>.

This fight cannot be won without support from you, our members. We must educate ourselves and our family and friends on the importance of full funding. Illinois should be a national leader in education funding and opportunities. Our future depends on it. Let's work together to make this a reality!

## JOIN IFT MEMBERS ALL ACROSS ILLINOIS FOR MONTHLY SOLIDARITY WALK-INS

IFT members are standing up to the ultra rich who are trying to privatize and profit off of our public schools, colleges and universities. We're inviting all members to join us in monthly actions on **Full Funding Fridays** leading up to May Day on May 1.



# Local 604 Election News

## Local Officers & AFT Convention Delegates

Members wishing to nominate themselves or another member to be a Local 604 officer or AFT convention delegate should contact Darlene Mercer, Local 604 Office Manager, by phone or email no later than 3:30 p.m. on Monday, March 16. Nominators and nominees must be members in “good standing,” meaning they are current on dues. In addition, candidates for office must have been in “good standing” for at least two (2) years prior to the date of the election. Eligible candidates will receive the election rules approved by the Senate at its February 2026 meeting.

Officer positions include Local 604 President, Treasurer, Secretary and fourteen (14) Vice Presidents. The term of office is two (2) years, beginning on July 1, 2026. Officers are expected to attend five (5) Executive Board meetings and five (5) Senate meetings per school year, as well as participate on committees. Additional meetings may be called by the President.

The 2026 AFT Convention will take place in Washington D.C. from July 16-19. The Executive Board recommends a delegation of 22 members, including Local officers who may choose to attend as automatic delegates. Travel, hotel and meal expenses will be reimbursed by the Local, within established limits.

Per the Local 604 Constitution, a Council may have no more than one (1) Vice President. If there are two (2) or more candidates for Vice President from the same Council, the candidate with the highest vote total shall be considered for a position among candidates from other Councils and the remaining candidate(s) shall be disqualified.

The Local 604 Constitution also provides that any uncontested races for officer or delegate may be elected by a voice vote of acclamation at the April Senate meeting. If any Senator objects to a voice vote, acclamation of uncontested races may occur with a two-thirds (2/3) vote of approval by Senators in attendance at the meeting.

If necessary, an election of contested officers and/or delegates will take place no later than May 20, 2026. Members will receive an election packet by USPS mail to the address on file with the Local. The packet will include notice of the election and instructions to vote securely and confidentially either online or by mail. If you believe your address has changed since you last provided it to the Local, please contact Darlene to update it.

Darlene Mercer may be reached by:  
Email: [darmerc@ift-aft.org](mailto:darmerc@ift-aft.org)  
Phone: 815-725-0402

### Districts where our members work with funding adequacy levels below 90%

Odell CCSD 435	73%
Manhattan SD 114	73%
Chaney-Monge SD 88	74%
Spring Valley CCSD 99	74%
Kankakee SD 111	75%
Joliet Twp HSD 204	75%
Hampton SD 29	76%
La Salle-Peru Twp HSD 120	77%
Chicago Heights SD 170	77%
Aurora East USD 131	77%
Streator Twp HSD 40	77%
Wilmington CUSD 209U	77%
DePue USD 103	79%
Iroquois West CUSD 10	79%
Joliet PSD 86	80%
Taft SD 90	80%
Clifton Central CUSD 4	80%
Valley View CUSD 365U	82%
Princeton ESD 115	82%
Park Forest SD 163	83%
Pembroke CCSD 259	85%
St George CCSD 258	86%
New Lenox SD 122	88%
Lockport Twp HSD 205	88%
Tinley Park CCSD 146	89%

# Your rights under the workers' compensation act

by James M. Ridge, attorney at law

## Winter Safety Alert: Protecting Your Workers' Compensation Rights After a Fall

Winter weather brings ice, snow, slush, and meltwater—conditions that cause thousands of Illinois workers to suffer slip and fall injuries every year. Nearly **one in five** of these incidents leads to a serious injury, such as a fracture, torn ligament, or head injury.

If your fall occurs in your employer's parking lot, on their walkways, or inside the building near entrances where snow and water accumulate, it **may qualify as a compensable work injury** under Illinois law. These cases are highly fact-specific, so it is always wise to consult with an attorney to evaluate whether the incident is covered.

Remember: In Illinois, you generally have **three years from the date of the accident** to file your claim with the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission.

### If You Slip & Fall on Ice or Snow at Work, Follow These 3 Critical Steps

#### 1. Report the Fall Immediately

Snow and ice often leave no evidence moments after a fall—especially if melting or re-salting occurs. For that reason, reporting your injury as **soon as possible** is vital. Notify your supervisor, administrator, or property owner right away.

Be cautious with your statements. Even casual phrases like “*I’m fine*” or “*I didn’t see the ice*” can be twisted by insurers later. Stick to the facts and avoid unnecessary commentary.

#### 2. Gather Evidence Quickly

Winter conditions change fast. As soon as you can:

- Take **photographs** of the area where you fell, including ice patches, snow piles, or wet flooring.
- Get names and contact information for any **witnesses**. Ask whether the area has **video surveillance**, and request that the footage be preserved.

Waiting too long can mean losing crucial evidence, especially with melting snow, shifting weather, and routine maintenance.

#### 3. Seek Prompt Medical Care

Even if your injuries feel minor, see a doctor as soon as possible. Many winter slip and fall injuries worsen over time, and early medical documentation is essential for both your health and your workers' compensation claim. Medical records serve as key evidence that your injuries were caused by the fall.

#### Getting Help After a Slip & Fall Accident

Slip and fall injuries often lead to significant medical bills, therapy, and time off work. To recover medical expenses, lost wages, and other benefits, many injured workers choose to file a workers' compensation claim or, in some cases, pursue a separate claim against the responsible property owner.

A strong first step is to consult an experienced attorney. **The team at Ridge Law Group offers free claim evaluations** and can help you understand your rights, gather evidence, and ensure your claim is properly filed and protected.



For more information on your rights contact:

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## A Fight for a Fair Contract - Cahokia Federation of Teachers

By Kyle Stern, Local 571 President

Educators and staff in Cahokia Unit School District 187 have continued to serve their students with exceptional dedication despite being forced to work without a contract for months. The Cahokia Federation of Teachers (CFT) Local 1272—representing teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and service employees—has remained steadfast in its commitment to fairness, stability, and high-quality public education even as district leadership has pursued proposals that undermine decades of progress and collaborative bargaining. Teachers have now worked over half of the school year without a contract, marking the longest contract lapse the district has ever seen.

Throughout this prolonged dispute, the union has shown unity and strength. Meetings that would normally draw small crowds have instead filled gymnasiums with educators wearing blue union shirts, speaking passionately about the need for respect and equity, and demonstrating unwavering solidarity. Their presence underscores what the community already knows: the people who educate Cahokia's children are committed not just to their jobs, but to the future of the district.

The CFT has raised serious concerns about the district's initial bargaining proposals, which sought to eliminate or drastically revise the majority of existing contract language. These proposals would divide a unified workforce into three separate bargaining groups, stripping away collective strength and weakening long-standing employee protections. The union argues that these changes are not designed to improve working conditions or student outcomes, but rather to diminish the voices of the people who know the classrooms best. Union leaders have been clear that fragmenting the bargaining unit is a direct attempt to weaken the collective power of school employees and disrupt the stability that students depend on.

District administrators have tried to justify these sweeping changes by arguing that some contract language is outdated or that absenteeism requires strict new policies, such as mandatory doctor's notes for every sick day. But the union has countered this narrative with facts: the district's own data shows teachers are present in their classrooms 97% of the school year. Educators have pointed out that they work in environments where illness spreads easily, and requiring a doctor's note for routine ailments

not only burdens employees but also shows a lack of trust in professionals who continually put students first.

CFT leaders also emphasize that chronic turnover—not staff commitment—is the real issue harming the district's stability. High turnover is driven by low pay, low morale, and an environment where educators feel undervalued. The union argues that gutting contract protections would worsen retention problems, making it even harder for Cahokia students to have consistent, experienced educators in their classrooms.

Further complicating negotiations are the political entanglements within district leadership. Superintendent Curtis McCall Jr. is closely connected to prominent political figures, including his father, the mayor, and his uncle, a state senator whose spouse serves on the district's bargaining team. The CFT believes these connections create a lopsided power dynamic, making it harder for educators' concerns to be taken seriously. CFT President Wendy Lochmann has stated that the district "picked this fight" with aggressive proposals that disregard both staff expertise and community trust.

Despite these challenges, the CFT has consistently emphasized its goal of avoiding a strike. Union leaders highlight that a strike would disrupt students' education—something educators desperately want to avoid. At the same time, the union has made clear that accepting a contract that weakens rights, divides the workforce, and undermines school quality is not an option. Educators remain ready to continue negotiating in good faith, but they will not back down from defending the dignity and stability of their profession.

Throughout this process, the Cahokia Federation of Teachers has demonstrated what true commitment looks like: showing up for students day after day without the security of a contract; standing together to defend public education from proposals that would erode it; and fighting to ensure the district remains a place where educators are respected, valued, and supported. Their consistent presence, professionalism, and unity signal their dedication not only to fair labor practices but to the health and success of Cahokia's schools.

For the CFT, this struggle is ultimately about protecting the future of public education in Cahokia. Strong schools require stable, respected, and fairly compensated staff. As negotiations continue, the union remains resolute in its belief that when educators thrive, students thrive—and that a fair contract is essential to ensuring both.

# The Spirit of Giving this past Holiday Season!

AF<sup>T</sup> Local 604 put all council names in a drawing who collected food for donation. We pulled 3 names from the box at our December Holiday Party. Congratulations to LaGrange Highlands, Park Forest, and District 86 Paraprofessionals! Local 604 will donate \$100 in each of those councils name to their choice of food pantry.

**Park Forest-Bloom Township Food Pantry**  
**LaGrange Highlands-Share Food Share Love Food Pantry**  
**District 86 Paraprofessionals-Morning Star Mission**

Thank you to everyone who organized and collected food this past year!

## Summit Hill Donations...



## Tinley Park Donations...



## Park Forest Donations...



## Joliet 86 Paraprofessionals Donation...



Continued from page 6...  
Valley View Office Personnel Toy Donation...



Homer Teacher Council & Support Staff Council Donation...



Delivery of food collected by LaGrange Highlands...



## Student Debt Loan Forgiveness

Katie Kollross (Local 604) and Brian Devine (Local 780) have previously assisted our members with student debt forgiveness.

At this time, clinics are on hold due to ongoing uncertainty. Once details are clearer, clinics will resume, and you will be notified.

These clinics are offered by AFT. You can sign up by going to this website.

<https://www.aft.org/student-debts-clinics>

If you take the AFT class(es) and have follow-up questions, you may contact Katie at [kkollross@ift-aft.org](mailto:kkollross@ift-aft.org) for assistance.

## IFT Scholarships

**Carl J. Megel Scholarship** is for high school seniors who are enrolled in a special education school, class, or program for students with disabilities. **The application is due February 28, 2026.**

**Robert G. Porter Scholarship** is for high school seniors attending a public Illinois university or college. **The application is due on March 6, 2026.**

For more information, visit [ift-aft.org/scholarships](http://ift-aft.org/scholarships)



# Retiree's Council News

Phil Staley, President, Local 604 Retirees Council

604 Retirees and Fellow Active 604 Members, you are invited to a...

## Local 604 After School "Work Stops"

The Local 604 Retiree Council, together with Local 604 is hosting three separate "pizza" gatherings for 604 members. The events are open to all active and retired 604 Union members.

Any active 604 member retiring in the spring of 2026 is invited to attend at no charge with a membership in the 604 Retiree Council. Your membership in Local 604's Retiree Council includes membership in Local 604, and the IFT.

The cost for all other members is \$15.00. Menu for the events will be pizza, salad, pasta and soft drinks. Seating is limited and reservations are required. Please contact the 604 office at 815-725-0402, or email [president604retirees@gmail.com](mailto:president604retirees@gmail.com), to reserve your spot. **Reservations are due by Wednesday, March 4, 2026.**

The events will be held at the following locations:

Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at Aurelio's, 1600 N. Covent, Bourbonnais, IL 60914. 4:30-6:30 PM

Wednesday, March 11, 2026, at Riverside Pizza, 1100 Douglas Rd, Oswego IL 60543. 4:30-6:30 PM

Thursday, March 12, 2026, at Cemino's Pizza, 1630 Essington Rd. Joliet, IL 60435. 4:00-6:30



## Future Retiree Council events:

Thursday, March 19, 2026, 2:00 P.M. Presentation on Bee Keeping, Dade Bradley, from the Forest Preserve District of Will County, Plum Creek Nature Center, held at Local 604.

Sunday, April 26, 2026, a performance of the Joliet Symphony Orchestra. Program is held at the University of St. Francis, 500 Wilcox St. Joliet, IL, 60435 in the Sexton Auditorium beginning at 4:00 P.M. Tickets are to be purchased prior to the event. A lunch at Merichka's, 604 Theodore St., Crest Hill, IL, 60403 is being planned for interested members. If you plan to meet for lunch, a reservation is requested.

On Thursday, May 21, 2026, a trip to Hidden Oaks Nature Center, Bolingbrook, beginning at 11:00 A.M. Topic TBD.

## 604 and Retiree Council Election of Officers

This spring, elections will be held for Local 604 Officers, Local 604 Retiree Council Officers and Delegates to the AFT Convention in July. If you are a member of the Retiree council and wish to run for a council position, please contact Kristy Ledvina, at Local 604. She can be reached at 815/725-0402. Elections for the Retiree Council will be held online with ballots sent to your personal email address. Please be sure to contact the Local 604 office with a current email.

Thank you

Phil Staley

**Next Senate Meeting...  
April 15, 2026 @ 6:00pm  
Local 604 Office**



**American Federation of Teachers Local 604**  
[www.aftlocal604.org](http://www.aftlocal604.org)  
**Hours: 8:00am-3:30pm**

**Darlene Mercer, Office Mgr./Editor/darmercer@ift-aft.org**  
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**Dan Mercer, President**  
**Sean Hunt, Treasurer/Business Mgr.**  
**Julie Harris, Secretary**

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