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# YES ON 2 Campaign




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# Campaign for YES on 2 hits high gear




The campaign to replace the MCAS-based high school graduation test is gathering momentum.

By: Scott McLennan

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The final push is on to replace the MCAS graduation requirement, as educators and other public education advocates have started canvassing neighborhoods and calling voters to ask for their support on Question 2.




Canvassers for YES on 2 fanned out recently in Chelsea. Photo by Ed Dube.

Question 2 on the fall ballot will ask voters to replace the MCAS graduation requirement with certification by local districts that students have completed coursework aligned with state academic standards in the areas tested by MCAS. The campaign began more than a year ago, when the MTA joined forces with a group of parents also seeking to end the use of standardized MCAS exams as a high school graduation requirement.

Since then, more than 170,000 voters across the state have signed petitions over two rounds of signature gathering, placing the question on the ballot. The statewide election is Nov. 5. **Early voting in Massachusetts begins Oct. 19.**

MTA Vice President Deb McCarthy has long maintained that MCAS exams are misused and given too much influence.

“We have high academic standards in Massachusetts. Teacher training and curriculum frameworks are grounded in those standards. What high-stakes MCAS testing has done is actually limit educators’ ability to develop successful teaching strategies for students who do not do well on standardized tests but are quite capable of learning the required material,” McCarthy said. “Denying a diploma to these students, who meet every other requirement, is an injustice. And forcing educators to work toward a one-size-fits-all style of teaching is bad policy and practice.”

When Question 2 passes, MCAS exams will still be administered, but used for diagnostic purposes as originally intended. With New York this year ending its use of standardized tests as graduation requirement, Massachusetts will be one of just eight states remaining that hold on to the outdated practice.




Deb Mousley, a Retired member, canvassed door-to-door in Lawrence. Photo by Deb Mousley.

A large, statewide coalition has grown in support of Question 2. Lexington parent Shelley Scruggs, who launched the ballot initiative, said finding allies on this issue has been easy.

Scruggs' son attends Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School and her experiences as the mother of a child who struggles with test-taking drew her to this fight; while gathering signatures to have the question placed on the ballot, she learned she wasn't alone.

"Most people, when you're standing outside of Market Basket or the grocery store or the mall, don't want to sign anything. But when you say 'MCAS,' they turn around because they have a story about how much

they don’t like it,” she said, adding, “They don’t like it as a student. They don’t like it as a parent, because you just spend an awful lot of time trying to pass the test. My son is in the Class of 2026. He can do the classwork; I don’t want him spending all his time trying to pass these tests.”

Carolyn Armitage is a science teacher in Worcester and took part in a blitz of neighborhood canvassing on Aug. 17.



Carolyn Armitage, in driver's seat, and Kirsten Frazier checked their location as they canvassed for Question 2 in Worcester. Photo by Scott McLennan.

“We have incredibly high standards,” she said. “Removing the graduation requirement will allow us to focus on those standards rather than focusing on how to teach students to take a standardized exam.”

The YES on 2 campaign has already drawn several major endorsements. The Massachusetts AFL-CIO, Massachusetts Nurses Association, Massachusetts Association of School Counselors, the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment all have voiced organizational support for Question 2.

“This campaign has the support of educators, working families, community activists and students,” said MTA President Max Page. “The people closest to public education are saying in one, unified voice that it is time to end the punitive practice of using a one-size-fits-all standardized test as a high-stakes graduation requirement.”

***For more information on the YES on 2 campaign, please visit the website at [https://www.yesonquestion2ma.com/join](https://www.yesonquestion2ma.com/join).***

## GET MORE FROM

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# Two outstanding organizations receive the MTA's civil rights and creative leadership awards

Inclusive Eats received the Louise Gaskins Lifetime Civil Rights Award. Raising Multicultural Kids won the Kathleen Roberts Creative Leadership Award.

By: Scott McLennan

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The MTA's Human Relations Committee recently presented the Louise Gaskins Lifetime Civil Rights Award to Inclusive Eats, a student-led group tackling food insecurity through a lens of cultural sensitivity. The Committee also awarded the Kathleen Roberts Creative Leadership Award to Raising Multicultural Kids, an organization formed by parents and education professionals that is bringing BIPOC instructors into public schools to spark discussions about race and identity.

The two organizations were recognized at the HRC's annual awards dinner, held June 14 in Worcester.



MTA President Max Page, left, and MTA Vice President Deb McCarthy, third from right, stand with the recipients of the 2024 Human Relations Committee awards. Photo by Scott McLennan.

Belmont educator Denise LaPolla, chair of the HRC, presented the awards to Woburn brothers Luke and Noah Sheldon, of Inclusive Eats, and to Raising Multicultural Kids co-founders Kelly Lamb and Denise Barbosa Lane.

For 40 years, the MTA has been recognizing its members and community activists dedicated to advancing racial and social justice, LaPolla noted.

“During this time, the MTA has honored leaders, activists, advocates, role models, risk takers, organizers and innovators,” LaPolla said. “The range of award winners has been broad, but they all share a passion and commitment to enriching the lives of those they serve. Tonight, we will be adding two new organizations to this impressive list.”

Woburn resident Lisa Sullivan of the Lexington Education Association nominated Inclusive Eats for the Louise Gaskins Lifetime Civil Rights Award. The award is given to those who display leadership and tenacity in advocating for the rights of others. This award is named after a pioneer in the MTA’s ongoing commitment to fighting for the rights of women, people of color and marginalized communities.

Twins Noah and Luke Sheldon started Inclusive Eats a year ago. Noah had been volunteering at a food pantry and realized how the offerings lacked a cultural component.

“As a Brazilian-American, I cooked various Brazilian dishes with my mother,” he said. “This served as a way for me to not only learn more about my culture, but also as a way for me to love and embrace it. I recognized the disparity when I saw what this pantry looked like, combined with knowing how diverse my community is, now more than ever. After doing research, I found that one-in-five families in

Massachusetts are food insecure, including one-in-three BIPOC families."

The Sheldon brothers recruited close friends to spread awareness about the role food plays in nurturing a culturally diverse and inclusive community. Working with other social service organizations, Inclusive Eats not only collected and distributed food to pantries but also held community dinners and other events to promote the need to have culturally relevant foods in pantries and food banks.

"Long-lasting change starts with the individual sparking broader movements," Luke Sheldon said. "Every person in this room has the power to create change. No matter how young you might be, you can create a positive impact on our society."

Their mission is gaining momentum. Students in New Mexico and New York are opening chapters of Inclusive Eats. Closer to home, Noah Sheldon says Inclusive Eats will continue to holding events to raise funds and awareness.

"We believe events can get people to notice and realize that if a group of kids is trying this hard to bring attention to the need for culturally relevant foods, then maybe I shouldn't get a can of clam chowder or green beans for my school's food drive. That is the notion we want to set," he said.

State representative and former MTA President Carol Doherty nominated Raising Multicultural Kids for the Kathleen Roberts Creative Leadership Award. Former MTA president Kay Roberts, who died in 2017 the age of 103, was a tireless advocate for public education by being a mentor, political activist and community organizer.

Raising Multicultural Kids began in Easton and is now in five communities engaging students from preK to 12.

RMK's main goal is to expand the ranks of BIPOC educators in public schools. The group is encouraging college students to be instructors, in part by having them visit public schools to lead discussions based on books that address differing aspects of cultural and racial identity. These conversations engender racial sensitivity and improve school climate, and the program gets young people of color interested in becoming full-time educators.

"I don't think Denise or I even imagined we'd receive recognition on a platform like this. When I think back to the beginning, I'm not even sure how we got to where we are today," Lamb said.

Lamb noted that, for RMK, it all started when her daughter was in kindergarten and targeted by bullies for having brown skin. The young girl told her parents and school officials that having a Black teacher would make other students realize that brown skin is OK. Lamb said that a strong community response made RMK's launch successful and sustained the organization's growth.

"We have been able to push through challenges because we have a strong community," she said.

Each award bestowed by the HRC comes with a financial contribution to the organizations that are recognized.

MTA President Max Page applauded the HRC's work to lift up the organizations and activists dedicated to improving the quality of life for students and families.

“We can’t have an impact on what goes on in the classroom without addressing what goes on outside of the classroom,” he said.

*For more information about the MTA Human Relations Committee and its awards, please visit [www.massteacher.org/hcr](www.massteacher.org/hcr).*

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# ESPs build union skills, networks through leadership and mentoring programs

Education Support Professionals in preK-12 and higher education are taking part in member-driven programs.

By: Mary MacDonald

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The opportunity to learn from a mentor, someone who has walked in your shoes professionally, shouldn't be a matter of luck for educators who want to become union leaders, but it often is. Sometimes they get fortunate and have a colleague who is committed to their growth.

A member-driven program for Education Support Professionals, supported by the MTA, is taking the chance out of those opportunities and creating relationships that build leadership and organizing skills, which are improving contract outcomes for members.

**The ESP Leadership Mentoring Program**, a member initiative using an NEA grant, recently graduated its first class of 10 mentors and mentees. The year-long, weekend program pairs emerging ESP leaders with veteran counterparts in a one-on-one match, allowing them to share professional insights into their work and build union skills.

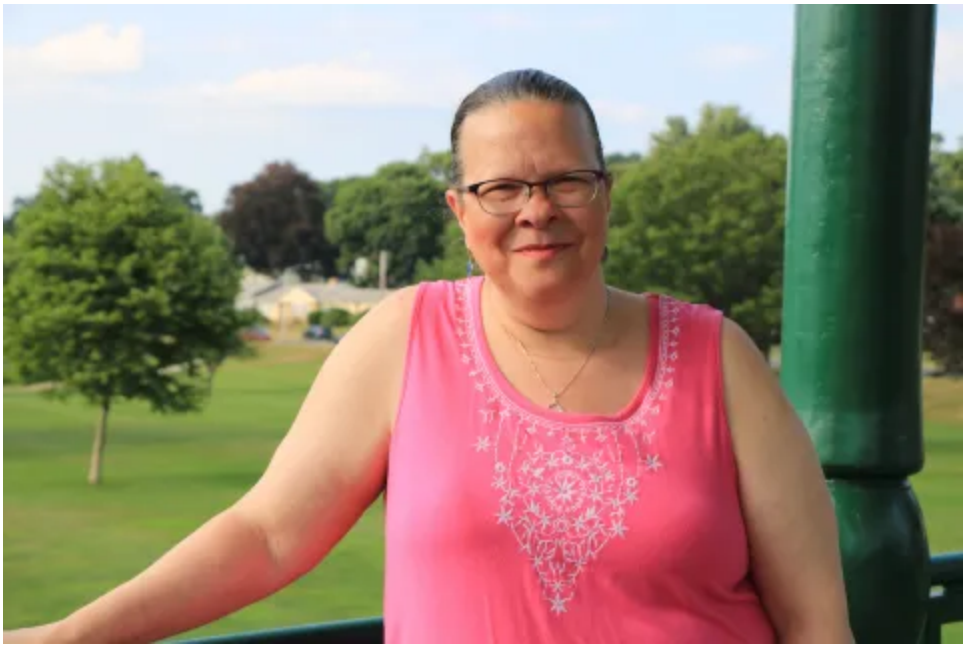


ESPs who were mentors and mentees gathered in July at the Summer Conference. From left are Brenda Johnson, Cindy Gushee, Sonia Fortin, Amy Morin, Kim Foley, Amy LeBlanc, Mary Ann D'Eufemia, Tina Mansfield and Joni Cederholm.

Led by Amy Morin, co-president of the Lexington Education Association, and a veteran ESP leader, the program involves once-a-month in-person meetings.  Participants say they gain an immediate support system and learn that they aren't alone in whatever challenges they face. Over the course of the program, mentees learn about union organizing strategies, negotiating tactics and how to create a professional network for advocacy. They are showing up for actions in locals throughout the state, as part of a growing network of ESP leaders.

The mentoring program builds on **the ESP leadership weekend program that started several years ago as a pilot**. It operates under a three-year, $407,000 NEA grant, which covers stipends for the ESP mentors and mentees, training materials, conference funding and food. Participants have attended several professional events, including the 2024 Labor Notes Conference and the NEA and MTA ESP conferences. ESPs in preK-12 and higher education are participating.

Kim Foley, who worked previously as an ESP in Wilmington, and is now pursuing a job in another district, recently completed the program as mentee. She found support in the program for organizing efforts, which she used as part of the contract action team for her local. She learned about what other locals had tried, and what they learned from their experiences.



Kim Foley, an ESP mentee, found the mentorship program extremely helpful for developing union skills and expanding her professional network. Photo by Sarah Nathan.

“I’ll reach out to two people, and get those people to join our group, and have them talk to two people, and just kind of spread the word that if we stand as one, we stand a better chance. If 100 of us are out there, it’s better than just 10 of us.”

Foley, who is completing a master’s degree, said she’s seen the culture change just in the past few years, where ESPs travel to help other locals engaged in actions for stronger contracts. “If there’s a school district that’s fighting, others are showing up. I’m from Burlington, or I’m from Waltham, and I’ve come to stand with you and support you. That’s what we were doing as well. Because if you go to support them; they’ll show up to support you.”

Amy LeBlanc, a paraprofessional with the Pentucket local, started getting more involved with union work two years ago when she attended her first MTA ESP conference. She signed up as a mentee for the Leadership Mentoring Program when she saw that Morin was the

facilitator. “Seeing what she does as the president of her local gave me the goal of becoming the co-president of my local,” LeBlanc said. “Joining on with the mentorship program gave me that goal.”

One of the goals of the program is encouraging ESP leaders to identify emerging leaders and become mentors themselves.

LeBlanc ran for local co-president, and although she didn’t win, she isn’t deterred. She enjoyed getting her name out there and is pursuing more development and leadership opportunities, including becoming a Summer Member Organizer for the MTA. She recently presented a seminar at the MTA Summer Conference on how to build an ESP Contract Action Team.

On a recent evening, LeBlanc thought nothing of driving from her home in the North Shore to Bristol County, to join a forum organized by the local at Bristol-Plymouth. One of her fellow mentees had invited everyone to join in. Union work has become a large part of her identity, LeBlanc said. “I love that it’s a community. I feel a part of it. It feels like a family.”

***ESPs in preK-16 who are interested in applying for the ESP leadership weekends program are encouraged to submit a short, online form. The application for FY2024-2025 is Sept. 30.***

***The ESP Leadership Mentoring program application for FY2025-2026 is also available for submission.***




# Colin Mogé, of West Springfield, Massachusetts School Counselor of the Year

Colin Mogé understands all too well how quickly a teen can become sidetracked by challenges.

By: Mary MacDonald

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When Colin Mogé talks with students, he understands all too well how quickly a teen can become sidetracked by academic or personal challenges. A school counselor at West Springfield High School, Mogé recently was named 2024 Massachusetts School Counselor of the Year. The honor was awarded by the Massachusetts School Counselor Association.

He almost dropped out himself, as a teenager, and started college at a nontraditional age, after working for several years. The candid advice he received from a school counselor was one of the reasons he didn't drop out. Instead, he took summer classes and night classes and pushed himself to graduate.

Now, his workdays as a professional are spent talking individually with students about what their plans are, what they hope to do after leaving school. He often shares his own story.



The job of school counselor has changed significantly since the pandemic. Along with class schedules and talking about post-graduate plans, Mogé tries to reach students who are missing from school. West Springfield counselors recently started making more home visits, to try to meet students where they are and help them find the help they need.

Mogé, a Chicopee native, said by the time he was a junior in high school he was failing many classes and in danger of dropping out. Mogé was in a few bands, and focused on other things, he said. “I was more interested in being social with my friends,” he said.

Reflecting on familial experiences with educational struggles, which had greatly impacted his family, was one of the reasons he tried to push himself and stay through graduation. It meant evening classes, all through his senior year, just to get across the finish line.

Once he graduated, he told his parents he wanted to take a semester off before beginning college. A few months turned into two and a half years.

He entered Holyoke Community College at 21 and developed an interest in therapy and counseling. Once he became focused on school counseling, he went on to earn his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Westfield State University. A member of the West Springfield Education Association, Mogé has worked at West Springfield High School since August 2018, initially as a graduate intern.

The job is multifaceted. “School counselors now focus not just on core academic advising and course selection,” he said. “There’s a significant social and emotional component that we’re providing for our students. There is, of course, post-secondary support, whether that is college applications, workforce development, career readiness, military enlistment, anything you can think of.”

More so now than in previous years, students are interested in the trades, such as carpentry, welding and electrical apprenticeships.

The interaction and relationships he's built with students are his favorite part of the job. He had a counselor help him find his focus when he was a teen, and now he's hoping to do the same for others who need it.

"I like to think I'm giving back in that way. I eventually came to terms with the fact that I wanted to find a purpose, a greater sense of self, by helping others. And giving back and giving what other people have given to me. That's what draws me to this work and what keeps me as enthusiastic as I am every day."

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NEWS

# Meet Karen Torres, the 2024 MTA ESP of the Year

Karen Torres is a member of the Andover Education Association.

By: Jonathan Ng

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Karen Torres, an instructional assistant in the Andover Public Schools for 17 years, is the MTA 2024 Education Support Professional of the Year, a

recognition that celebrates her commitment to her students and relentless advocacy for her colleagues.

An active union leader at Bancroft Elementary School, Torres has played a pivotal role in the Andover Education Association. As a member of the union's bargaining team, she helped secure what the local president called “the best ESP contract in the Commonwealth in 2023,” showcasing her commitment to improving the working conditions and wages for her fellow ESPs.




When Karen Torres started 17 years ago, the expectation was to help classroom teachers set up projects or grade tests. But with students needing increased support, IAs have become frontline workers for delivering special education services.

"The responsibilities grew. The compensation did not. And the recognition did not," Torres, pictured at a 2022 contract rally, told *MTA Today*.

Torres learned of her award at a surprise celebration, organized by her union and the MTA. As the chair of the Instructional Assistants unit, she is known for her inspiring phrase: “This is just the beginning.” In Andover, Torres drew inspiration from strong contract campaigns in Haverhill and Malden, which focused on a living wage for all members.

In her acceptance speech, Torres expressed gratitude and humility, saying, “I’m so honored, so humbled, and shocked to receive the individualized ESP of the Year award. But, in this union, it should have been the ESPs of the Year award. My friends worked so hard to accomplish what we did in November.”

A living wage was at the top of the contract priority list, she explained. “It all trickles down from there, including the ESP turnover that our most vulnerable students see.”

As an instructional assistant, her role involves supporting students with complex disability profiles, helping them develop academically, behaviorally, socially, emotionally, and in daily functioning. Torres’s impact is profound, as evidenced by the numerous recommendation letters from her colleagues, fellow unionists and Andover parents who submitted testimonies on her behalf for the award.

Kim Rabold, an assistant principal, described Torres as a mentor and trusted colleague. “Karen takes it upon herself to mentor new staff, helping to orient them to the building, the district, their colleagues and job expectations. Other paraprofessionals look to her for her leadership and knowledge,” Rabold wrote, in nominating Torres.

Torres’s efforts on the AEA’s bargaining team were instrumental in securing provisions that elevated ESP priorities in the recent contract. MTA President Max Page lauded her dedication, saying, “She’s a

relentless advocate for Andover instructional assistants. The work that Karen has done in Andover sets the bar for the rest of the state for ESP living wages."



*MTA ESP of the Year Karen Torres, center, pictured with (from left to right) MTA Vice President Deb McCarthy, 2019 ESP of the Year and Weymouth ESP Joni Cederholm, 2023 ESP of the Year and Malden ESP Paula Higgins and MTA President Max Page.*

MTA Vice President Deb McCarthy praised Torres's passion and professionalism. "It is widely understood that Education Support Professionals go above and beyond the mandates of the job, making sure that their students' academic, social and emotional needs are met daily," said McCarthy.

Joni Cederholm, a Weymouth ESP, former MTA ESP of the Year, and chair of the MTA Education Support Professionals Committee, praised Torres's work and her compassion for students, families, and colleagues. She also noted Torres's role in creating a district training program for new ESPs.

"Karen was part of a force for bold action needed in Andover," said Cederholm. "She's a strong voice for the living wage campaign, showing

the way for all of us in our locals, bargaining for amazing contracts that have never happened before. I hope we all learn from her example."

Following the surprise announcement, McCarthy spoke with Torres about how Andover ESPs secured one of the best contracts in the state in 2023: through community building.

"Karen knew that before any contract action could be successful, she and others had to create a sense of community within the workplace," McCarthy said. "She shared that we need to get to know each other, to be in a relationship around our shared values and common interests long before they could fight for what they deserve at the bargaining table. Folks need to feel like they are part of something bigger."

Colleagues agreed. AEA President Matt Bach credited Torres's yearslong effort, which led to a successful bargaining fight for a fair contract that was supported by parents and the community.

"The gains from the contract fight could never have happened without Karen Torres," Bach said. "The campaign we ran in Andover was based on the tip of the spear, which was the living wage campaign. Karen did the essential groundwork."

In his letter of recommendation, Bach highlighted Torres's leadership in building an active IA bargaining unit within the AEA, ensuring Andover IAs "won the best contract in the Commonwealth in 2023."

Torres affirmed that the work is never finished, and that she will endeavor to ensure that all ESPs in Massachusetts earn a living wage.

"We have each other's back because we know now that we can do it because we've done it. We can do hard things."