



Inside FEA

Spring 2026
Vol.69 • No.3

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Leading with
Courage,
Teaching
with Purpose



Message from Sharon Manuel, President of the Federal Education Association



Sharon Manuel, President

My doctor recently gave me some disappointing advice: stop drinking soda.

Apparently, soda contains too much sugar, too much caffeine, and too many chemicals with names that sound like Marvel villains or industrial cleaning products. If I want to live a long and productive life, I need to stop pouring fizzy bad decisions into my body.

I was not happy. Soda is comforting. It is easy. It gives a little burst of energy and tells me I can survive the next meeting. The problem is that soda does not force itself on you. It arrives politely. It is offered with a smile. It says, "Come on, everyone is doing it."

Sound familiar?

Education has become very good at offering teachers soda. The soda is every new initiative, every fresh acronym, every recycled strategy with a shiny new label. It is the endless cycle of trainings, mandates, data collection, political debates, and the constant promise that this newest thing is finally the answer.

The sales pitch is always excellent. The words are sweet: innovation, rigor, engagement, accountability, transformation, best practices. Nobody wants to be the person in the meeting who raises a hand and asks, "Are we sure this actually helps students?" Sugar makes bad ideas easier to swallow.

Then there is the caffeine. In education, everything is urgent. Every problem is a crisis. Every teacher must pivot, innovate, differentiate, document, analyze, communicate, and smile while doing it. Caffeine creates movement, but movement is not the same thing as learning.

Then comes the carbonation: the impressive-looking activity. The strategic plans. The data walls. The presentations. The new checklists. The meetings explaining the previous meetings. Carbonation makes a lot of noise, but eventually the bubbles disappear. And finally, the artificial flavors and colors. Every few years, the same old drink returns in a different can. A familiar idea gets a new acronym, a new logo, and a new PowerPoint, and everyone is expected to be amazed by what is essentially root beer in a different bottle.

FEA is not dazzled by the can. We read the ingredients. What matters is not how well a program is marketed or how many buzzwords are attached to it. What matters is whether it helps students learn, respects the profession of teaching, and improves the classroom. The problem is not change. Good teachers have always adapted. The problem is the expectation that teachers must consume every new idea immediately and without question. The best teachers are not those who drink every soda placed in front of them. They are the ones who pause, read the label, and ask whether the contents are actually good for them and their students.

They keep what is useful. They discard what is empty. Teaching is not passive consumption. It is professional judgment.

My doctor was right. Maybe the answer is not to find a better brand of soda. Maybe the answer is to stop accepting every can that gets pushed into our hands.

At some point, a teacher has to set the can down.

Message from David Kelts, Former Pacific Area Director of the Federal Education Association



David Kelts, Former FEA Pacific Area Director

For many Federal Education Association members, the protections, resources, and support available today can feel like a permanent part of overseas education. Yet many of those gains were built through decades of advocacy by leaders who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to improve the lives of educators and students.

Among those leaders is former Pacific Area Director David Kelts.

Kelts' journey with the association began in 1973 when he arrived in Misawa, Japan, as a Department of Defense teacher. At the time, he was not a union member. That changed when the Overseas Education Association, FEA's predecessor, successfully challenged the Department of Defense over teacher pay.

When OEA won a lawsuit against the Department of Defense saying they weren't paying us correctly, I felt I had to join," Kelts recalled. "They won so much money for us. All of our salaries went up immediately."

That experience taught him a lesson that would shape the rest of his career: collective action works.

In 1994, when Pacific Area Director Brenda Travis retired, fellow faculty representatives selected Kelts to continue her work. He stepped into leadership during a challenging period. Membership was declining, communication was difficult, and educators often felt disconnected from one another and from decision-makers in Washington, D.C.

Kelts believed the solution was simple: show up.

During his years as Area Director, he visited schools throughout the Pacific, meeting directly with educators, listening to their concerns, and ensuring members understood the value of their union.

One of the most significant challenges facing educators involved a troubled payroll transition to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). Teachers were arriving overseas only to discover their records had been misplaced and their paychecks had stopped.

Kelts regularly traveled to Washington, D.C., working directly with DoDEA officials to resolve cases. His efforts helped create a system that allowed newly hired educators to begin receiving pay while paperwork issues were resolved, protecting teachers from financial hardship during overseas moves.

Yet when asked about his proudest accomplishment, Kelts does not point to payroll victories or policy changes.

Instead, he points to relationships.

At a time when labor-management relations were often adversarial, Kelts worked to bring administrators and educators together. He invited principals to association meetings and walked them through what Pacific educators called the "Brenda Contract," helping administrators better understand their responsibilities and building stronger relationships between school leaders and faculty representatives.

For seven years, the Pacific enjoyed an unprecedented period of cooperation.

"It turned out to be the teachers' union that was teaching principals how to be principals," Kelts said with a laugh.

Message from David Kelts, Former Pacific Area Director of the Federal Education Association



David Kelts, Former FEA Pacific Area Director

The benefits extended beyond labor relations. Teachers secured improvements in housing allowances, transfer opportunities, and overseas benefits. Communication improved, parents became more engaged, and students benefited from stronger educational environments.

Kelts also believed communication was essential to a strong union. Long before email newsletters became commonplace, he created the Wednesday Report, a weekly publication sharing updates from Washington, contract information, local news, and emerging issues affecting educators throughout the Pacific.

The goal was simple: ensure everyone had access to the same information.

Throughout the interview, Kelts repeatedly returned to the idea that unions succeed when they

remain connected to the people they serve. He encouraged current leaders to communicate openly, listen carefully, and remember that advocacy extends beyond salary negotiations.

Looking back, Kelts credits FEA with helping transform overseas education into a stronger and more supportive environment for educators and students alike.

"When I started, we were broke," he said. "When I finished, we were financially secure."

The statement reflects more than finances. Under Kelts' leadership, membership grew, communication expanded, relationships strengthened, and educators gained a stronger voice in decisions affecting their professional lives.

Today, more than two decades after leaving office, Kelts remains optimistic about FEA's future.

"As long as there are overseas schools on military bases," he said, "I hope FEA is standing there to support them."

His story serves as a reminder that FEA's strength has always come from members willing to step forward, advocate for one another, and build something larger than themselves. David Kelts' legacy continues to shape the association through a simple but powerful belief: strong schools begin with supported educators, informed members, and a community working together toward a common purpose.

"Strong schools begin with supported educators, informed members, and a community working together toward a common purpose."

Spotlight: Dr. Michael A. Pope's Legacy of Global Learning, Innovation, and the Power of One



Dr. Michael A. Pope, FEA Member

For more than three decades, Dr. Michael A. Pope has transformed classrooms, inspired students, and demonstrated what is possible when educators combine passion, curiosity, and a commitment to lifelong learning. His journey from a young educator in Georgia to a member of the 2026 National Teachers Hall of Fame reflects a career defined not by accolades alone, but by an unwavering belief in the power of one teacher to change a student's life.

Dr. Pope began his educational career in 1995 as a paraprofessional and substitute teacher in DeKalb County, Georgia, where he developed a strong foundation in mathematics and special education. By 1999, he had become a Gifted and High Achievers Science Teacher at Stephenson Middle School. His early promise was recognized when he received the Georgia Science Teacher Association's Middle School Teacher of Promise Award and was selected as a Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Scholar to Japan.

In 2003, he became the face of representation in education when he appeared on the cover of *NEA Today* as "The Male Teacher," highlighting the importance of diversity and visibility within the profession.

That same year, Dr. Pope's educational journey took him overseas to DoDEA, where he first served as a Science Coordinator at Shirley Lanham Elementary School in Japan, helping lead curriculum adoption efforts. In 2006, he joined Zama American Middle High School, where he would spend nearly two decades developing a nationally recognized science program focused on research, inquiry, and student voice. As coordinator of programs including Junior Science and Humanities Symposium (JSHS), eCYBERMISSION, and STEMinar, he created opportunities for students to engage in authentic scientific investigation and see themselves as researchers, innovators, and global citizens.

At the heart of Dr. Pope's teaching is his G.L.P. Model: Global, Local, Personal. Inspired by his international experiences and grounded in his doctoral research on military-connected students, the framework encourages students to explore global scientific challenges, connect them to their local environment, and ultimately discover personal meaning in their learning. Through this approach, students become active participants in their education rather than passive recipients of information.

"Students are at the heart of every learning experience," Dr. Pope explains. "When science becomes personal, learning becomes lasting."

His innovative approach has earned some of the highest honors in education. In 2017, Dr. Pope received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST), the nation's highest honor for STEM educators. His commitment to global education continued through prestigious fellowships, including the National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship in Svalbard, the NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellowship in South Africa, and the Fulbright/IREX Teachers of Global Classrooms Fellowship in Colombia. In 2019, he was named a Top 50 Finalist for the Varkey Global Teacher Prize, placing him among the world's most distinguished educators.

Beyond the classroom, Dr. Pope has continued to influence educational systems at the highest levels. In 2022, he was appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education to serve on the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the Nation's Report Card. He has also served as the NSF DoDEA Alumni Representative for PAEMST, a Space for Teachers Embedded Teacher Program Fellow, and the Pacific District Subject Matter Expert for Student Engagement, where he shares his expertise in ethical gamification and student-centered learning with colleagues across the region.

Spotlight: Dr. Michael A. Pope's Legacy of Global Learning, Innovation, and the Power of One



Dr. Michael A. Pope, FEA Member

Despite his many accomplishments, Dr. Pope remains grounded in the philosophy that has guided his career from the beginning: “The Power of One.” For him, the most meaningful measure of success is not the awards displayed on a wall but the students who discover confidence, curiosity, and possibility because someone believed in them.

“I teach not for the awards, but for that one student,” Dr. Pope shares. “I will be that one adult cheerleader or advocate

who believes in them, even if they do not believe in themselves.”

That philosophy has also shaped his advice for fellow educators. He encourages teachers to continue investing in themselves through professional development, fellowships, and new learning opportunities. In his view, when educators choose to grow, students benefit from that growth.

In 2026, Dr. Pope achieved one of the profession’s greatest honors when he was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame, becoming the first DoDEA educator to receive this recognition. While the honor celebrates his extraordinary career, Dr. Pope sees it as a recognition of the larger DoDEA community and the educators who work every day to prepare students for a rapidly changing and interconnected world.

His legacy extends far beyond awards and titles. It lives in the students who see themselves as scientists, the educators he mentors, the colleagues he

inspires, and the global community of learners he continues to build.

As Dr. Pope often reminds others, “We teach who we are.” Through his curiosity, compassion, and commitment to excellence, Dr. Michael A. Pope has shown generations of students and educators exactly what that means.

“I teach not for the awards, but for that one student. I will be that one adult cheerleader or advocate who believes in them, even if they do not believe in themselves.”

Spotlight: Wanda Merritt Leads with Heart, Advocacy, and a Commitment to ESP Voices



Wanda Merritt, FEA Member

Leadership is often about stepping forward when others may hesitate. For one FEA ESP leader, accepting a leadership role was never about recognition. It was about creating a stronger voice for colleagues and ensuring members understood the power of their union.

Motivated by a desire to better support fellow educators, she stepped into leadership knowing the responsibility would be significant. Her sense of responsibility was shaped early in life as the oldest of four children and through her experiences playing team sports, where success depended on encouraging and supporting one another through both victories and challenges.

Since taking on the role, she has intentionally grown as a leader. Advanced leadership and communication training have helped her transform from

someone who was naturally quiet and more inclined to listen into a more confident advocate who is willing to engage in difficult conversations on behalf of her members.

For her, transformative leadership begins with education and trust. When she first became a leader, she recognized that many members were unfamiliar with the Master Labor Agreement (MLA). She made it a priority to ensure members understood their rights and felt prepared to navigate challenges in their workplace. Just as importantly, she has worked to build relationships where members know they can reach out at any time and trust that they will be supported.

Leading a local with limited leadership support has not always been easy. With only herself and her secretary managing the work of the local, she has had to balance many responsibilities while maintaining a commitment to setting healthy boundaries and not allowing union work to consume her personal life. Despite the small team, they have built strong working relationships with school administrators and have effectively served their members.

The challenges became particularly apparent during the uncertainty surrounding the March Executive Order, when many questions arose about how the union would continue its work. During that period, her focus remained on providing members with stability, information, and advocacy.

A major accomplishment of her tenure has been strengthening membership by being honest and transparent with colleagues about the union's role in protecting their rights and creating safer, more supportive workplaces. She begins each school year by introducing herself to current and potential members, reminding them that she is available to help, and showing small acts of kindness that reinforce a simple message: every member matters.

Her approach to advocacy is deeply personal. She describes the work as "a part-time job with no pay," but one that brings immense satisfaction when members experience victories. She approaches advocacy with the same wholehearted commitment she once brought to supporting her own children during their school years.

Spotlight: Wanda Merritt Leads with Heart, Advocacy, and a Commitment to ESP Voices



Wanda Merritt, FEA Member

That dedication extends to her work on the ESP negotiations team, where she advocates for safer working conditions, improved wages, and stronger benefits. While she may not point to one single moment of standing firm, she emphasizes that the team has consistently held its ground on critical issues affecting ESPs, including pay, work hours, and benefits.

Looking ahead, her vision is clear: continued growth in membership and increased member involvement so that the next generation of ESP leaders inherits a stronger, more knowledgeable union. She hopes to create a culture where ESPs feel empowered to understand their rights, advocate for themselves, and support one another.

Her leadership journey has transformed her both professionally and personally. Professionally, she has gained confidence in addressing concerns with school

administrators while maintaining positive working relationships. Personally, she has developed meaningful friendships with fellow local presidents across districts, describing them as people who “bring their own sunshine” and make her feel welcomed and supported.

For members who may be considering stepping into leadership but doubt their abilities, her advice is simple: be confident and stand tall. Leadership is not about having every answer from the beginning. It is about approaching the role with knowledge, compassion, and heart.

Through her dedication, courage, and commitment to service, she demonstrates what union leadership truly looks like: showing up for others, helping members find their voice, and ensuring no one has to face workplace challenges alone.

“Leadership is not about recognition. It is about helping others find their voice and ensuring they know the power of their union.”

Spotlight: Alesia “Ms. Lee” Gladden

A New Chapter of Courage and Leadership



Alesia “Ms. Lee” Gladden, FEA Member

Some journeys remind us why we remain committed to our union family. They are stories of courage, perseverance, and the deep belief that we are stronger together. The story of Ms. Alesia Gladden, lovingly known as Ms. Lee, is one of those journeys.

After a lifetime of service, Ms. Lee began a new chapter in July 2025 when she became a Lifetime NEA Member. This milestone is remarkable not only because of her dedication, but also because of her resilience. Just one year and four months earlier, Ms. Lee experienced a stroke, an event that could have changed the course of her life.

But if there is one thing everyone knows about Ms. Lee, it is this: she does not stop. She does not quit. She rises.

And rise she did.

When Ms. Lee arrived at the NEA Retired Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, she made history once again by becoming the first Education Support Professional paraprofessional to attend the prestigious event. She did more than participate. She stepped into leadership. From the moment she walked through the doors, she was warmly welcomed and soon after was inducted as the FEA Membership Coordinator.

Motivated, energized, and ready to serve, Ms. Lee embraced this new role with purpose.

During the conference, she immersed herself in sessions on membership engagement, organizing strategies, and the policies that guide union work. Yet the most powerful lesson echoed throughout every room she entered: we must stay united. We must continue to organize. And the work of the union never stops.

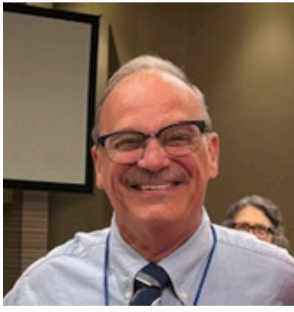
Ms. Lee expressed that message in her own heartfelt words:

“Unity is our strength. When we lift each other up, we become unstoppable.” – Ms. Lee

Those words resonated deeply with everyone in attendance. Despite the challenges she has faced, Ms. Lee continues to demonstrate what true leadership looks like. Her leadership is grounded not in titles, but in heart, commitment, and care for others.

Her presence in Phoenix was more than symbolic. It was inspiring. It was a reminder that retirement is not the end of our journey as union members. Instead, it opens a new chapter filled with opportunities to mentor, advocate, and strengthen our community.

As Ms. Lee continues her journey as a Lifetime Member, we celebrate her courage, her resilience, and her unwavering dedication to our union family. Her story reminds us all that when we stand together, we rise together.



Message from Mike Priser, FEA Retiree Representative

Protecting the Retirement Security Federal Employees Earned

Most federal employees spend years focused on serving the public, not calculating how much income they will have in retirement. It is often only when retirement approaches—or after leaving federal service—that many begin to understand how their pension benefits are determined and how seemingly small differences in those calculations can have a significant impact on their financial security.

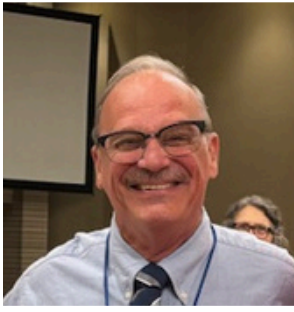
Federal retirees have faced retirement inequities before. Just last year, our union celebrated a historic victory in the fight to repeal the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP). For decades, these two federal laws unfairly reduced Social Security benefits for many Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) retirees. The effort to eliminate GPO and WEP took more than 30 years of advocacy, but persistence paid off when Congress passed repeal legislation and it was signed into law in 2024.

Today, FEA-Retired and other advocacy organizations are working to address another long-standing retirement inequity—this time affecting retirees under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS).

As inflation continues to increase the cost of everyday necessities, many FERS retirees find that their cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) fail to keep pace with rising prices. Unlike CSRS retirees, FERS retirees do not receive the full Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase in many years. Under current law, when inflation rises by more than 2 percent but less than 3 percent, the FERS COLA is capped at 2 percent. When inflation reaches 3 percent or higher, the FERS COLA is reduced by one percentage point below the CPI increase. In addition, most FERS retirees do not begin receiving COLAs until age 62.

The result is a gradual but significant loss of purchasing power. Over time, these reduced COLAs compound, making it increasingly difficult for retirees living on fixed incomes to keep up with housing costs, healthcare expenses, groceries, and other essential needs.

This was a powerful reminder that being a member of a union pays in ways you may not be able to foresee.



Message from Mike Priser, FEA Retiree Representative

To address this issue, legislation has been introduced in Congress that would provide a fairer COLA calculation for FERS retirees. Originally introduced by the late Representative Gerry Connolly of Virginia and now championed by Representative James Walkinshaw in the House, along with Senator Alex Padilla in the Senate, H.R. 491 and S. 624 would ensure that FERS retirees receive the same full cost-of-living adjustments currently provided to CSRS retirees.

The legislation remains under consideration in congressional committees, but federal retirees can play an important role in building bipartisan support. FEA-R members are encouraged to contact their Representatives and Senators and urge them to support H.R. 491 and S. 624. If your Representative serves on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, ask them to help advance the bill out of committee and bring it to the House floor. Likewise, if one of your Senators serves on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, encourage them to support the measure and move it forward.

The successful repeal of GPO and WEP demonstrated what determined advocacy can accomplish. By working together once again, we can help ensure that FERS retirees receive the full inflation protection they deserve—and hopefully achieve this reform far sooner than the decades it took to correct previous injustices. Federal employees have dedicated their careers to serving the nation. Their retirement benefits should preserve the purchasing power they earned.

Federal employees have dedicated their careers to serving the nation. Their retirement benefits should preserve the purchasing power they earned.

Important Contact Information

Please note that 202-822-7850 is no longer a reliable way to reach FEA staff directly. To connect with someone, we recommend emailing the appropriate address below. A staff member will follow up by phone or provide the best number to call if needed.

Please direct general concerns or issues for FEA Washington to Adesuwa Wilson-Iguade, FEA Executive Assistant and Paralegal, at FEAdmin@nea.org

Please include a brief description of the issue and any relevant details so it can be routed appropriately.

Please direct membership questions (joining FEA, updating your information, or checking your membership status) to Hellem Hernandez, FEA Director of Membership Processing, at FEAMembership@nea.org

Please direct retirement questions to: Federal.Retired@nea.org

Using the correct email helps ensure your question or concern is addressed as quickly and efficiently as possible. Thank you for your understanding.

Stay Connected!

Stay connected with FEA by subscribing to our newsletter. If you are not already subscribed, email us at feaadmin@nea.org and we will be happy to get you added to our distribution list. The newsletter is one of the best ways to stay informed about advocacy updates, member resources, upcoming deadlines, and opportunities to get involved.

You can also follow FEA on social media for timely updates, announcements, and highlights from across our community:

Bluesky: [@our-fea.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/our-fea.bsky.social)

Instagram: [@our.fea](https://www.instagram.com/our.fea)

Facebook: [@FedEdAssoc](https://www.facebook.com/FedEdAssoc)

Following us and subscribing ensures you do not miss important information affecting federal educators and education support professionals.

Voting Absentee While Overseas

As educators serving overseas, FEA members are encouraged to stay engaged in U.S. elections through absentee voting. Under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), eligible U.S. citizens living abroad can register and request absentee ballots for federal elections.

Voting absentee involves three main steps:

1. Register and Request Your Ballot
2. Complete the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), which serves as both a voter registration form and absentee ballot request. FVAP recommends submitting a new FPCA every January, whenever you move, or at least 90 days before an election.
3. Receive Your Ballot
4. Election officials typically send absentee ballots 45 days before an election. Many states allow ballots to be delivered electronically through email or online download.
5. Return Your Ballot
6. Complete and return your ballot as soon as possible, following your state's deadlines and instructions carefully.

If you do not receive your ballot in time, you can use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB), which acts as a backup ballot for overseas voters.

Helpful resources:

- [Federal Voting Assistance Program \(FVAP\)](#)
- [Register and Request an Absentee Ballot \(FPCA\)](#)
- [Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot \(FWAB\) Information](#)
- [State-by-State Voting Assistance Guide](#)
- [Vote.gov Voter Registration Information](#)

Taking a few minutes to register and request your ballot early can help ensure your vote is counted, no matter where in the world you are serving.

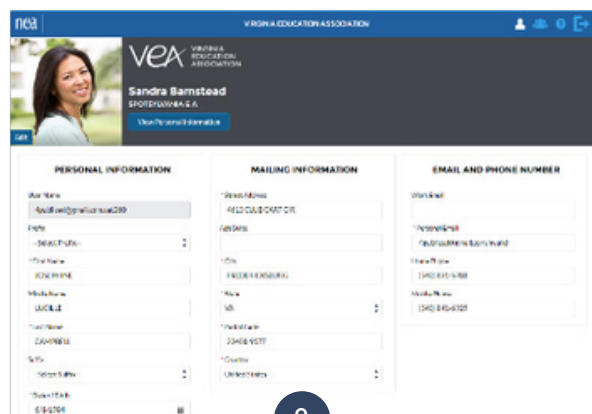
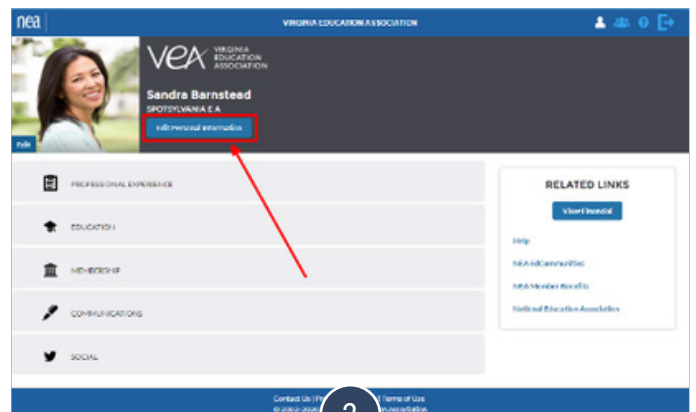
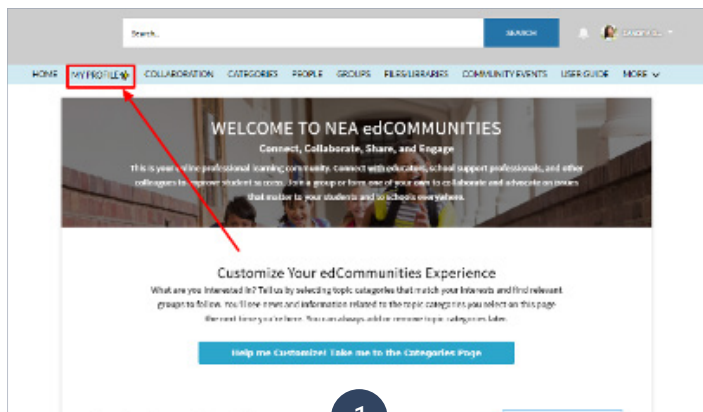
How to Update Your Contact Information

Keeping your profile updated ensures that you continue receiving important FEA communications, including the print Journal and other pertinent information, directly in your inbox and at your home address.

How can you update your profile? It's easy!

1. Scan the QR code or go here: <https://www.mynea360.org/s/member-portal> and log in or sign up. If you need your NEA Member ID, you can find it in this journal or in FEA's newsletter. If you need assistance email feadmin@nea.org.
2. Click on the My Profile link near the upper right portion of edCommunities.
 1. Click on the My Profile link near the upper right portion of edCommunities.
 2. Click on the Profile badge in the upper right portion of [MyNEA360.org](https://www.mynea360.org) to see what details are missing.
 3. Then click **View Profile Details** to finish completing your profile.

You can also click on **Edit Personal Information** under your name to access your profile.





NEA Member* Exclusive

A Trusted and Valuable Benefit

As an NEA member, did you know you receive \$1,000 of term life insurance at **no cost** to you? You're already enrolled in the NEA® Complimentary Life Insurance Plan, but it's a good time to make sure you've selected a beneficiary.

When you do, you can have some peace of mind that your loved ones will receive their benefit in a time of need. This unique benefit helps ensure educators like you have additional coverage beyond what may be provided through your district. It's just one of the many ways your union membership works hard for you.

**Scan the code or go to
neamb.com/mycomp for a quick
and easy path to update your
beneficiary information.**



*Must maintain NEA membership. This coverage is offered to Active, Reserve and Staff members, as well as to Life and Retired members who are actively employed in education. DT680825

FEA Member Benefit: VESi Online Courses



Through FEA's partnership with Virtual Education Software, Inc. (VESi) and Augustana University, members can access over 30 graduate-level, online courses for just \$250 total—with no additional fees. These courses can be applied toward recertification or pay advancement and are designed for flexibility, allowing educators to learn at their own pace, from home.

Topics include classroom management, diversity and inclusion, mental health, early childhood, special education, and more. A new course on Ethical Leadership & Leading Teams in Schools is now available. Stay current, earn credits, and save money—thanks to your FEA membership.