



Washington state Teachers of the Year on Maintaining Strong and Welcoming Public Schools

March 27, 2025 AI Summary

[Watch the LEVinar recording](#)

In this webinar hosted by the League of Education Voters, a critical conversation unfolded about maintaining strong and welcoming public schools. Arik Korman, CEO and a parent personally invested in these ideals, set the stage, emphasizing the organization's dedication to fostering safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments for all Washington students. The urgency of the discussion was palpable, driven by recent federal executive orders that threatened marginalized student populations.

Mandy Manning, the 2018 Washington State and National Teacher of the Year and former educator of immigrant and refugee students in Spokane Public Schools, spoke first, highlighting the pervasive fear and uncertainty within her community. She voiced concerns about the rhetoric surrounding education and the challenges faced by transgender individuals, the LGBTQ+ community, special education students, and immigrant and refugee students. Mandy passionately championed the importance of radical honesty and storytelling. She reminded everyone of the transformative power of showing up and refusing to normalize harmful rhetoric. Mandy's words resonated with both the educators and students, fueling a collective resolve to push forward.

The panel included students like Leonel Perez Valenzuela, Naomi Elsing, and Minal Gowda, who offered their unique perspectives. Leonel, a senior at West Seattle's Summit Atlas Public School, spoke candidly about the struggles his family faced as Mexican immigrants, highlighting the uncertainty and fear that hang over families navigating citizenship and documentation challenges. His words revealed the resilience required to endure such challenges while striving for an education.

Kim Broomer, the 2025 Washington State Teacher of the Year and kindergarten teacher at an inclusive elementary school in the Northshore School District, recounted the direct impact of post-election anxieties on her classroom, including significant student absences as families prioritized securing their documentation. She also spoke movingly about the immense strain on families, particularly those with students facing the greatest educational injustices.

Naomi and Minal, juniors from Lincoln High School in Seattle Public Schools and members of the Association of Washington Student Leaders (AWSL), shared stories of their initiatives to build bridges in their school community. They highlighted the success of "Cram the Cave," a project

that rallied students to attend unified basketball games, fostering a culture of inclusivity. Naomi also bravely called attention to persistent issues, such as derogatory language used toward special education students, and encouraged peers to stand up against such harmful behaviors. And Naomi described how she and Minal sought guidance from a trusted teacher in the aftermath of the election, highlighting the critical role teachers play in supporting students during these unsettling times.

The educators present exemplified the power of advocacy and compassion. Brooke Brown, a mother of four, Board Member of the Washington State Board of Education, and the 2021 Washington State Teacher of the Year, shared a deeply personal story about her youngest son with Down syndrome preparing to start kindergarten amidst uncertainty. Her call to action was powerful: “What does it mean to humanize our work? How do we model for young people what it looks like to humanize one another?”

Amy Campbell, the 2020 Teacher of the Year, Board Member of the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), and a special education teacher in the Camas School District, emphasized the strain that federal policy changes have placed on families and educators. She expressed concern about potential actions that could disrupt essential services like Medicaid, further burdening already strained communities. Amy also lamented the need to redirect energy toward urgent advocacy rather than direct services, underscoring the relentless challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Jerad Koepp, the 2022 Teacher of the Year and Native student program specialist in North Thurston Public Schools, shared a powerful analogy of Sequoia trees, whose strength lies in the interlocking of their roots rather than the depth of a single taproot. He likened this to the need for communities to support one another, creating a web of resilience that can weather any storm.

The LEVinar also celebrated moments of courage and collective action. Lyon Terry, principal of Midway Elementary, a diverse dual-language school in Highline Public Schools, recounted his testimony at a school board meeting, where he advocated for policies that upheld belonging for all students. His powerful story ended with a roomful of people erupting in cheers as the board affirmed their commitment to equity and inclusivity.

As the session concluded, attendees left with a renewed sense of purpose. They were reminded, as Minal eloquently put it, that even small acts of showing up—whether cheering at a unified basketball game, greeting someone with kindness, or standing in solidarity at a school board meeting—could weave the threads of a stronger, more inclusive community.

The voices of the students and educators echoed a shared commitment: to reimagine schools as sanctuaries of belonging, where every child’s humanity is honored and celebrated. The road ahead may be fraught with challenges, but together, these advocates demonstrated the power of unity, resilience, and hope.