



 the alliance to
reclaim our schools

Authoritarian Attacks on Public Schools and How We Resist



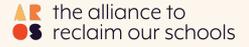
Welcome!!!

In the chat, please drop your:

- First name
- Where you are joining from
- Why do public schools matter to you?



Who is Free the Future



We are a project of the **Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools**, a national coalition of labor unions and organizing groups that are working locally and nationally to protect our students, support our schools, and defend our democracy.



A Union of Professionals



What we will cover today:

The Promise of Public Education

Over decades, hard fought wins have **advanced access and equity** for millions, but opposition forces have undermined progress at every turn.

Grounding in the Moment

This continues today. **Billionaires** and government have joined forces to accelerate the dismantling of public education and our democracy. This is **authoritarianism**.

How to Fight Back

We can fight back by engaging more people, building a broad **resistance movement** and using **non-cooperation**, as others have done before us.

What We Can Build Together

Using key principles of **non-cooperation**, we can build aligned circles of action across the country, protect our students, our schools and our democracy!

1

The Promise of Public Education

The transformative **POTENTIAL** of free and universally accessible public schools...

19th Century:
Schools should be for everyone

Tax-funded “Common Schools” and compulsory education laws spread education access for poor and working class families

Federal office of education (now DOE) and National Teachers Association (now NEA) founded

Early 1900s:
No, really... everyone...

First anti-segregation court judgment in California

Founding of American Federation of Teachers

Establishing of federally-funded free meal program

Mid to late 1900s:
We mean EVERYONE.

Brown vs Board of education desegregated schools

Passing of major federal programs: Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Higher Education Act, Head Start, Title 1, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

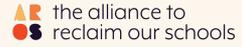
2000s to now
And... they should be fully-funded and excellent.

No Child Left Behind act and ESSA set federal standards and accountability

School finance litigation challenges inequitable funding

2020 ESSER funds for COVID relief

Efforts to undermine the potential of public ed:



1600s-1800s - Slave Codes outlaw teaching enslaved people to read

Early 1900s - Jim Crow era school systems allow states to differently fund racially separate schools

1930s - Federal government expands boarding schools for Native American students that suppress language and culture

1930s-1950s: “Patriotic” groups like Daughters of the American Revolution work to ban “radical”, “communistic” textbooks that mention racism in American history

1960s - “Massive Resistance” to Brown vs Board leads to schools closing and public funding for white students to attend segregated private schools

1980s - American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) advances vouchers, private school tax credits, and other forms of school privatization through legislation

1990s - Zero tolerance exclusionary policies target Black & Brown students with expulsions, suspensions, school-to-prison pipeline

2000s - No Child Left Behind introduces English-only testing for English language learners

As we look at these opposition efforts, which of these push the idea that public schools are “not for everyone” or “not intended to be excellent.”

How do these efforts relate? Share in the chat or come off mute!

Worth defending: public schools today

1900

1 in 10 US students **attended school after age 14**

Pre-1918

Not all states required students to **attend school at all**
15% of US adults graduated high school

Pre-1954

States were **not required to educate** Black and White students together

Pre-1975

1 in 5 children with disabilities received any public education at all
62% of US adults had graduated high school

Pre-1982

Undocumented students not guaranteed free public education

Today

100% of US children are entitled by law to a free public education
50 million students attend public schools (88% of all students)
90% of US adults have graduated high school



**Has anyone here ever been
part of defending or supporting
public schools? How?**

Drop it in the chat!

2

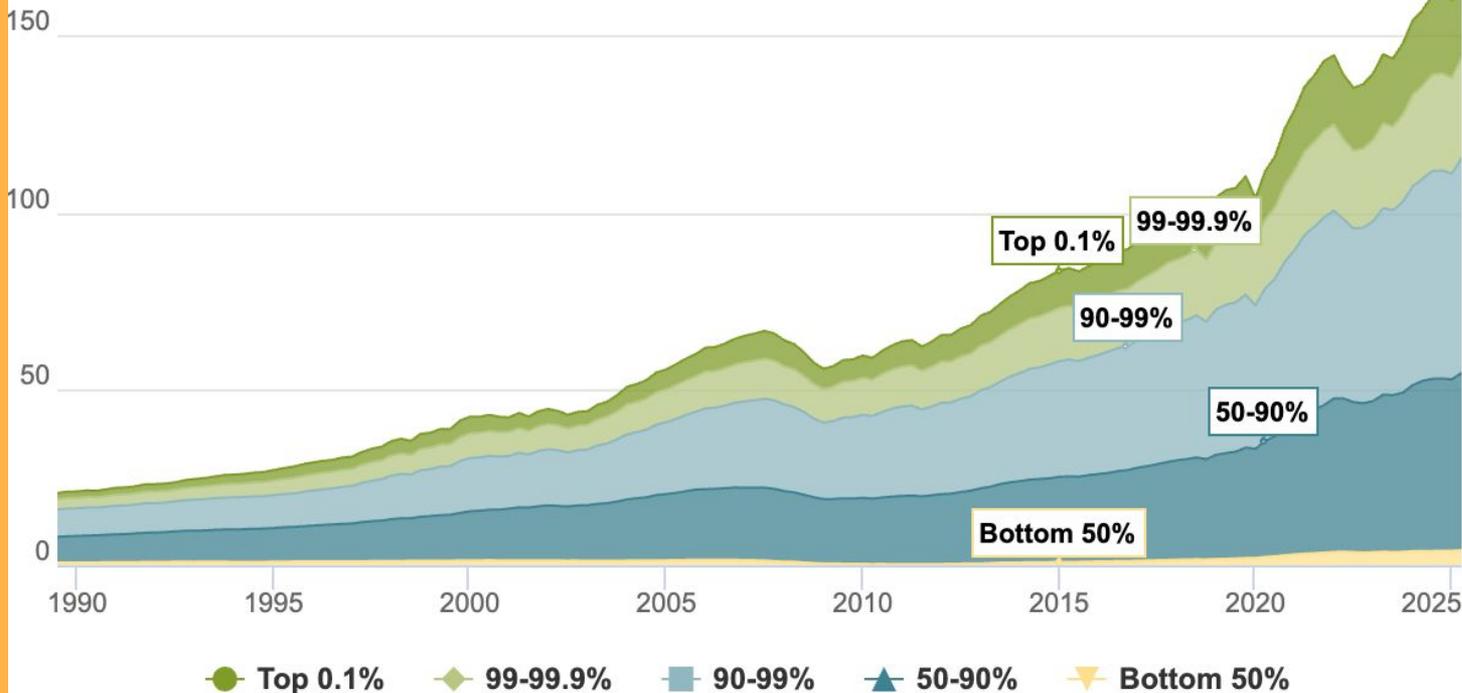
Grounding in the moment

Wealth by wealth percentile group

Trillions of Dollars

1989:Q3

2025:Q2



Source: Survey of Consumer Finances and Financial Accounts of the United States

Who is really in the driver's seat? BILLIONAIRES.



Peter Thiel

His data and surveillance company Palantir has mega government contracts

What he's about: Opposes government oversight and public spending on social welfare, spends big on elections on achieve that



Elon Musk

His companies SpaceX and Tesla receive billions in government contracts & subsidies

What he's about: Opposes government institutions and oversight; spends hundreds of millions on elections to achieve that



Jeff Yass

Tax-avoidant billionaire from PA, his companies get millions in tax credits

What he's about: Funds politicians who cut corporate and capital gains tax, reduce IRS funding, and advance private school vouchers



Linda McMahon

Founder and former billionaire CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE); current Secretary of Education

What she's about: Massive Trump donor supporting deregulation, tax cuts, school vouchers



Betsy DeVos

Michigan-based billionaire family that pours millions into influencing elections

What she's about: Former Secretary of Education who cut regulation, oversight and equity, advanced vouchers

Billionaire's three main strategies in public ed

1

DEFUND

Erosion of state and federal school funding over decades

Disruption and cancelation of \$12B in federal funds during Trump's 1st year in office

2

DISCREDIT

Censorship: In 2024-25, there were 6,870 school book bans across 23 states

Villainize BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities and immigrant students as threats

3

DISMANTLE

Privatization: 12 states have “universal” vouchers that pay private school tuition for any student of any income, leading to budget deficits and school closures

Attack public institutions: Dismantling of the Ed Dept, attacks on teacher unions, takeover of school boards

Federal funding disruptions to public ed in 2025

Trump administration bypassed Congress to **delay, cancel or halt over \$12B** in K-12 funding in 2025:

- **IDEA grants cancelled: \$2.2 billion**, including teacher quality partnerships, mental health services, community schools
- **Pandemic relief funds clawed back: \$3.3 billion**, causing sudden halts to afterschool and tutoring programs, infrastructure projects, tech contracts underway
- **Formula funding withheld temporarily: \$6.8 billion** for professional development, ELL services, afterschool programs, enrichment and adult education, leading to program delays and breach of trust
- **School tech support requests denied: \$57.7 million** taking away WiFi on school buses, internet hotspots for families and students.

What are the billionaires really after?



AUTHORITARIAN MOTIVE

Goal is society in which superior elites rule inferior underclass

Factory curriculum cultivates a demoralized, compliant worker underclass

Crush worker power by destroying teachers unions
- largest unions in country



IDEOLOGICAL MOTIVE

Free market libertarianism: all education should happen through private schools, church schools and homeschools with no government involvement



ECONOMIC MOTIVE

\$500+ billion taxpayer dollars in public ed to put in their pockets

Replace democratically-controlled public institutions with elite-controlled private businesses



RELIGIOUS MOTIVE

Christian nationalists want public schools to teach Christianity

Betsy DeVos: spreading Christianity in schools will accelerate the kingdom of heaven on earth

**“Authoritarians fear a
well-educated citizenry.”**

They fear what educators do—the teaching of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, power and privilege cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.”

Randi Weingarten, AFT President
Why Facists Fear Teachers

A portrait of Tiffany Justice, a woman with long dark hair and glasses, looking slightly to the right. The image is in grayscale with a dark red tint.

Asked what percentage of children she imagines should be in public schools going forward, Tiffany Justice, founder of Moms for Liberty, now with The Heritage Foundation's political advocacy arm, told ProPublica:

“I hope zero. I hope to get to zero.”

A 2017 memo from the conservative Council for National Policy to Trump envisioned:

“a gradual, voluntary return at all levels to free-market private schools, church schools and home schools as the normative American practice.”



To achieve these aims requires **Authoritarian Consolidation**



BILLIONAIRES GROUP UP
with government and **TAKE OVER**
governing structures.

But what is authoritarianism?

Concentration of power in the hands of a small group of people who act in ways that are not constitutionally accountable and who maintain that power through repression and threats or acts of violence.

What to expect from authoritarians?



They will stoke **fear and chaos** to keep us off-balance.



They will make threats to get people to **obey in advance**.



They will weaponize **fear of subgroups** to keep us divided and apart.

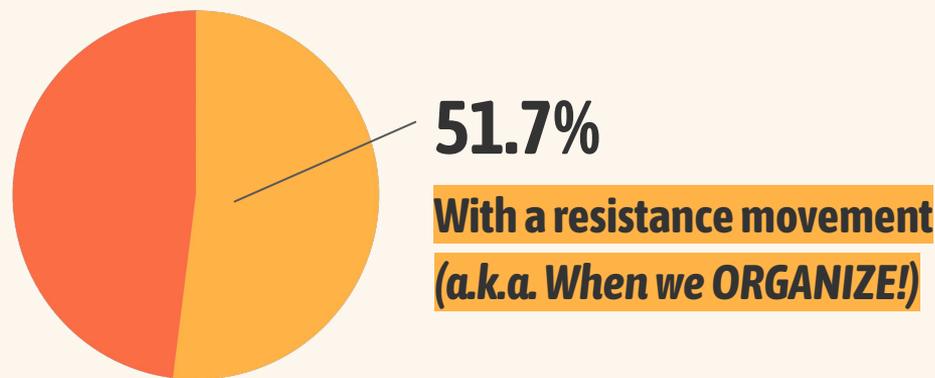
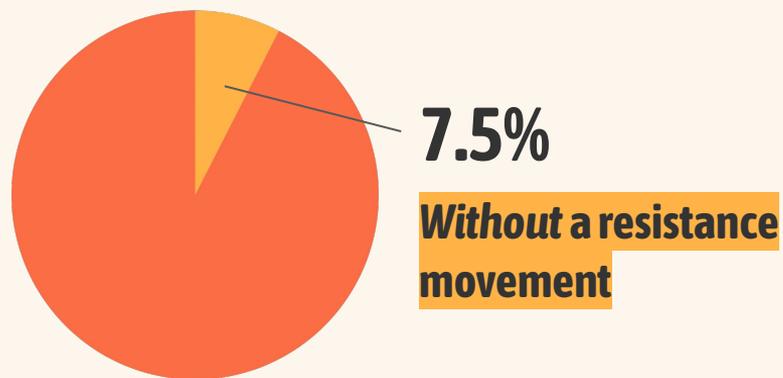
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How to fight back



How we make a U-TURN back to democracy

Analyzing 35 cases from 1991-2021, the probability of stopping the dismantling of democracy:



NB: approximately 83% of movements with national trade union participation succeed, versus only 29% of movements without.

Source: Jonathan Pinckney, Claire Trilling (2024). [Breaking Down Pillars of Support for Democratic Backsliding](#)

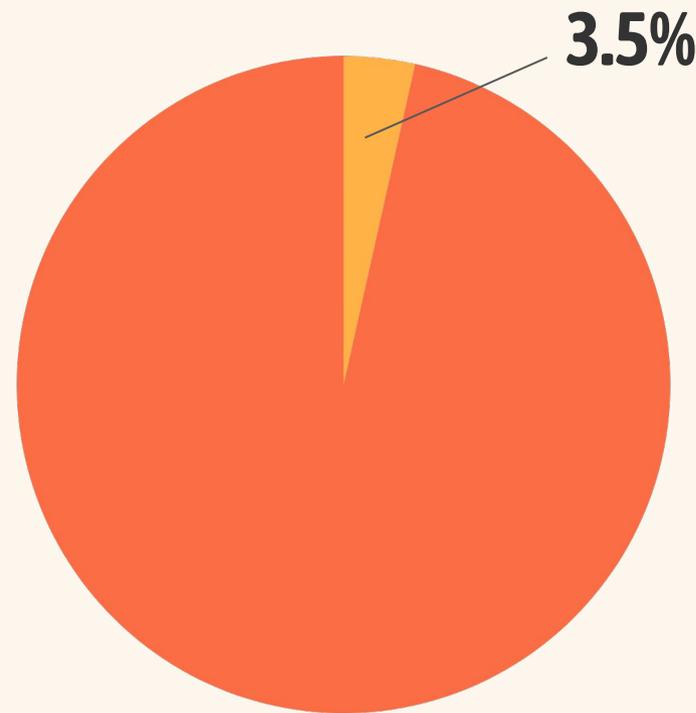
What Scale Is Needed?

More than we have now.

Research shows that when 3.5% of the population* engages in a resistance movement, **people can stop an authoritarian regime.**

(There is a lot of fascinating debate about this number, but it is clear we need a LOT MORE people engaged.)

***Erica Chenoweth**
Political Scientist & Professor, Harvard Kennedy School



Forms of Building a Resistance Movement



Symbolic Actions

To raise public awareness of an issue and **persuade** a target to act in a desired way

Examples:

- Marches/rallies/vigils
- Street theater
- Letter-writing/petition drives
- Skywriting
- Mock awards
- Picketing
- Group lobbying
- Mock elections
- Birddogging



Building Alternatives

To build an alternative institution or policy by acting as though it is already in place to disrupt or directly challenge the current system/policy

Examples:

- Nonviolent land seizure
- Occupation of buildings
- Citizens' arrests
- Guerilla gardening
- Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party alternative elections
- Mutual aid food/health



Noncooperation

To undermine the authority of an unjust system by disrupting it, refusing to cooperate with it, or otherwise **making it harder**, or impossible, for the system to keep its unfair policy

Examples:

- Worker strikes
- Boycotts
- Rent strikes
- Tax refusal
- Fix bathrooms signs
- Jury - conscientious objection

Why might we want to lean into non-cooperation in our current context?

Remember the definition:

To undermine the authority of an unjust system by **disrupting it, refusing to cooperate with it, or otherwise making it harder, or impossible,** for the system to keep its unfair policy



We aren't the first!

Education stakeholders (students, teachers and parents) have used non-cooperation to fight authoritarianism and build a resistance movement before!



Norway: Prevented Nazi takeover of education (1942)



Venezuela: Resisted the teaching of regime-friendly materials (2001-2013)



Argentina: Created lessons plans designed to ignore Perón's regime (1946-55, 1973-4)



Türkiye: Supported minority (Kurdish) rights in education under Erdogan (2016)



Chile: Educators and students mobilized against Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990)



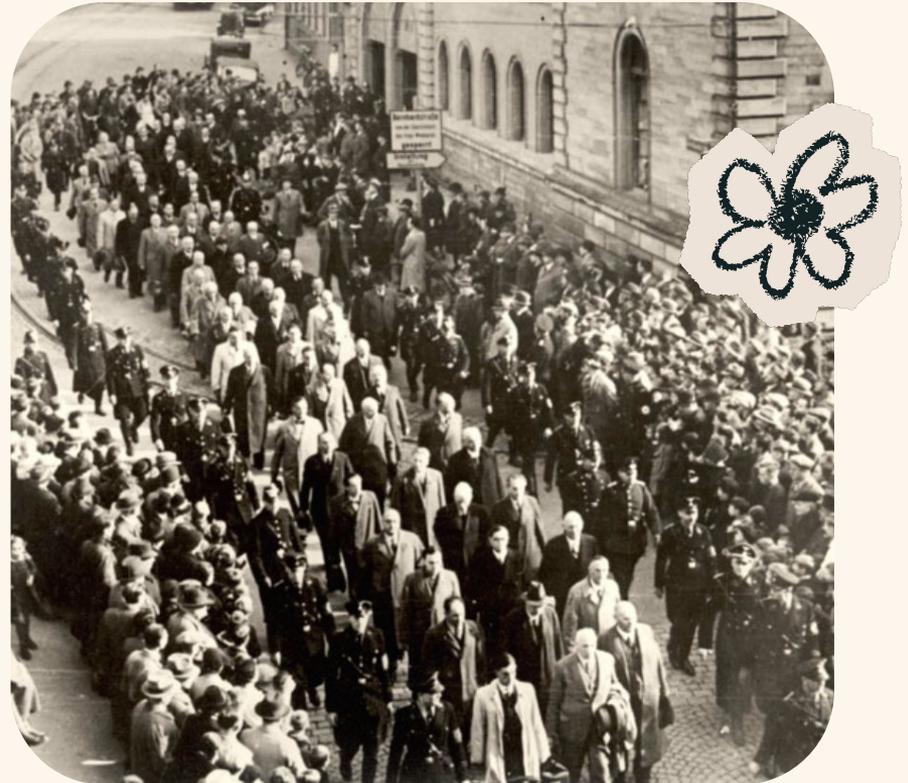
Hungary: Tanítanék ("I wish to teach" in Hungarian) movement of resistance against Orbán's attack on education (2024)

Norway (1942)

Around 8,000 - 10,000 of Norway's 12,000 teachers refused to teach the Nazis' fascist curricula, submitted letters of refusal, and continued to teach classes clandestinely. Prevented schools from being incorporated in fascist state and thwarted Quisling regime.

Tactics:

- Wearing of symbols (paper clips)
- Boycotted state institutions
- Refused to teach curriculum
- Resigned, taught in secret, made repression backfire



Chile (1980s)

During Pinochet's dictatorship, diverse groups of Chilean educators and students organized strikes, underground study circles, and mass demonstrations, using schools and universities as hubs of nonviolent resistance against authoritarian rule.

Tactics:

- Hunger strikes
- Occupying spaces
- Public shaming of Pinochet's regime
- Clandestine education



Hungary (2022-present)

Tanítanék, a grassroots movement, built a nationwide coalition, supporting punished educators, mobilizing 90,000+ supporters, and sustaining nonviolent resistance to Orbán's authoritarian education policies.

Tactics:

- Strikes over unjust wages, poor conditions
- Student walkouts & human chains
- Creation of public strike fund (backed by key influencers)
- Significant digital outreach



4

**What we can build
together**

Three Earths: A Way to Think About this Moment

EARTH 1

The before times



“democracy”

EARTH 2

Where we are now



authoritarianism / fascism

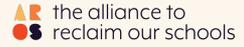
EARTH 3

The future we need to build



something better

We want to build **ALIGNED CIRCLES** of ACTION in communities throughout the country



Why are we so focused on ACTION?

Leaders like us can help people find purpose together in these uncertain times.

Groups of people find purpose by doing real things together that none of us could do alone.



Also it's more empowering than sitting still!

HOW?

Let's build the muscle of doing things together!

**Let's lean into actions that center non-cooperation,
to normalize saying NO.**

**Let's see if we can connect with and persuade more
folks to join us to oppose what is happening.**

We want to build **ALIGNED CIRCLES of ACTION**
in communities throughout the country.

How do we achieve alignment?



Knowing what makes us move together



Getting more people to stand with us



Going for scale and building
the broader resistance movement

**These are core principles
of non-cooperation and
building the resistance we
need right now!.**



Knowing what makes us move together

Movements in the past have used a clear understanding of “redlines” to decide what we collectively say NO to and when we move together.

That’s why we made our non-permission slip. These are our redlines. You cross them – we move.

NON-PERMISSION SLIP

Hey Secretary of Education Linda McMahon:

I believe every student deserves excellent, fully-funded schools—welcoming, safe spaces to learn and grow, with teachers and programs that help them thrive and prepare them for the future.

Therefore, I DO NOT grant you permission to:

- Cut school budgets or divert public money to private schools
- Cut special education while pushing families to private schools that reject students with disabilities
- Profit off our schools or sell student data
- Ban honest history or censor what students learn about our diverse country
- Target students based on who they are, or defund programs supporting Black students, immigrant students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students
- Militarize or raid our schools with ICE agents or treat children like threats

Unlike you, I will work to protect and strengthen public schools for every child.

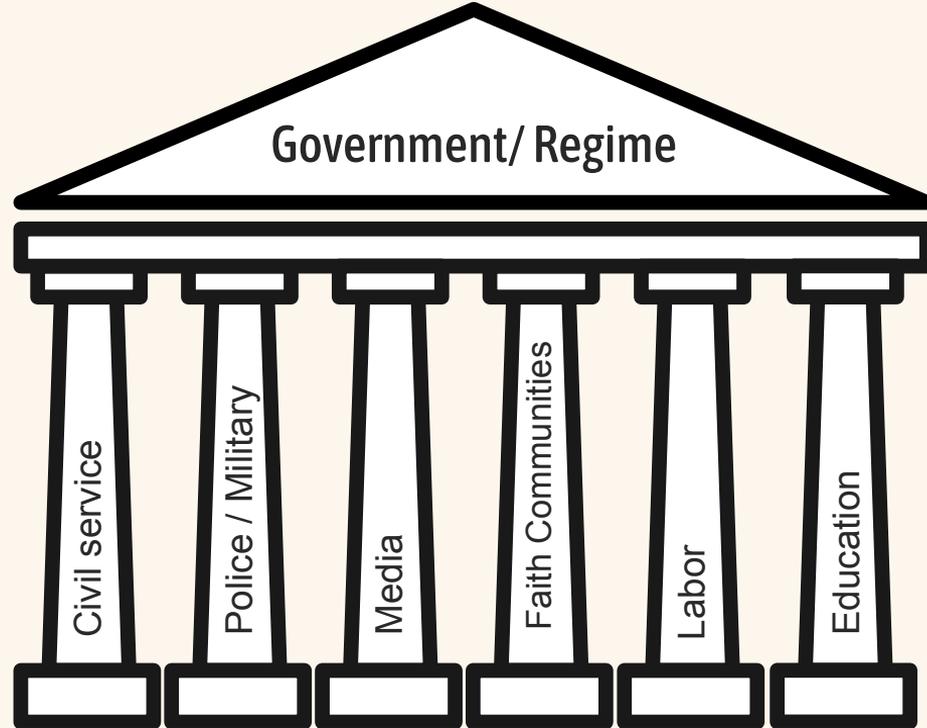


Getting more people to stand with us

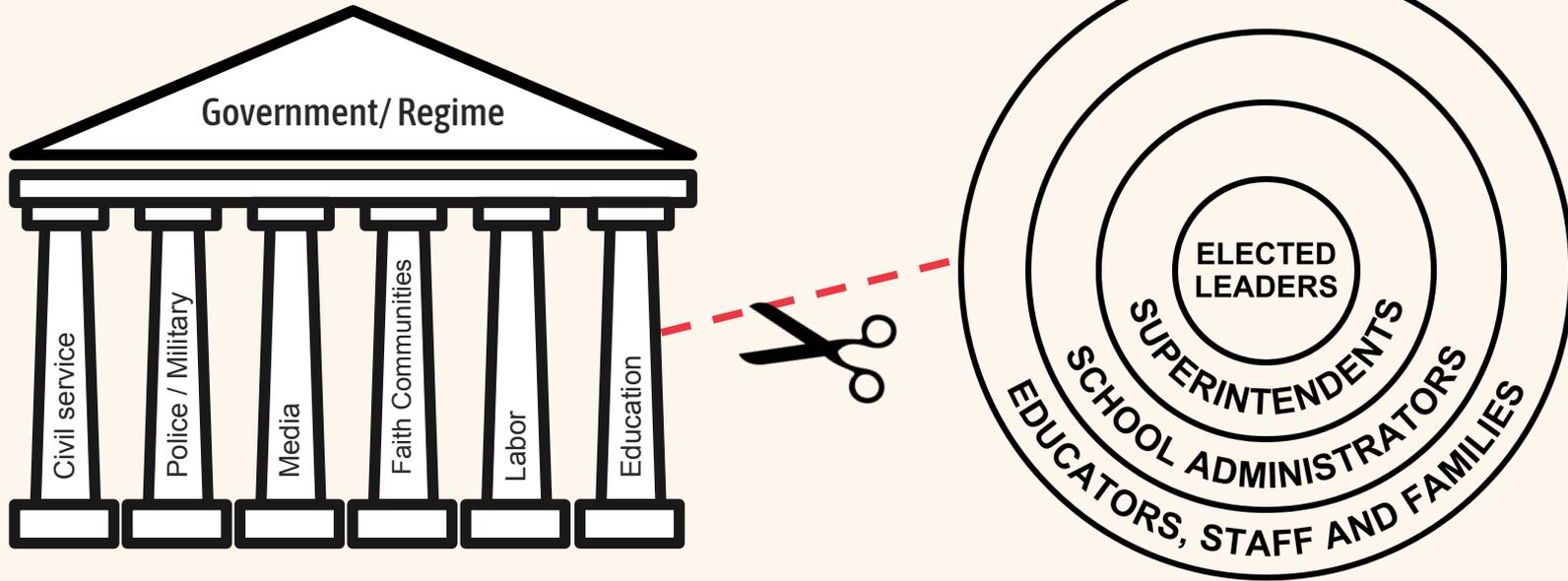
(Also known as SHAKING PILLARS!)



Pillars of Support



Cross Section of a Pillar



Getting Pillars to Crack and Defect

We will work together to get principals, district superintendents, school board members, state elected officials and secretaries of education, and others to take public action to reject the extremist political agenda that aims to dismantle public education.

We are currently asking these education leaders to write letters to their members of Congress about why their schools should be protected as “sensitive locations” from any ICE activity.



Together, our advocacy shifts the ground

Federal education advocacy this year....

- **Stopped** some of the worst parts of the federal voucher program
- **Reversed** Trump's suspension of \$6.5 billion in afterschool funds
- **Ensured** on-time delivery of majority of federal funds to schools in the fall, despite government shutdown
- **Pressured** Congress to reject \$12 billion in Trump's proposed cuts to schools



SO, what can we do right NOW?

1. Sign the the non-permission slip and send it to three friends

Signers will receive information on how to **take action** to impact federal education budget and policy.



SO, what should we do right NOW?

2. Join Free the Future Action Calls!

Biweekly 1-hour calls on Wednesday evenings, the next one is February 25th. We will talk about:

- **HOW** to start an action circle for public ed
- **WHO** to recruit for your circle
- **WHAT** actions your circle can take

You will meet great people and get support to take action for public schools!

