



## AFT Washington 2022 Candidate Questionnaire

### About AFT Washington

AFT Washington represents approximately 6,500 education professionals working in community and technical colleges, regional universities, early learning, and K-12. Our members work with all ages of students, from young children in pre-K education settings to adults in higher education, as well as all facets of education. Our members are bus drivers, maintenance workers, faculty, paraeducators, food service workers, custodians, success coaches, grounds crew members, and more. Together, with our members and national organization, we advocate and fight for:

- Safe, welcoming, and thriving neighborhood schools for every student, and high-quality, affordable post-high school opportunities to fulfill our paramount duty to help *all* students succeed, at every level;
- Economic and advancement opportunities for everyone;
- Affordable, high-quality healthcare for everyone;
- Democracy, pluralism, and voting rights by involving the voices of students, parents, and the community, side-by-side with educational employees and elected officials;
- Racial, social, financial, and civic equity, and fighting back against discrimination, hatred, and bigotry.

We hope you will take this opportunity to complete the questionnaire below and allow us to better understand your candidacy. Completing the questionnaire is required for consideration of endorsement or possible campaign contributions. If our Committee on Political Education (COPE) decides they would like further information, we may ask you to participate in an interview.

To be considered, return your completed questionnaire via email, by close of business, on March 25<sup>th</sup> to [aftwashington@aftwa.org](mailto:aftwashington@aftwa.org). If you have questions, please leave a message at 206-242-4777.

### Candidate Biographical Information

**Name:** Sharlett Mena

**Candidate for which office:** State House of Representatives 29th LD, Position 2

**Party affiliation:** Democrat

**Political background** (*offices held or currently hold, offices ran for, party positions, etc.*):

I have had the privilege of serving in public service roles at the federal, state, and local level. I began my career as staff in the United State Congress, where I worked to get thousands of Americans signed-up for healthcare under the Affordable Care Act. At that time, I led a bilingual outreach campaign and planned events for residents to meet with certified navigators to sign-up for healthcare, free of charge. I also led

campaigns for families to get no-cost immunizations before heading back to school, and for legal permanent residents to get no-cost legal assistance to apply for U.S. citizenship.

While working in the Washington State Legislature, I was part of the team that worked behind the scenes on policies like the Washington Voting Rights Act. While working in the Senate, I was also selected to lead an audit of the Senate sexual harassment policies, and ultimately rewrite them to implement a safer reporting structure.

While working as Deputy Director of Federal Affairs for Governor Inslee, I led statewide efforts to protect Washingtonians against harmful policies like cuts to food stamps, family separation, and environmental rollbacks. I am currently at the Washington State Department of Ecology where I work with governments and stakeholders to protect clean air and water, implement climate action, and advance environmental justice.

I ran to represent the 29th Legislative District (Position 2) in the House of Representatives in 2020 as well. This year, the seat is open.

**Community or organizational memberships (past and present):**

Outside of work, I am an active community organizer. I have led actions for immigration reform and to advance voting rights. In August of 2021, I co-created [Voter Turnup](#), a movement led by people of color to engage and empower each other through voter registration, cultural expression, and civic engagement.

I also serve as an elected Precinct Committee Officer for the 29th Legislative District Democrats, and I am a Board Member of the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council. Additionally, I serve on the Boards of Fuse Washington, Progreso, and the Planned Parenthood Votes Washington Political Action Committee. I was also appointed by Governor Jay Inslee to serve on the Governor's Pandemic After Action Review Task Force as a representative of the immigrant community.

In years prior, I was a youth mentor and taught English and citizenship classes to adults. Also, I have volunteered interpreter services to OneAmerica and the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.

**Current occupation:** Special Assistant to the Director of the Washington State Department of Ecology

**Current employer:** I currently work at the Washington State Department of Ecology as Special Assistant to the Director where I lead statewide strategies to protect, preserve, and restore our environment. I work with Tribes and stakeholders including businesses, local governments, and the environmental community to implement policy. I also lead inter-agency strategies to advance Washington's federal environmental priorities with Congress and the Administration. Finally, I work to incorporate environmental justice into our agency work.

**Are you currently a member of a labor organization?** Unfortunately, I work in an exempt job class and an unrepresented position. As a political appointee and staffer, I have never been able to benefit from union membership. I believe this has to change, which is why I supported the Legislature taking initial steps this year to enable collective bargaining among its own staff.

My mom has been a paraeducator with the Pasco School District for almost 20 years. She is a member of the Public School Employees Union. Thanks to my mom's union, our family had stable health care, a reliable paycheck, and security. All Washington workers deserve this security and dignity.

**If yes, which labor organization, and how long have you been a member?** N/A

**If not currently a member of a labor organization, have you ever been?** No, unfortunately I have always had exempt employee status.

**If yes, which labor organization, when, and for how long?** N/A

### *General*

**1. Why are you running for this elective office?** I am running for State Representative in the 29<sup>th</sup> Legislative District of Washington because we have been struggling with the same issues for far too long. We are one of the most diverse and hardworking communities in Washington State. It is time for a new generation to take responsibility for these issues.

Folks here are living paycheck to paycheck, if they are lucky. The COVID health and economic crisis has only exacerbated our worst problems including income inequality, health disparities, and food insecurity. At the same time, our area has some of the highest air pollution concentrations of anywhere in the state, putting us at a higher risk of death from coronavirus.

I understand what it is like to work against the odds. I come from a family of immigrant farmworkers. I did not speak any English when I started school. It was hard, but with a little help from public services and a lot of hard work, I became the first person in my family to attend and graduate college. Since then I have dedicated my career to public service working in the U.S. House of Representatives, the Washington State Legislature, and for our Governor Jay Inslee.

Too often, I have found myself the only person with my perspective and experiences during conversations about how to respond to harmful federal policies such as Family Separation, Public Charge, and cuts to the food stamp program. This must change. Our district deserves a representative leadership who understand what it is like to struggle and will put people first.

I am committed to fighting for an economy that works for all of us, health care for all, quality education for our kids, and combating climate change. I am also committed to campaign finance reform in Washington, so we can put power back into the hands of the people. This is why I am in this race.

**2. What qualities distinguish you from other candidates for this office?** As a candidate, I bring with me a depth of experience in government, community organizing, and service. I also bring with me lived experience as a Latinx woman from an immigrant family. The 29th Legislative District is minority-majority.

Unfortunately, we are far from achieving the diversity we need in the Washington Legislature. Having worked in government and policy roles for the last ten years, I know that those we elect get the final say on critical decisions, and that voices like ours are desperately needed in those spaces.

Additionally, my campaign is distinct because we are reaching out to communities that have been routinely overlooked. We are working to connect, not just with routine voters, but first-time voters, folks who have recently had their voting rights restored, and people who were purged from the voting rolls.

Finally, I am bringing my family values to this race. I am the proud daughter of Mexican immigrants. My mom came to Washington doing migrant farmwork, and she met my dad working at the meat cutting plant, IBP, in the Tri-Cities. They traded off working day and night shifts so someone was always with my brothers and me. They are fighters. Just like the folks in the 29th. My parents taught me to dream big and work hard for results. This drives my work in the campaign.

*Revenue and Education*

1. For decades Washington State has had the most regressive tax system in the country, contributing to underfunding of public education and many other investments in the public good. **The pandemic has highlighted the numerous gaps in education funding that persist, for example in the form of the digital divide, the need for wrap-around services, stagnant wages, etc. When new funding is allocated, it is often for specific populations of students or specific programs and in relatively small sums. How will you approach finding new sources of revenue to both invest in Washingtonians and create a more progressive revenue system?**

**Do you support...**

	Yes	No
<b>Capital Gains Tax?</b>	X	
<b>Wealth Tax?</b>	X	
<b>Estate Tax?</b>	X	
<b>Elimination of cap on Workforce Education Investment Account tax?</b>	X	

2. During the pandemic, many Washingtonians have lost their jobs and been evicted from their homes. The poverty rate has increased during the pandemic, particularly for BIPOC Americans. In the 2022 legislative session, a bill was introduced that would have given cash assistance to those below the poverty line with a stipend, also known as Universal Basic Income or Guaranteed Basic Income. **What is your position on this policy? Do you believe it can help address the racial wealth gap?**

I support UBI/GBI and was sad that it didn't make it further in the process during the 2022 session. Direct cash assistance has proven efficacy. The working families tax credit was a great step in the right direction, but we must go further to address the racial wealth gap. I have heard directly from community members that cash assistance has helped them keep a roof over their heads, feed their kids, and pay off debt.

One of the key priorities of my campaign is tax reform. Washington's current tax structure is one of the most inequitable and regressive in this country. We currently rely heavily on sales tax otherwise infamously known as the "poverty tax." Some of our lowest-income residents pay nearly 18% of their income in state and local taxes while our highest-income earners pay merely 3% (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy Washington-Who Pays? 6th edition). Sales taxes such as these are not only morally wrong, as they hurt our community and hamper class mobility, they also leave us incredibly vulnerable to recessions.

With large corporations and wealthy Americans using tax loopholes to pay little to nothing in taxes, we have a large amount of untapped income for the state. Closing these loopholes and reforming the broken tax system will bring in new revenue. With more reliable and robust revenue sources, we would be able to invest in people and critical programs.

3. Public education, from K-12 through Post-High School has seen state disinvestment for several decades. **What will you do to increase the funding of community and technical colleges in order to invest in the workforce? Do you support pay equity for part-time faculty?**

We must prioritize funding for CTCs with progressive taxation. The capital gains tax will hopefully withstand the current lawsuits, but whether or not it does, I will continue to advocate for a fair tax code that would allow for the bold investments necessary. More than 360,000 students attend our state's CTCs every year. The pandemic and recession have heightened the urgency of addressing racial and economic inequity. The tensions in our society over systemic racism and the economic impacts of a deteriorated economy call for significant investments in the CTC system.

While the Washington State Supreme Court ruled the State Legislature met its obligation under McCleary, we are still far from our goal of fully and fairly funding public education for every student. Our districts are struggling and we need greater investments in lower class sizes, special education, mental and behavioral health services, professional development opportunities for educators, and more. We also need greater investment in learning opportunities and professional development for all staff at our schools, especially in the areas of racial competency and equity. We must make these important investments if we are ever going to close the opportunity gap in Washington State.

Washington should require that full- and part-time ratios in the CTC system be returned to 2008 levels. I absolutely support pay equity for part-time faculty; I believe in equal pay for equal work. Faculty of color are disproportionately impacted by the increase in part-time and adjunct workforce. CTC administrators should turn their focus to pay equity *and* fostering more tenure-track faculty.

4. Pre-K 12 employees work with students dealing with a wide range of issues outside of school, e.g. trauma, behavioral challenges, developmental disabilities, health issues and more. This can pose safety issues, for example for paraeducators who are often hit, bitten, shoved or in other ways harmed because of student behavior. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, which translates to a range of potential solutions. **How would you approach problem solving if a group of workers sought your support in addressing this issue?**

Educators who are in the classroom and experiencing the issues are best equipped to tell us what they need. Any path forward begins with listening and understanding.

It is sad to see the rise in violence in schools with teachers reporting more aggression from students than ever before. Especially over the last couple of years, our students have been through so many difficult and new situations and all of that has a significant impact on their behavior. I would like to work with teachers to find both long-term and short-term solutions to this.

Everyone needs to feel safe at school. We need to protect teachers and other students when a student is getting violent or aggressive as well as address the underlying issue with the student in question. I would help workers create plans to protect everyone involved- that may involve having all the students leave the classroom or calling someone else with proper training for help. Documenting these incidents can also help to have conversations with the student and parents, there may be a pattern that documenting helps reveal. Social workers or school counselors should also be involved in addressing this issue.

Longer-term, we know that our schools need investments and funding to be able to adequately pay teachers and social workers so that class sizes are manageable and workers have the right training to manage situations like this. The protection of a union would also help greatly.

5. In recent years public officials have attempted to solve budget problems through privatization of public services. This diversion of public funds has led to a poor quality of services, reduced accountability, and a loss of good jobs, while failing to realize the promise of saving money. **What is your position on privatization in the education arena? Please explain.**

Our public schools serve our students indiscriminately and shoulder the burden of serving large student populations with varying needs, including language barriers. We have to invest in the institutions that are serving our kids, not subsidize private institutions.

**Do you support...**

	Yes	No
<b>Public tax dollars funding private charter schools?</b>		x
<b>Privatization of school and college resources (i.e. counseling, childcare, student services)?</b>		x
<b>Public Capitol Funds for projects at private colleges and universities?</b>		x

*Collective Bargaining*

1. Many Washingtonians recognize the value of union representation and are organizing at their workplace, such as legislative aides in Olympia, workers at Starbucks, etc. **Do you support every worker’s right to collectively bargain for better working conditions, and their right to join a union? Please explain.**

It was thanks to my mom’s membership with the Public School Employees Union that our family had stable health care, a reliable paycheck, and security. I was raised with strong union values. I know that when we allow unions to be undermined, we allow workers to be undermined as well. We must not only oppose “right to work” policies but fight back with policies designed to protect and create new avenues for workers to organize.

As former staff in the Washington State Legislature, I fully support collective bargaining for staff. All workers have the right to organize and use their collective power. We need to update the law where necessary to remove any barriers to doing so.

I hope to work with unions as a legislator. I know that to properly represent the people, I must consult and listen to those with lived experience. I hope to work with unions on the protections they need and support unions as they bargain with employers.

2. We see ongoing attempts to weaken unions and diminish working conditions here in Washington State and at the federal level. **What policies can support unions and workers' rights and how will you work to enact such policies?**

The safety of workers should always be a top priority for elected officials, but it is now more vital than ever that we support and uphold safety measures and expand them to address the ongoing pandemic variants. Worker safety must always come before profits. I will work to make hazard pay mandatory when workers are asked to put themselves at risk and ensure workers have the proper protective equipment to do work safely during this pandemic and beyond. We must also recognize that the health of workers is much more than proper hazard prevention. Maintaining a healthy workforce means secure scheduling, ample pay, and strong unions.

Our families and communities thrive when workers earn a family wage. Unions are integral to making that a reality as well as maintaining appropriate working conditions.

There is also more we can do in the Legislature to protect workers from sexual harassment and to protect immigrant workers.

**On Sexual harassment:** Schools need to be safe spaces for everyone including the professionals who work there. We must enforce a zero-tolerance policy for harassment in the workplace. I have direct experience working on this issue at the state level. While working in the Washington State Legislature, several accusations against a house member representing my district came out. I and others in my community were outraged and pushed for a recall of this representative. I saw the failings in our systems and worked to correct them: I worked to improve the Senate's sexual harassment reporting structure to make it safer for people to report; for example we created a new avenue for people to report to a non-partisan third party.

Through my work, I saw further improvements that can and should be made in Washington State law to protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace. We must:

- Create an agency to act as a third-party reporting system for workers in the state who experience sexual harassment. Currently, companies and organizations' own HR departments or direct supervisors are the only places for workers to report harassment. This is an obvious conflict of interest and can result in claims being dismissed or diminished.
- Expand mandatory sexual harassment training laws: In 2019 Washington State enacted a new law mandating yearly sexual harassment trainings for certain industries—including the retail, hotel, motel, security, and property services contractor industries-- with more than one employee. We must expand this to be mandatory for all industries; sexual harassment is not relegated to specific areas in our society, but insidious throughout it.

**On Immigrant Workers' Rights:** As the daughter of immigrant farmworkers, the fight for the rights and living standards of immigrants, temporary guest workers, and undocumented students are close to my heart. The Washington State legislature has a duty to protect all members of our community, that includes not only guest workers, but also those who are not citizens. I understand that protecting the rights of these workers to fair wages and safe working conditions, protects the fair wages and safe working conditions of all other members of the workforce, as immigrant labor cannot be exploited for increased profit. I will support and promote policies that work towards these protections and rights.

As Deputy Director of Federal and Interstate Affairs for Gov. Jay Inslee, I worked to protect Washington residents against harmful federal policies that target immigrants. I am committed to maintaining that conviction in the Washington State Legislature.

I look forward to working with AFT on these issues as well as other safety issues AFT would like the legislature to address.

### *Social Justice*

1. What do you see as **your role** as a state official in addressing racial, social, and economic inequities in our educational system? **Please specifically address each issue.**

As a Latinx woman with immigrant roots, being intersectional helps me see the intersectionality of the issues I work on. For example, a student requires a dedicated teacher in the classroom as well as other resources to succeed in school. They also need language access, stable housing, food in their bellies, healthcare, and help with homework. Performance can also be tied to community, geographic location, generational poverty, and more. No issue is truly isolated, nor can it be separated from our identities—least of all income inequality and housing.

The change we need will not happen until communities are represented in government by their own peers. In office, I intend to approach each issue from an intersectional and social justice lens.

The 29th Legislative District is one of the most racially diverse communities in Washington, and most of us are working class. Our kids deserve the same education and opportunities as every other student in this state. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go before realizing that goal. Graduation rates for Black, Latino, Native American, and low-income students in Washington are trailing behind the national average. Our districts are struggling. To start to get to great racial and social equity, we need greater investments in lower class sizes, special education, mental and behavioral health services, and more. We must make these important investments if we are ever going to do right by our students. Additionally, we must continue to invest in our kids through quality early learning opportunities.

Pre-school is proven to build a strong foundation for kids to be successful in school. Investing in our littlest learners can help us close the opportunity gap. When I began pre-school, I did not speak English. Joyce, a teacher's assistant in my Head Start program worked with me every day to help me catch up to my classmates. With her help and a lot of hard work, I not only mastered the English language; I became the first person in my family to graduate from college and received a B.A. in Communication from



Washington State University. This is one of countless examples of how teachers transform their students' lives.

In order to close the education and opportunity gap, and get to greater economic equity, however, we must also look at shortcomings outside of the classroom itself. Growing up in the Tri-Cities, I know first-hand how historical housing segregation persists today and plays an unfair role in determining the quality of education a student receives. I am committed to meeting the state's constitutional obligation to provide every student with a quality education.

Additionally, we must do more to bring diverse teachers and staff into the classroom as well as training educators to serve every student well, regardless of background.

For me, and many students in the 29th, public school was not just a place of cognitive learning, but also a critical lifeline for integrating into a new culture. For many kids, school can be their only safe space or the one place they know for sure they will eat. I believe that our schools are communities and that we must invest in our kids' holistic experience from the classroom to the playground. Like many of our kids in the 29th District, my education was the gateway to opportunity and a better future. I am committed to providing that opportunity to every child in the 29th District and Washington State.

2. We are faced with numerous threats to social justice, including ongoing threats to our immigrant communities, the housing affordability and student debt crises, police accountability, and more.

**Where have you shown leadership and acted on issues of social justice in the past? What will your social justice priorities be if you win your election?**

Social justice is the bedrock of my campaign. As a woman of color from an immigrant family, I know first hand how systemic racism affects the economic well-being of communities of color. Racism permeates every institution in our society and plays a role in determining our health outcomes, educational opportunities, abilities to purchase a home, and more. Those in the LGBTQIA+ community face similar injustices, and when identities such as race and sexual orientation intersect, these issues compound. The same is true for people in the undocumented and disability communities. We must address these inequities at their root by dismantling oppressive systems and rebuilding new, inclusive ones.

I am committed to this goal. I will work with LGBTQIA+ rights groups, anti-racism organizations, and disability rights advocates to support policies that close the opportunity gap in education, create equity in business and higher education, ensure equal pay for equal work, and establish healthcare for all.

I know my lived experience cannot make up for all the voices who are overlooked and shut out when it comes to policy making, but I do know my voice and lived experience will help begin to close the representation gap. However, it is the insight and drive these difficulties have given me that will make me a champion for unsung voices in the Legislature.

From my career in public service and my organizing and advocacy, I already have a track record of working on behalf of social justice issues related to women and immigrant communities, both of which I have outlined in earlier sections of this questionnaire. Once in office, I hope to continue and expand my social justice work.

3. Several bills were passed in the 2021 legislative session designed to reduce police violence and hold police accountable; in the 2022 session attempts were made to dilute the definition of excessive force and minimizing the role of de-escalation. **What is your position on these issues?**

Everyone deserves to feel safe in their community, neighborhood, and home. Unfortunately, systemic racism and violence have made this unattainable for many families and people of color. I was proud to join demonstrations demanding greater accountability for law enforcement in 2020. I support the strides made by the state legislature in 2021 regarding policy accountability. We must hold the line on supporting de-escalation and creating accountability for excessive use of force. While legislation is routinely tweaked for clarity, this year's HB 2037 dropped the use of force standard from 'probable cause' to 'reasonable suspicion' in certain circumstances. This is a rollback.

When I talk to voters in the 29th, I frequently hear about their concerns with the rise in crime in Pierce County. The best way to address this issue is not to roll back accountability measures that keep the public safe, it is to address the root causes of crime including economic and housing insecurity.

4. Hate crimes have risen 25 percent nationally since 2015. But the number of hate crimes in Washington state increased by 97 percent. There were 542 hate-crime incidents reported statewide. **How do you plan on addressing the increase in hate crimes in Washington state?**

Hate crimes, or biased-motivated crimes, are particularly distressing because perpetrators target people and groups based on who they are. Hate crimes foment fear and insecurity among communities and make all of us less safe.

It is unacceptable that incidence of violent hate crimes continue to rise. As a legislator, I would publicly support impacted communities and work to educate other members. We must have a zero tolerance policy for any hate crime, and it begins with awareness and culture change. Second, we need enhanced training for law enforcement so they understand what hate crimes are and learn to identify them. We also need greater transparency and accountability in law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Too many hate crimes go unreported because law enforcement fails to identify them. Many victims choose not to report hate crimes out of fear of retaliation or mistrust of law enforcement. This is especially salient for members of the LGBTQ+ community that are also people of color. We must continue to improve the relationship between law enforcement and our communities through awareness, training, and accountability.

I understand this is no easy feat, but I am committed to being a champion on this issue. We must double down on these efforts. There is too much at stake.

## Campaign Information

**Are there any additional comments you would like to provide that you believe are necessary in understanding your candidacy?**

As a strong advocate for livable wages and the labor movement, I know that passing protections and supporting collective bargaining mean little if we do not have a system to properly enforce these laws. The burden of proof needs to be moved off the workers, and onto the employees to prove they are

complying with the protections. We need to create a robust auditing system as well as an easy to use reporting system.

**What is your overall campaign budget?** Since we do not yet know who my opponents will be we have not created a budget for this race. Once someone else files or when we get closer to filing week we will have more information.

**How many volunteers are currently working on your campaign? What is your goal for volunteers working on your campaign?** Since it is March, I am doing most of my own doorbelling and work. As we get closer to the primary we plan to run a campaign largely supported by volunteers, similar to my previous campaign in 2020.

**To date, how much money have you raised and obtained pledge for?**

Since launching in December we have raised over \$36,000

**Please provide any endorsements you have received:**

Federal and State Officials:

- Governor Jay Inslee
- Attorney General Bob Ferguson
- Treasurer Mike Peliciotti
- Congressman Derek Kilmer
- Congresswoman Maryland Strickland
- Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal
- State Representative Steve Kirby
- State Representative Melanie Morgan
- State Representative David Hackney
- State Senator Yasmin Trudeau
- State Senator Manka Dhingra
- State Senator Rebecca Saldaña
- State Senator Emily Randall
- State Senator Mona Das
- State Senator Joe Nguyen
- State Senator Sam Hunt

Tacoma and Pierce County Officials:

- Mayor Victoria Woodards
- Deputy Mayor Keith Blocker
- County Councilmember Derek Young
- County Councilmember Ryan Mello
- County Councilmember Jani Hitchen

- Councilmember Marty Campbell
- City Councilmember Catherine Ushka
- City Councilmember Kiara Daniels
- City Councilmember Joe Bushnell
- City Councilmember Sarah Rumbaugh
- City Councilmember Kristina Walker
- School Board Member Korey Strozier
- School Board Member Chelsea McElroy
- School Board Member Lisa Keating

Community Leaders:

- Chair of the Commission on African American Affairs Dorian Waller
- Chair of the 27th Legislative Democrats Justin Camarata
- Phyllis Izant
- Evelyn Feilding Lopez

Organizations:

- Fuse Washington

**Campaign address: City: Zip:** PO Box 7437, Tacoma, WA, 98417

**Campaign phone:** (253) 778-6712

**Home phone:** (509)591-1729

**Email address:** [info@sharlettmena.org](mailto:info@sharlettmena.org) ; [sharlett@sharlettmena.org](mailto:sharlett@sharlettmena.org)

**Website address:** <https://www.sharlettmena.org>