



A Union of Professionals

## The American Federation of Teachers' Quality Education Agenda

American public schools have a responsibility to prepare all students for the opportunities and challenges that await them, and in so doing, to develop an educated citizenry that strengthens our country. Our aspirations for our children are inseparable from our societal imperatives.

Every day, in classrooms across the country, teachers help move us toward those goals. But our schools are not organized or supported in a way to provide all children with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life and career. By and large, our education system, public and private, has not been affected by the knowledge-driven revolutions that have transformed so many other sectors—technology, medicine, manufacturing and communications, to name a few. As a result, too many American schools are not equipped to prepare students for pursuits in these areas, or in others yet to emerge or be imagined.

Many American education policies reinforce the inadequacies of our approach to education: the misuse of standardized testing, the narrowing of the curriculum, the emphasis on competition over collaboration, and other top-down reforms that have divested parents and teachers of input and have led to inadequate support and difficult conditions—all producing rampant teacher turnover. Add to that the deep, harmful and ongoing cuts to education, and it's little wonder that the United States falls below many other countries on international education comparisons. (It should be noted, however, that if we control for our higher rate of child poverty, U.S. students perform as well as or better than all our competitors. This speaks volumes about the necessity to address children's poverty issues with healthcare, social services and after-school programs.)

Such an approach to education will not get our children, our communities or our country where we need to go. Test-taking skills must take a back seat to developing students' ability to analyze and apply knowledge. Memorization must give way to true mastery of concepts. Narrowed curricula must be broadened to give students the breadth and

depth of knowledge they need to be truly well-educated individuals. The education we provide our children—all our children—must help develop their capacity to problem-solve, think critically and approach challenges with ingenuity. And in order for children to do all this, their teachers must be well trained, supported and developed throughout their careers; given true voice in their work; and treated as professionals.

American public education must change; that much is beyond dispute. But *how* to change it is a matter of great debate, with two main theories emerging.

Those who describe themselves as education "reformers" advocate top-down overhauling of systems, using standardized testing in math and English as the primary measure of student and teacher performance and success, and using competition to leverage change, although neither approach has been shown to improve student achievement. Their tactics are intentionally disruptive and invite instability: frequently opening and closing entire schools rather than fostering stable, successful neighborhood schools; and cycling through a procession of short-term teachers, seeking to fire, instead of develop, large numbers of teachers. They require teachers to implement policies made without their input, yet in effect shift responsibility for school outcomes solely onto teachers. They use international comparisons to denigrate American schools, but pursue practices that are antithetical to the successful strategies employed in high-achieving countries.

This stands in stark contrast to the approach to educational improvement supported by the American Federation of Teachers and other advocates for systemic, effective education reform. In a speech shortly after becoming president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten said that, when it comes to education reform (with the exception of vouchers), "Everything should be on the table, provided it is good for kids and fair to teachers." Since that time, the AFT has pursued a quality education

agenda focused on **evidence** (to ensure quality, efficiency and effectiveness), **equity** (to provide a great education to all children), **scalability** (to make success systemic, not isolated) and **sustainability** (so that the reforms outlast changes in school, district and union leadership; don't fall prey to budget cycles; and aren't buffeted about by political shifts). And the AFT and our affiliates have sought to achieve this through collaborative efforts and shared responsibility.

The AFT's quality education agenda is based on best practices in American public school systems as well as in high-achieving countries. In this theory of education reform, teachers and teachers unions are partners in reform—not impediments.

### **OUR QUALITY EDUCATION AGENDA:**

The major proposals the AFT has developed and implemented are serious and comprehensive. They focus on the two primary linchpins of educational attainment—what students need to succeed, and what their teachers need to facilitate success. And they include the societal support necessary to foster the conditions to achieve all this.

### **Teacher Development and Evaluation**

With few exceptions, the best teachers, the ones who make a difference in children's lives year after year, are made, not born. That is why an ongoing teacher development program, closely aligned with teacher evaluation and due process, is crucial to reform that lasts. When we started this work in April 2009, teacher evaluations (with few exceptions) were broken—brief, isolated classroom visits providing often meaningless snapshots.

The AFT set about to design a better way. We convened leading independent teacher evaluation experts, as well as educators and teachers union leaders, to develop a teacher development and evaluation framework that overhauls the way most teachers currently are evaluated. This framework is rigorous, objective and in-depth. It provides a foundation for teacher evaluation to be a supporting exercise, not simply a sorting exercise.

The AFT is helping to put into place development and evaluation systems that help new and struggling teachers improve, help good teachers become great, and accurately identify teachers who do not belong in the profession. These systems focus on improving the vast majority of teachers, not just removing a small minority, in order to ensure that all kids are taught by the excellent teachers they deserve.

Since we announced this framework in January 2010, more than 100 school districts have started working with the AFT to adopt this more effective way of evaluating teachers

and developing their skills. And in July 2011, the American Association of School Administrators joined us as a partner in implementing the framework in school systems across the country.

Our focus on developing great teachers once they are in the classroom is not intended to ignore or minimize the issue of teacher preparation. Pipeline issues must be addressed to ensure that our nation's schools of education properly prepare and train future teachers, and that new teachers receive mentoring and other support through induction programs to reduce high turnover rates.

Some officials seem to believe you can fire your way to good teaching. Not only is such an approach disruptive to learning, it defies both common sense and voluminous research showing that teachers improve over time and with support.

In addition, trying to fire your way to good teaching is very costly, making it untenable in this difficult fiscal environment. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that teacher turnover costs the nation \$7.34 billion each year. That figure includes the amount of money it takes annually to recruit, hire, process and train new teachers. This approach is not just bad education policy, it's bad economic policy.

The AFT also has proposed a process for aligning teacher evaluations to due process. Our proposal begins with implementing a comprehensive teacher development and evaluation system, such as the one outlined above. In cases where teachers are deemed to be unsatisfactory, it triggers an improvement and support process that can last no longer than one year. At the conclusion of the support and assistance period, an administrator judges whether the teacher is now performing up to the standards. The school district decides whether to retain or remove a teacher, a decision that can be reviewed by a neutral third party. The entire hearing process can take no longer than 100 days, and in many cases would be much faster.

### **Curricula**

Students need great curricula, delivered within an environment that eliminates barriers to success. Our children won't have the opportunity to become the thinkers, innovators and leaders of tomorrow if they have been taught only the subjects tested. Curricula should ground students in areas ranging from foreign languages to physical education, civics to the sciences, history to health, as well as literature, mathematics and the arts.

A curriculum does what academic content standards can't do. It provides teachers with a detailed road map for helping

students reach the standards. It is the how-to guide for teachers. The curriculum provides information to teachers about the content, instructional strategies and expectations for student performance levels necessary to meet the standards. A curriculum must be comprehensive without being restrictive; it must provide examples and allow for flexibility; and it must establish the broad parameters within which teachers apply their professional knowledge and judgment.

Curricula do not work in isolation and must be a part of the entire system—including reading materials, textbooks and software; information on instructional strategies to help teach the standards in a variety of ways; professional development; and assessment. Curricula and these supports must be aligned with the academic standards and standards-based assessments that students are expected to master, including the Common Core standards for reading and math. And teachers must have access to high-quality, ongoing professional development to help them use the curricula to differentiate their instruction to ensure all students succeed. Right now, such curricula aren't routinely in place, and many teachers are forced to make it up every day.

### **Community Schools—Schools as the hub of a neighborhood**

While good teaching is crucial to student learning, there are factors in every child's life that are beyond the teacher's control and may deeply affect the child's ability to perform well in school. In fact, decades of research have shown that out-of-school factors account for up to two-thirds of student achievement results. Sadly, there are more impediments to learning in the lives of poor children than there are in the lives of children from more advantaged circumstances. If we are to close the achievement gap, we must address the factors that impede learning. This is especially important now, when the struggling economy has increased the pressures on families.

The most direct and effective solution is to provide accessible services right in the school. Schools can coordinate with local providers—medical providers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other local nonprofits, for example—to provide services where families can readily access them. The community schools model has proven successful in a number of school systems, and it should be replicated more widely.

Community schools typically are open beyond regular school hours to provide access to tutoring, homework assistance and recreational activities, as well as medical, dental and mental health services. Families and other

community residents also may benefit from legal advice, immigration assistance, employment counseling, housing help and English-language or GED instruction, depending on needs. These services can alleviate family crises and stresses that interfere with children's schooling.

Teachers are a critical focal point for coordinating the services that each child needs and ensuring that academic services are connected with what children are learning in school. Community schools have been supported by numerous AFT affiliates, including the successful programs in Syracuse, N.Y., where Say Yes to Education, a nonprofit foundation, links students and their families to needed services, including a guarantee of tuition to a state university or college for high school graduates. And in Cincinnati, Community Learning Centers provide access to health and social services, as well as enrichment, tutoring and adult education programs. Among the benefits have been higher student test scores, and better attendance and parent involvement rates. In addition, the AFT Innovation Fund is supporting the expansion of community schools in Philadelphia and West Virginia.

### **Collaboration**

Top-down, dictatorial mandates are a prescription for failure in public education, as in most other sectors. As a theory of action, collaboration—in other words, teamwork or working together—has boundless potential. Collaboration based on shared responsibility means that parties are willing to solve problems, confront challenges and innovate in a system that promotes trust and that values involvement in decision-making. Collaboration is not an end in itself, and it cannot be done in isolation. It is used in service of a mission—in this case, improving student success.

Collaborative work—interest-based bargaining, finding the solution instead of winning and losing—is something that too few school systems have enough experience with. Collaborative reform leads administrators, teachers and parents to work together toward goals on which they all agree, using methods they all accept. Collaboration by itself won't create systemic change. But it is the vehicle that creates trust, that enables risk, and that fosters shared responsibility. Given the complex work we do in education, it only makes sense to draw broadly on people's knowledge and to join forces to improve outcomes.

Many school districts have moved collaboration from theory to practice. In Lowell, Mass., the partnership between the United Teachers of Lowell and the superintendent laid the foundation for changes that have greatly improved student outcomes in the district. The former superintendent and union president worked in concert: visiting every school

in the district together, sharing student achievement data and goals, listening to teachers' concerns and soliciting their suggestions. Lowell has a new superintendent, but collaboration has been key to the district's success, and the expectation is that it will be the hallmark of labor-management relations in the district going forward.

The ABC Unified School District in southeastern Los Angeles County once was mired in labor-management conflict and unacceptable conditions for teaching and learning. The resolution of a divisive strike and the arrival of a new superintendent provided an opportunity to wipe the slate clean. The teachers union and the new superintendent jointly developed an intensive reading program targeted to assist struggling schools in the district. The success of that partnership led to further collaborative efforts around curriculum, the use of data to improve student achievement, and an innovative program to mentor new teachers. The union and district have been awarded an AFT Innovation Fund grant to extend administration-union partnerships to 10 schools through projects tied to student achievement. And the superintendent and union president—both of whom are successors to those who seeded this collaboration—regularly present their approach to other districts and education observers, in hopes of expanding it to many more school systems. While the superintendent and union president positions are now both held by new people, the culture of collaboration has lasted.

In Charlotte County, Fla., school management and union leaders created Partnership and Performance Councils in their 2004 collective bargaining agreement, allowing for teachers and staff to provide input on decisions affecting teaching and learning. The collaboration and joint professional development academies have been credited for increases in student achievement and graduation rates.

## Community

America's public schools truly are *the public's schools*—given the responsibility of educating all children; imparting the knowledge, values and skills required for full civic participation; and dependent upon (and reflective of) the support and involvement of the communities in which they are located.

The AFT is committed to strengthening the ties between public schools and their communities for the benefit of all. This commitment is evident in our work and priorities at the national level—through initiatives such as Faith in Action, which brings together leaders from the Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Protestant communities, along with AFT leaders and staff, to work on areas of common concern. The AFT has also actively supported efforts such as the One

Nation march, a major event last fall backed by community and civil rights groups, faith leaders and labor unions to build support for an agenda promoting secure jobs, high-quality schools and equal opportunity.

Many AFT affiliates are focusing on connecting with their communities too. The Cleveland Teachers Union, for example, is involved in ongoing efforts with local business leaders, educators, clergy and parents to strengthen Cleveland's public schools and communities. In Detroit, the AFT and the Detroit Federation of Teachers are engaging the community in developing a reform agenda for the city's public schools, listening to community groups and asking them to partner with the union on school improvement efforts.

New York City's United Federation of Teachers has worked tirelessly over the past decade to partner with parents, community leaders and faith-based institutions to maintain and improve relations between the union and the community. For example, the union hired parent and community liaisons to promote parent advocacy and sponsor regional parent conferences. It also maintains a popular Dial-a-Teacher homework assistance program. For the 2011 school year, the UFT's Albert Shanker scholarship fund provided scholarships to 250 low-income public high school seniors, totaling more than \$1 million. And the UFT's latest outreach efforts involve developing ongoing partnerships with the faith community.

The interconnectedness between community values and the goals of America's labor movement was made clear recently in Wisconsin. There, the governor sought legislation to strip public workers of bargaining rights and voice on the job. Rather than seeing this as affecting only union members, the people of Wisconsin rallied against what they saw as an attack on democracy and fairness that would adversely affect the quality of their lives. The groundswell of opposition to the governor's efforts included farmers, teachers, parents, religious communities, union members and nonunion members alike.

Similarly, in Ohio, nearly 1.3 million people signed petitions to allow voters in the state to vote this fall on whether to repeal legislation curtailing union rights. If the petition had been signed by every union member in the state but not a single additional person, it would have fallen short. Instead, widespread community mobilization secured five times the number of signatures necessary to put the measure on the ballot.

For more information about the AFT's school improvement efforts, please visit [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org).