



*A Union of Professionals*

## **The American Federation of Teachers' Quality Education Agenda**

A strong, equitable public education system is critical—both to ensure all our children are prepared for life, college and career, and to enable the United States to achieve its potential as a vibrant democracy, an engine of economic opportunity and a global leader.

Every day, in classrooms across the country, teachers help move us toward these goals. But extensive improvements to America's education system are essential to help all students acquire the knowledge and skills they need for success in the 21st century. Students must not only attain knowledge, they must be able to apply what they have learned. They must have access to a curriculum that focuses not just on what is to be tested, but on what should be learned to make them well-rounded thinkers and individuals. And in order for students to do all this, their teachers must receive adequate preparation, support and development throughout their careers; be given true voice in their work; and be treated as professionals.

Many of the education policies advanced by federal, state and local governments and by school boards have had negative effects, including the misuse of standardized testing, narrowing of the curriculum, an emphasis on competition over collaboration, and punitive accountability systems instead of thoughtful accountability measures and supports that foster shared responsibility for student success.

In addition, many of the educators we represent, and the students, families and communities we serve, face additional challenges. Three million more children are living in poverty since the start of the recession, and the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is now almost twice as large as the gap between black students and white students. More than 300,000 education jobs have been cut since 2008, and educators are struggling to meet their students' increasing needs with fewer resources.

This climate is no excuse for not having a proactive education agenda. In fact, it demands it.

The American Federation of Teachers is committed to advancing a Quality Education Agenda that matches high expectations for both students and teachers with high levels of support. Shortly after becoming president of the AFT, Randi Weingarten said that education reform should be viewed through the lens of whether it is good for kids and fair to teachers. Since that time, the AFT has pursued an agenda focused on **evidence** (to ensure high quality, efficiency and effectiveness), **equity** (to provide a great education to all children), **scalability** (to make success systemic, so it extends to all, not just some) and **sustainability** (so 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).

Even in this tough budgetary time, the AFT has aligned resources and programs to help our state and local affiliates make this agenda a reality. Through efforts such as investments by the AFT Innovation Fund, the Reconnecting McDowell initiative, the

Share My Lesson initiative, and our work with community partners, we are fighting both for what works and against what does not.

### **A SYSTEMIC APPROACH BASED ON WHAT WORKS**

The AFT's Quality Education Agenda is based on best practices in American public school systems and in the highest-achieving countries, as well as the wisdom and experience of our members. This agenda also promotes the promise of innovative, entrepreneurial solutions.

The systemic reforms advanced in this agenda are especially important given the fragmentation and lack of alignment in education practices in the United States. The countries that consistently top the international rankings, for example, emphasize high-quality teacher preparation, development and collaboration. They align academic standards and instruction with accountability standards and measures. They provide

a more equitable education for all students, and offset the effects of poverty through wraparound services that support students and their families starting when children are born.

High-performing systems treat teachers with respect, involve teachers unions in education policy, and work with them as partners in implementing successful policies and practices. Most of the countries with the highest levels of student performance also have the strongest teachers unions, and the highest-achieving states in the United States are also the most densely unionized.

In the United States, unfortunately, many policymakers fail to support the replication, adaptation or scale-up of effective education practices. They hold up international comparisons primarily to put down American schools, but then pursue approaches that are antithetical to the successful strategies employed in those systems.

The AFT Quality Education Agenda proposes a different approach. Although it doesn't include all programmatic elements necessary for a quality education agenda—such as how to ensure early childhood learning and provide multiple pathways to college and/or career—it focuses on the primary linchpins of educational attainment: what students need to succeed, what their teachers need to facilitate success, and the societal supports necessary to foster the conditions to achieve all this.

## **DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING**

No one would deny that teachers are central to the education process, yet teachers too often are denied the tools, time and trust necessary to aid them in their extraordinarily complex work. Some officials even believe that you can fire your way to good teaching. Such an approach defies both common sense and research showing that, on average, newly hired teachers are least effective and that teachers improve over time and with support.

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 ongoing teacher development programs, closely aligned with teacher evaluation and due process, are crucial to sustained reform. Failure to implement such programs carries huge costs.

In the United States, half of teachers leave in the first five years because of lack of support or other frustrations. 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 is bad economic policy.

Three years ago, the AFT convened leading independent teacher evaluation experts, as well as educators and teachers union leaders, to develop a rigorous and objective teacher development and evaluation framework with a focus on both teacher practice and student learning. The AFT's framework stresses the continuous development of all teachers, rather than the removal of a small minority, in order to ensure all children have well-supported,

effective teachers. The purpose of this work is to help new and struggling teachers improve, enable good teachers to become great, and accurately identify teachers who, after appropriate support and assistance, do not belong in the profession.

Numerous affiliates are working with the AFT and their district partners to adopt or adapt this framework. For example, the AFT worked with teachers in New Haven, Conn., during negotiation and passage of a new teacher contract that established a collaborative evaluation system emphasizing instructional growth. This new system already has had a positive impact on teacher practice and has become a model for its focus on teacher quality through strong labor-management collaboration.

With grants from the AFT Innovation Fund and the federal Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), AFT state affiliates in Rhode Island and New York have created new teacher development and evaluation models through a collaborative approach with teachers and district partners. These models are rapidly spreading beyond the original districts due to their focus on student growth, collaboration and improved instructional practice.

The AFT also has developed 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 a teacher's work is rated unsatisfactory, it triggers an improvement and support process that can last no longer than one year. At the conclusion of that period, an evaluator or team of evaluators judges whether the teacher is meeting or exceeding the standards. The school district then decides whether to retain or remove the 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.

Teacher development is a continuum that starts in teacher preparation and lasts throughout a teacher's career. Because of this, the AFT has convened a task force of AFT members and leaders in preK-12 and higher education to look at ways to better prepare teachers, align preparation and practice, and foster shared accountability among teacher candidates, the institutions that prepare them, and the school districts that hire and support them.

## **DEVELOPING ENGAGING, BROAD CURRICULA FOR THE WHOLE CHILD**

Students need rich curricula that ground them in literature, mathematics, foreign languages, physical education, civics, the sciences, history, health and the arts. Our children won't have the opportunity to become the thinkers, innovators and leaders of tomorrow if they haven't had access to a well-rounded curriculum.

The Common Core State Standards offer a great opportunity to set high goals in English language arts and mathematics for all students, regardless of where they live, and to streamline and clarify the topics and depth of knowledge that students must master.

AFT teachers have been deeply involved in the Common Core State Standards from the outset, including a group that partici-

pated in the writing of the English language arts and math standards. The teachers in this ever-expanding group have deepened their understanding of the instructional shifts demanded by the standards, participated in designing and testing lessons and professional development, and now are contributing to the Next Generation Science Standards. The AFT Innovation Fund is supporting five local affiliates doing important work related to the Common Core standards, including partnering with parents and higher education institutions and producing materials for English language learners. The AFT is committed to similarly deep engagement in the development of assessments aligned to the Common Core standards.

Full and effective implementation of the Common Core standards will be crucial to realizing their potential. Given that education budgets are stretched thin and teachers throughout the country are being asked to do more with less, there are reasonable concerns that states and school systems may skimp on implementation of the Common Core standards, which could further fuel the current fixation on testing as opposed to teaching and learning.

Teachers need tools, such as curricula, classroom resources and training; time to confer with colleagues and to enact this major shift; and trust from their principals and fellow educators to teach in new ways and help students meet the standards. Appropriate class size is another important part of a high-quality education, allowing teachers to focus on individualized attention, differentiated instruction, project-based learning and small-group instruction, and to personalize the school experience. Research shows that targeted investments to lower class size—for example, as an intervention for high-needs children and in the early grades—can have positive effects that last for years. Yet, more and more, class sizes are being increased to save money—at the cost of more personalized instruction for students.

In a bold new undertaking designed to help teachers access the resources they need to help students reach higher standards, the AFT has created Share My Lesson, a vast, free online resource bank that enables teachers to share knowledge, skills and effective classroom strategies. Many of the resources will be aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Teachers rate the resources, putting teacher-developed instructional materials at educators' fingertips—providing what teachers need, when they need it.

Educators can upload and download teaching resources, such as lesson plans, handouts, student quizzes, videos and ways to involve parents, for example. Share My Lesson provides an online community for teachers to collaborate with and learn from each other. Such collective practice is key to teachers' ownership of their profession.

Share My Lesson is a powerful and appropriate way to use technology to strengthen teaching and learning. It offers teachers ways to engage students and individualize instruction, helps equalize educational opportunity by giving all teachers access to the best teaching resources, and supports educators instead of undermining them.

## COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Some education observers advance the false premise that teachers can somehow do it all, no matter the circumstances. The idea is that through intellect, hard work and determination, a dedicated teacher can single-handedly overcome the ravages of poverty, inadequate resources and other obstacles confronting disadvantaged students and their teachers. Teachers *are* dedicated, and that dedication underlies their conviction that poverty and hardship affecting students must be addressed to help students succeed.

In the United States, poverty affects 16.4 million children—more than one in five. The poverty rates for African-American and Hispanic children are far higher—38.2 and 35 percent, respectively. And suburban poverty has soared in recent years.

Recent research by Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam has exposed a persistent and troubling gap between the opportunities available to the children of more-affluent parents and those available to the children of less-affluent parents. Putnam found that less time with parents, less family income and fewer enrichment activities all add up to hugely unequal opportunities available to children of working-class parents, with implications for their educational, economic and social prospects.

One of the most effective ways educators have helped overcome barriers to student success is through community schools, which harness community resources to provide services and opportunities that enhance student achievement and well-being. Supports can include academic and enrichment programs, medical and mental health services, food assistance, mentoring, internships, college counseling and a variety of social services. This approach creates an environment where everyone can do their best—kids are better able to learn, and teachers can focus more on instruction, knowing their students' needs are being met.

The benefits of successful community schools include improved attendance and academic achievement, higher graduation rates and rates of matriculation to postsecondary education, increased family engagement, and healthier students.

In Cincinnati, for example, every public school is a community learning center (CLC), serving as a central location for students and families to access services. Since adopting the CLC approach in 2001, Cincinnati has become the highest-performing urban district in Ohio. High school graduation rates climbed from 51 percent in 2000 to 81.9 percent in 2010. Achievement gaps between African-American and white students narrowed from 14.5 percent in 2003 to 1.2 percent in 2010. And enrollment is up significantly in Cincinnati schools, including the return of middle-class families to the district.

In New York City, the United Federation of Teachers is partnering with the New York City Education Department, community groups and business groups to turn six schools into community hubs. Each school and its local community will determine which services to bring into the school, depending on student and community needs.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

We know that public schools reflect the communities in which they are located. That is one reason the AFT seeks opportunity not only for our members and those they serve, but for all in society. We believe that all people deserve good schools, high-quality healthcare, safe neighborhoods and decent jobs. But the AFT cannot achieve these worthy aims alone. By joining with the larger community around shared values and common goals, we gain the leverage to demand, support and sustain reforms that will have a genuine, lasting impact.

The AFT recently launched our most ambitious and wide-ranging community partnership to date—as the lead partner in Reconnecting McDowell, an effort to improve education and the quality of life in McDowell County, W.Va., the eighth poorest county in the United States. The AFT is coordinating the efforts of businesses, clergy, healthcare providers, other unions, universities, elected officials and community groups to create a community partnership whose combined effect is far greater than its separate parts.

In addition to the important work AFT members do every day as part of their jobs, they are also part of community-based organizations, faith-based institutions and groups that are working to improve our neighborhoods and society. Many AFT local unions are partnering with such groups, as well.

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. The St. Paul (Minn.) Federation of Teachers trains teachers to visit their students' families through the successful Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, forging relationships and helping parents support their children's learning.

A powerful partnership has developed between the AFT and First Book, a group devoted to providing new books to children in need. AFT affiliates in Birmingham and Jefferson counties in Alabama are working with First Book to bring books back to tornado-devastated schools. In Charlotte County, Fla., two joint AFT-NEA affiliates are using this partnership as part of their "Reigniting the Love of Learning" program in the 11 Title I Family Reading Centers in the district's elementary schools. And the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers participated in a book bank distribution that provided 80,000 books to public school students in the city.

In order to embed community engagement into the core work of our unions, the AFT is developing new structures, roles and capacities to foster meaningful, reciprocal relationships between our unions and various community partners. Such partners include Jobs with Justice, the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, to name a few.

Together, organized workers and organized communities can form a constituency with the power to ensure that public education, healthcare systems and public services are supported to enhance quality, equity and opportunity for all.

## COLLABORATIVE REFORM AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Productive, cooperative labor-management relationships set the stage for what needs to happen at the school level among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Top-down, dictatorial mandates are a prescription for failure in public education, as in most other sectors. As a theory of action, collaboration—teamwork and cooperation—has boundless potential.

Collaborative work, such as interest-based bargaining and focusing on finding solutions instead of winning arguments, 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 best vehicle to create trust, enable risk-taking and foster shared responsibility. Many school districts have moved collaboration from theory to practice.

The AFT is a national leader in championing and supporting labor-management partnerships. We are a key signatory to a historic May 2012 agreement among the major education organizations and the U.S. Department of Education recognizing collaboration as vital to efforts to improve the teaching profession.

On the ground, the AFT has supported and nurtured student-centered collaborative relationships between our union affiliates and school districts, including the noted partnership between the ABC Federation of Teachers and the ABC Unified School District in Southern California. More recently, the AFT Innovation Fund has awarded a grant on expanded learning time to United Providence!, a unique nonprofit organization formed by the Providence Teachers Union and the Providence, R.I., school district that is "turning around" three persistently low-achieving schools.

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 on (and reflective of) the support and involvement of the communities in which they are located.

Making a great education available to all helps cultivate self-fulfillment, curiosity, enlightenment and creativity. It also enhances individuals' employment prospects, the overall economy and civic participation. It is one of the greatest personal and civic goods.

America has not yet achieved this urgent imperative. The AFT and our members will continue to advocate for what works in our schools, and to be part of solutions on the frontlines of education. Our proactive Quality Education Agenda is intended to unite those we represent and those we serve. We hope others will join us, because ensuring that every child in America has access to a high-quality education should be everyone's agenda.

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

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