



A Union of Professionals

AFT Innovation Fund

This concept paper introduces the American Federation of Teachers' Innovation Fund, a landmark proposal to establish a philanthropic foundation that will seek, support, study and sustain, and share successful teacher-led, union-led and collaborative reform efforts in public schools across the United States.

I. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world linked by a global economy, the challenges and opportunities for our country have never been greater; neither have our responsibilities. America's ability to continue as a world leader, a driver of innovation, the cradle of tomorrow's big ideas and the nurturer of democracy will be shaped in great part by our ability to provide the world-class public education our children deserve.

There is a great deal of weight resting on the shoulders of educators and the children they teach. We face an economy in recession, a disappearing middle class and a safety net that seems to grow more threadbare every year—Americans are nervous about the future, and with good reason. So while Americans look ahead to who will lead our nation as our next president, they also are looking with anticipation to the next generation—the kids in our public schools—to rise to the 21st-century demands that, so far, we have not entirely met as nation.

We have gone through a period of much-hyped market-based education reform efforts that are more noteworthy for the negative tenor of the discourse they engendered than for real sustained success in narrowing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. We have endured nearly a decade of reform in which the original vision of standards- and curriculum-based reform—which is the foundation of strong education in high-achieving countries around the world—has been distorted and, in some places, rendered unrecognizable, by an overly narrow focus on raising a small number of students' test scores. Further, as Harvard University reform expert Richard Elmore has observed,

many recent reform efforts have been premised on the idea that people in schools know what to do to improve education, but are seemingly held back by the lack of proper incentives.

These strategies aren't raising student achievement or closing the achievement gap in the ways that our country needs. In addition, the top-down approach of these strategies and their neglect of the broader aims of schooling are poisoning the well for future reform. We believe it is time to place greater emphasis on collaboration than on division; on results rather than on rhetoric; on capacity-building, not blame-mongering. It is time to re-imagine the effective use of standards, curriculum and accountability to productively steer education reform, and to harness the power of innovation to fuel the programs, policies and tools teachers and schools need to prepare students for success.

We believe that efforts to improve public education and raise student achievement should focus on three areas:

1. Building the capacity of teachers to provide consistently high-quality instruction (which research indicates is the single most important in-school factor in determining student achievement)—by deepening their skills and knowledge, increasing their access to excellent tools and providing a collegial, respectful environment that supports teaching and learning;
2. Recognizing that closing the achievement gap depends on more than just effective teaching—by addressing out-of-school factors that directly affect how well a child will do in school through, among other things, community schools and after-school, summer and early childhood programs; and

3. Fostering collaborative relationships among educators, their unions, management, parents and communities to create agreements that allow for establishing and implementing policies that address the first two areas.
4. The AFT believes the successful vision of reform is one that works *with* schools and the people who work in them, rather than one that imposes changes *on* them; one that learns *from* teachers rather than compels policy prescriptions *for* teachers. We call for reforms premised on collaboration, trusting the professionalism of our public school educators. Such reforms must be aimed to stimulate bottom-up innovations that can marry the wisdom of classroom experience with the strongest findings from research. This is the kind of reform that can reach and improve our most troubled schools and raise achievement among our most vulnerable children. It is in support of this effort that the AFT proposes the creation of the Innovation Fund.

II. The American Federation of Teachers

The American Federation of Teachers represents more than 1.4 million members, the vast majority of whom work in our nation's public schools. The AFT represents educators in a significant number of urban districts that face particular challenges, including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. The AFT Innovation Fund offers an exciting opportunity to capture the imagination of our members and local leaders, engaging them to develop and advance teacher- and union-led reform efforts, and encouraging them to seek collaboration with management as well.

The union has a long and proud history of risk-taking in support of what it believes is right, based on practical experience and reliable evidence, regardless of conventional wisdom. Launching the Innovation Fund demonstrates the continued willingness of the union to take risks in its search for more effective ways to work on behalf of the children our members serve every day, especially those in the most troubled schools in this country. The AFT will invest serious financial and organizational resources, supporting proposals that use the union local in central ways to solve problems facing struggling schools and districts.

The AFT brings to this education reform initiative a capacity that has been lacking in many other reform efforts. The AFT offers a unique combination of on-the-ground experience about what works in schools, a deep knowledge of the research and reality of teaching,

a profound interest in the achievement of all students—especially those from low-income homes—and staying power for the long haul. We also bring our members, the people needed to implement reforms. And, because the AFT is a federation, our affiliates are connected to other unions, allowing them to share good ideas and to bring them to scale.

We know that credible and successful education reform only can emerge from the accumulation of student achievement year after year, in classroom after classroom. There simply is no alternative. Whatever individual superintendents, state commissioners or elected officials decide to try today, tomorrow or next year, these policies will amount to little unless they are joined with creativity, inspiration and capability in the classroom. This is perhaps the most profound lesson of the last 25 years.

The AFT is not interested in a revolving door of reforms *du jour*. Neither our leaders nor most of our members have the luxury of moving on to the next school or district when an initiative they decide to try fails for students. Our future as a union, and the future of our members' careers as teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, depends on the quality of the public schools in which our members work.

The AFT Innovation Fund will carefully identify and assist in developing cutting-edge initiatives. Proposals will be selected and funded based on criteria derived from teacher and union know-how, from the lessons of the best research, and from the judgment of a tough-minded set of recognized expert advisors. We are determined to represent the best wisdom and experience of our members in delivering on our mission of high-quality public education for all students.

III. Current Landscape

There is a growing consensus around the importance of high-quality instruction. But many contemporary reform proposals are characterized by policy prescriptions that are neither scalable nor sustainable. Too many of these policies are developed without the input or support of the very people who must implement them: teachers.

Yet at the same time, teachers and their unions across the country are partnering in the development and implementation of innovations that strengthen teaching quality in ways that hold the promise of more permanent and sustainable reform. These endeavors demonstrate that collaboration between administrators and the union and its members—teachers and school staff working every day with children—is essential to build the capacity of our educators and set a foundation for long-term student success.

For example, the Toledo, Ohio, peer assistance and review program has long been recognized as a model for human capital development and quality control. Chicago's Fresh Start Schools are an innovative partnership between the union's teacher center and the district to transform struggling schools. New teacher-led co-op schools in Milwaukee are radically altering our notions of school governance. School-based teacher contracts, such as those in unionized charter schools, are customizing working conditions without sacrificing fair pay, respectful treatment and workplace voice. Schoolwide performance awards, such as those being piloted in New York City, encourage greater teamwork among school faculty and staff.

IV. An Unparalleled 'Value Proposition'

Unfortunately, the broader school-reform community is unaware of many of these initiatives. As a result, promising efforts go unnoticed by support organizations and philanthropies. Without necessary seed funding or resources to disseminate results, fewer students and schools benefit from these efforts. A major cause of this missed opportunity is the fact that teachers unions and private philanthropies either do not know one another, or have a limited understanding of one another.

In this context, the AFT Innovation Fund's mission to seek, support, study and sustain, and share successful teacher- and union-led reform efforts represents an unparalleled value proposition. This four-step mission aims to bridge previously unconnected worlds, creating opportunity to expand the scope and effectiveness of teacher- and union-led reforms.

Seek Out Innovation

Just as teachers know what's happening in a school before the principal, teachers union locals usually have first-hand knowledge of the talented educators working in school systems today. While district leaders and philanthropies may struggle to identify these promising reformers, the union knows them through daily interactions in schools, union meetings, professional development seminars, special commissions, social gatherings and service functions.

Closely collaborating with the leaders of state and local affiliates, the Innovation Fund will seek out promising efforts and talented educators who recognize, respect and are ready to use the union as the vehicle to contribute to the success of students and schools. The Fund will be a trusted partner to these innovators, serving as both an incubator of new ideas and a supporter of tested and proven reforms. Moreover, the leadership of state and local unions will provide institutional support, allow

educators to take risks, and dramatically increase the chances for sustainability and scalability.

The AFT and our newly elected leadership are no strangers to successful reform. Through our state and local affiliates, the AFT has supported peer review, new structures for teacher compensation, teacher-led professional development based on best research, extended learning time, and induction and mentoring programs. Newly elected AFT president Randi Weingarten has advanced bold and successful reform efforts throughout her career at the New York City union local, including the development of the city's Chancellor's District, the launch of Lead Teacher programs, the founding of two union-operated charter schools and an innovative partnership with Green Dot Public Schools.

The AFT's track record of openness, encouragement and support for innovation on the part of our members and leaders provides unparalleled experience for evaluating proposals and investing in the most promising ideas and people. By identifying high-quality teacher- and union-led proposals for reform, the Innovation Fund provides an incubator for significant efforts that might otherwise go unnoticed and receive no support. Moreover, the Fund will provide quality assurance in the implementation of the proposals it funds, backed by the record and reputation of the AFT and our leaders.

Support Development of Initiatives

The Innovation Fund will supply resources and expertise, both of which are necessary to plan and launch successful new initiatives. The AFT will invest \$1 million into the Fund as seed money, while seeking additional funding from a combination of AFT resources and private national philanthropic foundations. The Fund also will develop matching criteria for union affiliates and local philanthropies. With these funds, grants will be awarded to proposals sponsored and supported by state and local unions, based on Fund criteria. Awards will range in size based on proposal's scope and strategic importance.

Beyond financial support, the Fund will have an unmatched ability to provide technical assistance to its grantees. Throughout the ranks of the teachers union are world-class educators, hundreds of whom participate in the AFT's large and talented national cadre of professional development coordinators. These teachers serve their colleagues and profession in a variety of ways—as mentors, lead teachers, department heads, and union leaders, as well as through teacher training institutes, and on state and local committees and commissions. A key advantage of the Fund, as compared with many other reform efforts, will be its ability to coordinate this wealth of expertise in the service of new initiatives.

Study, Evaluate and Sustain Effectiveness

Great teachers continuously ask themselves the fundamental question: “How do we know?” How do we know that students are acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge? How do we know that all students, not just some, have mastered the material? How do we know if the standard of quality for classroom work meets the standard of quality throughout the school, community and nation?

This spirit of inquiry is central to the design and philosophy of the Innovation Fund. The Fund, through its selection criteria, aims to fund proposals and people with great potential not only to improve schools but to sustain that improvement. In addition, it will develop performance measures to evaluate the outcomes against strategic goals and objectives, using independent evaluators. Where possible, the Fund also will attempt to make controlled or close comparisons in order to assess, with a greater degree of certainty, whether the innovation—and not some other unmeasured factor—can take credit for students’ success. The Fund will bridge the world of research and practice, drawing on the wealth of great classroom educators and experts for some of the best and most current academic research on high-quality educational practice and school reform.

Share Innovations

A hallmark of any thriving profession is the dissemination of new and successful ideas and practices throughout the ranks of practitioners. Too often in education, unproven ideas are popularized through top-down implementation while sound practices fail to gain traction due to politics and reform “tribalism.” If we are to lift students to the academic levels that our nation—and their futures—demand, we need a better way.

By capitalizing on the AFT’s nationwide network of affiliates, the Fund will be uniquely situated to disseminate ideas and information throughout the nation’s teaching corps and deliver ideas to where it counts—the classroom. Through annual reports, issue briefs and electronic communications generated by the Fund and placed in union locals’ own newsletters and Web sites, the Fund will disseminate information about what’s working and what’s not. The Fund also will work in partnership with unions and education reform organizations to disseminate effective practices through forums, professional development sessions, seminars, online tools and other avenues that reach thousands of educators. By sharing information in a variety of ways, the Fund will grow and expand formal networks of practitioners and innovators.

V. Proven Ideas and New Ventures

Over the course of the next few months, the Fund will develop an investment plan that will prioritize policy and other strategic goals. But overall, the Fund will aim to stimulate the development and dissemination of *proven reforms* and also incentivize educators and union leaders to take on *new ventures with reasonable potential for success*. Below are just a few types of proven union-led reforms, as well as new ventures that represent the kinds of initiatives the Fund might support:

Successful Programs and Proven Ideas

Improvement Zones. Modeled after New York City’s Chancellor’s District and developed jointly by the Miami-Dade school system and the United Teachers of Dade, the Miami-Dade County School Improvement Zone focused on turning around 39 chronically low-performing schools. Features of the Zone included an extended school day and year, a mandated common reading curriculum, intensive small-group instruction for select students, professional development for teachers and principals, and additional compensation. Improvement in these zones had been facilitated by the negotiation between union and district of specific, supportive contract provisions. Despite gains made as of June 2008 funding ceased to be available to continue the Zone Schools Initiative. The demise of the Miami-Dade initiative is an example of the revolving door approach to reform that must end.

Peer Review. The Toledo Federation of Teachers is nationally recognized for its model of peer mentoring and evaluation. This program provides a process to evaluate and develop new teachers’ classroom teaching, as well as peer review for veteran teachers. Moreover, experience strongly suggests that peer-to-peer evaluation holds educators to a higher standard of workplace performance than traditional management-driven evaluation systems. As the national debate about teacher tenure continues to escalate, proven models of human capital development and quality control, such as Toledo’s, deserve broader understanding and application.

Teacher Centers and QuEST Centers. New York’s Teacher Centers and Chicago’s QuEST Centers are nationally recognized programs providing high-quality job-embedded professional development services to teachers in hundreds of schools. In New York City, the Teacher Centers were the in-house providers of professional development services for the most successful of the city’s 10 administrative regions, supporting dramatic increases in student achievement. They also provide training to a network of Core Knowledge schools, making possible further expansion of Core Knowledge schools in the city.

Collaborative “Best Practices.” The ABC Unified School District in California is a model of reform, having turned a failing district into one with steadily improving achievement. Central to the turnaround is a strong labor-management partnership noted for effective communication, inclusive strategic planning retreats and training in collaborative decision-making. This partnership has resulted in better professional development for teachers, peer coaching and community partnerships. The specific mechanisms and benefits of this partnership should be documented and shared.

Research-Based, Teacher-Led Professional Development. The AFT operates a national professional development program, Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D), that “translates” educational research into usable classroom practices and well-regarded training programs for classroom teachers. AFT local unions have used the program to provide a wide variety of professional development opportunities to members. For example, in Toledo, Ohio, the ER&D program is the basis for the Reading Academy, a partnership between the union and the district to strengthen early reading practices. The Reading Academy runs the district’s summer reading program, which has brought large numbers of students to early reading proficiency.

New Ventures

Community Schools. In a holistic approach to the academic, personal and social development of students, community schools seek to bring under one roof the social services and networks necessary to give students a more equitable start in life. Similar to the work of the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York and other community schools in Chicago, Cincinnati and St. Paul, this concept puts into action a communitywide effort to improve students’ achievement and well-being, advocated by some of the nation’s leading educators, elected officials and activists in the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education coalition.

Union-Partnership Charter Schools. Despite the AFT’s early support and popularization of the charter school model, the debate over charter quality has grown increasingly polarized. Fortunately, a number of high-profile efforts are reclaiming the charter school idea as a vehicle for teacher-led innovation and debunking the stereotype of unions as an impediment. As demonstrated by the United Federation of Teachers charter schools in New York and the example of dozens of charter schools across the country where teachers have chosen to join the AFT, union involvement in charter schools improves quality and provides a competitive advantage.

Differentiated Pay. In Douglas County, Colo., New York City and elsewhere, AFT local unions have supported the development and implementation of differentiated compensation. In these instances, union involvement ensured that such arrangements did not pit teacher against teacher, disabled students against their peers, or well-to-do schools against less advantaged schools. As school districts continue to explore differentiated pay as a mechanism to improve student achievement and retain expert educators, union involvement is critical to ensure fairness and encourage cooperation.

School-Based Teacher Contracts. More and more, school districts are recognizing that schools are the fundamental unit of organization in education. As such, schools and teachers require flexibility to meet their students’ needs in a manner that fits each school’s unique culture and circumstances. For years, many district-union contracts have included language that allows for a school’s faculty to waive contract provisions. More flexibility in allowing school-based or stand-alone contracts will better serve students and educators; enhance a school system’s commitment to fair pay, respectful treatment and workplace voice; and offer another tool to retain quality teachers through a professional workplace.

VI. Teachers Unions as Partners in Reform

The AFT Innovation Fund will bring a new level of trust and effectiveness to reform efforts. For affiliated state and local unions, the Fund represents a pledge by the AFT to preserve the union’s core commitment to fairness, teacher voice and professionalism. For the philanthropic community, the AFT will stand behind the quality of Fund investments. When teachers unions are engaged as partners in reform, the ability to take risks, scale initiatives and generate sustainable results is increased dramatically.

The Fund will complement the work of educators, their unions and superintendents who recognize that collaboration is more effective than combative, scorched-earth reform. State and local applicants will be strongly encouraged to seek partnerships with districts and administrators. However, in instances where the district is not a willing partner, Fund-supported proposals can serve as invaluable “counterpoints” to top-down reforms mandated without the input or buy-in of educators. Fund-supported efforts can allow for comparison, creativity and dissent. Stimulating different ideas that may be “outside the box” of the conventional rubric of reform is a critically important function of the Fund.

VII. Governance

The AFT's Educational Foundation will serve as the "home" for the Innovation Fund. More than 20 years ago, the AFT created a subsidiary nonprofit, the AFT Educational Foundation (AFTEF), with a broadly conceived mission to *"sponsor study and research in educational and related fields, with the object, among others, of improving and reconstructing the educational system; to disseminate the results of such study and research; and to receive and administer funds for these purposes."*

The members of the AFTEF Corporation are the current members of the AFT executive council. The AFT president, Randi Weingarten, serves as the president of the AFTEF. The other board members are AFT Secretary-Treasurer Toni Cortese, AFT Executive Vice President Lorretta Johnson, and AFT Vice Presidents Linda Bridges, David Hecker, Marilyn Stewart and Adam Urbanski.

The Fund's strategic goals and grant-making will be informed by an advisory board, composed of educators, policy experts, and political, community, union and business leaders (currently in formation). The Fund will draw heavily on the expertise and knowledge of the advisory board as it develops criteria, policies and procedures and selects proposals to support.

VIII. Grant Criteria

Those in the business and venture-capital community know better than most that many new endeavors fail. Unlike investment funds that can write off a loss on the next financial statement, public schools can never write off students. The Fund will develop rigorous criteria to evaluate the likelihood of success of potential proposals. It will use those criteria to judge the expertise of the team proposing new ideas, and the capacity and commitment of the state and local unions. As a national Fund, these criteria also will consider the strategic significance of innovations within the national policy context.

IX. Timeline

Undertaking such an ambitious plan requires careful planning and deliberation. The effectiveness of the Innovation Fund requires the engagement of union leaders across the country, and it will be essential to gain their input and support. Moreover, there are valuable lessons to learn from education reform foundations and venture funds about how to set goals, structure criteria, make sound investment decisions, measure effectiveness and share ideas without imposing them on others.

Consequently, the AFT proposes a four- to six-month planning period during which this concept will be

articulated into a fully developed business plan. The plan will include specific actions for the launch of the Fund, its governance structure, internal and external funding commitments from national and local partners and affiliates, grant-making goals and criteria, evaluation procedures, and staffing structure, among other components. During this planning process, the AFT will continue to reach out to national funders to support the Fund's initial capitalization.

The Innovation Fund will be prepared to support its first set of proposals by September 2009. The Fund will support start-up costs not ongoing operating costs. The primary group of first-wave innovations will benefit schools starting in the 2010-11 school year.

X. Conclusion

The AFT Innovation Fund, with its belief in teacher- and union-led innovation, incorporates a values system—*premised on the notion that partnership, capacity-building and collaboration are necessary prerequisites for effective and sustainable reform.*

In building the Fund around an inclusive set of values rather than particular policies or divisive politics, the Fund is both durable and practical. It is durable in that it can withstand the pendulum of change swinging from one theory of education reform to another. It is practical in that the Fund can separate the policy prescriptions from the ideology of some reformers, and can retrieve good ideas from the battleground of education reform. Not coincidentally, the values of collaboration and pragmatism are the characteristics of our best educators and of our country's democratic tradition. This Fund will work to broaden the best both in our schools and in our nation.



AFT Innovation Fund
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