

# What Matters Most

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## Time for 'Bottom Up' Reform

There is a great deal of weight resting on the shoulders of educators and the children they teach these days. With 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 are also 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 met as a nation.

Teachers welcome the responsibility to help shape the learning of our country's next generation. That's why they are in this profession. But as they take on this important role, they need the right supports to deliver on the original promise of public education and make it work for the 21st century.

Unfortunately, many of the market-based education reform efforts that have been thrust upon schools during the No Child Left Behind era have missed the mark. Rather, they are noteworthy more for the negative tenor of the discourse they engendered than for any real success in narrowing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

That's why the American Federation of Teachers is investing in our own members - in their energy, creativity and experience - to develop their own reform initiatives, bubbling up from real classroom experience, not from a top-down corporate model that fails to appreciate the complexities of teaching and learning.

This month, we officially launched the AFT Innovation Fund. It's a landmark plan to seek, support, study and share successful teacher- and union-led reform efforts in public schools across the United States. This philanthropic effort is premised on partnership and collaboration as indispensable values necessary for sustainable reform and student excellence. With the Innovation Fund, the AFT will foster the true bottom-up reforms that our schools need and our kids deserve.

Projects will be funded based on criteria derived from union know-how, from the lessons of the best research and from the judgment of a tough-minded set of expert advisors. By collaborating with the leaders of the AFT's state and local affiliates, the Innovation Fund will seek out promising projects driven by talented educators who recognize, respect and are ready to use the union as a 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, proven reforms.

The Innovation Fund will also develop measures to evaluate the outcome of funded projects against strategic goals and objectives, and it will bridge the world of research and practice with funding decisions informed by reliable academic research. We hope to begin supporting our first set of projects in the next several months.

It's long past time we started tapping into the creativity, intelligence and dedication of our teachers to develop the kind of reforms that can actually work in the classroom. The top-down mandates we have seen over the past several years have rarely delivered the intended results because they were not developed collaboratively with teachers who are face to face with kids every day in the classroom. And even when such reforms have worked, they were seldom disseminated broadly for others to replicate.

If we truly want to prepare our children for the challenges they will face, we must take ourselves off the shortsighted, standardized-test-obsessed path we have been on. The Innovation Fund is an important step in changing this paradigm. With teachers leading the way, we can bring new meaning to reform and new opportunities for our children to succeed in work, citizenship and life in the 21st century.

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