

AFT Innovation Fund

The AFT Innovation Fund is a nonprofit venture fund established in 2009 to support and share successful union-led and collaborative reform efforts in public systems across the United States. The Fund works to identify, nurture and bring to scale union and educator-led innovations in public education. As an initiative of the AFT, the Fund's reach is nationwide, with emphasis on the country's largest urban areas.

Through the investments of the Fund, the AFT expects to accomplish two goals:

1. Improve student achievement in school systems with AFT affiliates by building strong local teams of teachers and school staff with improved skills and tactics; and
2. Help position the AFT as a leader and engaged partner in the nation's education reform efforts.

The Fund is developing, testing and refining three types of education innovations:

- Ensure that teachers have a voice in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and are prepared to teach them.
- Lead the development of new models for urban public schools.
- Design new approaches to cultivate effective teaching.

These three priorities all reflect areas of work where new approaches for union, management/school district and community leaders to work together to improve student learning are essential, as well as where changes to union-district contracts may need to be identified and negotiated. As such, they represent areas where the AFT can play a unique and vital role among other existing education reform advocates and grantmakers.

Over time, the Innovation Fund, in consultation with its national advisory board, may solicit proposals in new areas, in addition to those above. The Fund also may begin to invite proposals from other AFT constituency groups, such as higher education.

The goal of the Fund is to "seed" innovations, with the expectation that about 20 percent will prove to be durable, breakthrough efforts that influence student achievement and can begin to be adapted in school systems around the country. Because the Fund encourages its grantees to be bold, it recognizes that not all of the proposals funded will succeed.

For their initial proposals, affiliates are asked to plan a three-year project, but only the first year is actually funded. Further support is contingent on progress toward identified goals. The maximum grant awarded is \$200,000 per year.



The AFT uses the resources of the Fund to encourage innovations in two key ways:

- **Grants:** The majority of the Fund’s resources are distributed as grants to affiliates via a competitive selection process and used for planning and implementation activities that advance innovations in the three areas described above.
- **Technical assistance:** A significant amount of resources are devoted to technical assistance and capacity-building assistance to affiliates—both to build stronger commitment to and understanding of innovation unionwide and to support the success of Fund grantees.

While the Fund’s resources are concentrated in grantmaking to affiliates, the complementary investment in technical assistance is at least as essential. What makes the Fund distinctive—and more likely to succeed than past reforms that have sought to influence the teaching profession or the design of schools—is its commitment to invest in *both* areas, providing both support and urgency for affiliates to change their practices.

Grantees of the Fund work closely with its staff, and with key AFT staffers whose expertise matches their project’s focus, to bring their work to fruition. The Fund closely monitors each project, with monthly check-in calls, periodic site visits, quarterly narrative and budget reports, Webinars, and periodic national gatherings to bring AFT innovators together to exchange ideas and expertise.

Funders

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