



Bringing Labor-Management Collaboration to the School Level

ABC FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

■ THE ABC UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT IS DWARFED BY nearby school systems, including the massive Los Angeles Unified. By comparison, ABC has just more than 1,100 teachers, and spans a handful of cities in the southeast corner of Los Angeles County. But what it lacks in geographic size, ABC more than makes up for in reputation.

The district, serving 20,500 students who speak 31 different languages at home, has an outsized standing in the labor world for its excellent relationship between union members and management. The two sides work so well together that the union's AFT Innovation Fund project is centered on building a regular West Coast labor-management institute to teach union leaders and district administrators how to build effective partnerships.

Union members and administrators have long worked closely at the highest levels in ABC, but leaders on both sides wanted to "take the partnership deeper into the schools," said Laura Rico, the president of the ABC Federation of Teachers.

With the help of the Innovation Fund, ABC invited its nine lowest-performing schools, plus the special education program, to submit proposals for mini-grants designed to boost student achievement, increase parent involvement, or offer teachers professional development. The small-scale, customized projects, such as hosting family activity nights or using technology to teach English learners, are intended to help children and families as much as they are to encourage cooperation between union representatives and principals. No school could receive funding for the projects without showing evidence of a collaborative planning process.

The competitive process, designed to follow the AFT Innovation Fund's

own methods in miniature, spurred school leaders and teachers to brainstorm imaginative, bottom-up projects.

"How do we get out of this box of the traditional union-management relationship?" said Cheryl Bodger, the director of schools for ABC Unified. "It's really highlighted the places where either the principal or the union representatives were less skilled or less willing to work together."

The grants helped transform the union representative at each school from the "complaint manager" who dealt primarily with teacher grievances, to a "learning rep" working with the principal on strategies to help students, said Mary Sieu, the deputy superintendent for ABC Unified. "Focusing that conversation on student achievement, that's been the biggest change."

As a result, principals and union leaders are collaborating more closely than ever, said Ray Gaer, a special education teacher and the at-large vice president of the ABC Federation of Teachers leads the Innovation Fund work.

"We've found that the fruits of that have sparked gains in other areas," he said. "That's the true intention of the mini-grants." Schools are encouraged to make the programs sustainable after the funding runs out.

"It's not that much money," Gaer said, "but the mileage we're getting in relationship-building is worth it."

A committee of three union members and three district officials approved the initial set of grant projects in a rigorous process that was no rubber stamp. Schools that simply proposed buying new equipment were rejected and told to revise their proposals to incorporate more labor-management collaboration, Gaer said. The committee is tracking schools' progress by measuring academic achievement data, plus other indicators such as parent

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Director of schools,
ABC Unified School District



attendance at family nights. The committee has approved grants for another 10 schools for this academic year, and plans to promote the grant projects more heavily.

On a recent morning at Aloha Elementary School, 16 1st graders in a sunny corner of the blacktop hopped on one foot, doing their best flamingo imitations and counting each hop by twos. This was one of the class' monthly "Physical Mathucation" lessons, made possible by the Innovation Fund. Aloha staff used academic standards to create the supplemental activity, in the hopes of boosting math scores and providing students an opportunity to get fit, in keeping with the school's new designation as a health and medicine magnet.

"Our teachers love it," said Aloha 6th grade teacher Danielle Saldavia as she watched the children try to dribble basketballs around purple cones.

Other school-based programs the Fund has helped launch include:

- Before- and afterschool fitness and sports clubs
- Reading interventions
- A Web-based literacy assessment tool
- A new system for addressing negative behavior in special education students

Small initiatives like these foster teamwork between union members and school leaders, Bodger said. "One of the things we've lost with the standards movement and accountability, we've lost that ability to be creative."

ABC has shared these successes through its West Coast Partnership of Administration and Labor Institute, drawing participants from across Los Angeles County and even from Providence, R.I. That East Coast district, itself an AFT Innovation Fund grantee, realized that labor-management cooperation would be key to its efforts to carry out its grant to create a better system for evaluating teachers.

There is ample evidence that ABC's message is getting out, Rico says, noting that she's received numerous speaking requests and inquiries from other California districts about attending a May 2011 Institute.

ABC's close-knit labor-management relationship has evolved over more than a decade, forged through annual joint retreats after a 1993 teachers strike. The partnership has proven so durable that even as surrounding school districts struggled with shrinking budgets by issuing pink slips, ABC members acknowledged their district's budget woes and voted to take four furlough days rather than jeopardize fellow teachers' jobs and benefits. And the district was invited by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to present at a national conference on labor-management relations in February 2011.

All of the training, conferences, and retreats have the same simple objective: "The ultimate goal always is going to be student achievement, but how do we get there?" Deputy Superintendent Sieu said. "We can get there by ourselves, or we can get there working collaboratively together."



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