



AFT Innovation Fund

Investing in Union-Led Solutions

The American Federation of Teachers has a history of turning heads with provocative ideas for improving education. Albert Shanker, the legendary AFT president, is credited with coming up with the idea of charter schools and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.



So in 2009, when AFT President Randi Weingarten announced that the teachers' union would create an Innovation Fund to support its members' best ideas for school reform, the news made headlines. The union-led venture philanthropy fund was aimed at cultivating workable, bottom-up solutions from the people who know education best: educators.

No matter how divorced from reality it is, there exists a rising tide of antipathy toward teachers' unions as obstructionist and outdated. The AFT is intent on debunking that image by proving what is, in fact, the case: the AFT is in the reform vanguard and the Innovation Fund is part of that.

"Our unions are not afraid to take risks and to share responsibility for student success," she said. "We are not averse to change: We are leading it."

The idea behind the AFT Innovation

Fund is straightforward—but at the same time, revolutionary. After all, local teachers' unions had never been asked in a systematic way to propose bold ideas. They had certainly not received money and assistance from their national affiliate to carry them out.

At the same time that it emboldens local and state affiliates, the Innovation Fund requires that initiatives be planned in collaboration with school districts and, wherever possible, outside partners. Through these relationships, unions generate solutions and provide resources as leading partners.

"Here we are, sitting on this gold mine of knowledge and insights," said Adam Urbanski, an AFT vice president and a co-chairman of the Innovation Fund's advisory board, describing AFT's 1.5 million members. The Fund's "most fundamental goal was to tap into the collective wisdom

of the people we represent."

To carry out Weingarten's vision, the union sought philanthropic support to write a business plan for the Innovation Fund. In the process, multiple experts—inside and outside the AFT—examined the education landscape and recommended arenas for investment that would leverage the unique role of unions. The Innovation Fund's first funding priorities were deliberately crafted to reflect key areas that unions could influence, with the understanding that AFT's local affiliates could negotiate possible changes to union-district contracts to institutionalize changes. Specifically, the Innovation Fund decided to ask for proposals that cultivated effective teaching; gave teachers new professional opportunities and new ways to be paid; and created new models for urban education.

The Fund is designed to incubate ideas for no more than three years, after which time initiatives are expected to become self-sustaining through changes to district budgets and policy.

To support the Innovation Fund, the

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A Union of Professionals

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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AFT has contributed \$2 million of its own money. Leading foundations, including the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation also joined in the effort. Since its inception, the Innovation Fund also has received support from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Some of these philanthropic organizations had expressed misgivings about teachers' unions in the past. But they, like the AFT, recognize the collective wisdom of more than a million teachers, and realize that reaping educational rewards requires calculated risks.

The American Federation of Teachers is "interested in a retooling and a deepening of the profession," said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, a co-chairman of the Innovation Fund advisory board and the academic and accountability auditor for Detroit Public Schools. "It will only happen, I believe, if it comes from within. The Innovation Fund is attempting to be, and I think successfully, an incubator for dramatic teacher-led reform."

Less than a year after the Fund's creation, two of its first investments—projects to create comprehensive new teacher evaluation systems in New York and Rhode Island—won a prestigious \$5 million federal "Investing in Innovation" (i3) grant. The grant, one of just 49 awarded from a pool of some 1,700 applicants, provided national validation of the reform work seeded by the Fund.

The groundbreaking i3 project recasts teacher evaluation tools as "a path to continuous improvement, not simply as a sorting tool," Weingarten said.

The Fund's grantees continue to be spotlighted on the national education stage. The ABC Federation of Teachers from Los Angeles County, which is being supported to spread its union-district partnership to the school level, was a featured presenter at a February 2011 conference on labor-management collaboration hosted by the U.S. Department of Education.

Although teachers' unions have expressed serious concern over the tone and

direction of the charter school movement, local and state AFT affiliates see the Innovation Fund as a way to reclaim Shanker's original promise of the schools as laboratories for exciting experimentation. Four of the grantees in the Fund's diverse portfolio of 15 projects involve public charter school models. Two affiliates are opening "in-district" charters in Texas districts. In Minneapolis, the union is seeking to be-

change, offer tips on further funding and advice on sustainability, including how to interest local funders.

In these ways, union affiliates that receive Innovation Fund money are increasing their capacity to raise money, manage projects, build consensus with their partners, and gain exposure. These skills will be invaluable as pressure mounts on school staffs and budgets. Educators must find funding and professional support from unconventional sources.

While enthusiasm around the Fund has been high, the grant projects have not always unfolded according to plan. School districts everywhere are operating in a climate of fiscal austerity, and in many cases political upheaval, which make the implementation of new Innovation Fund programs challenging at best.

Some grantees, such as the Anchorage Council of Education, have faced down the possibility of layoffs of key staffers involved in the work. Others, like the Toledo Federation of Teachers, are persevering even with deep budget cuts and school closures. And the Philadelphia

Federation of Teachers has been strengthening wraparound services in West Philadelphia, even as schools in the community have been identified for dramatic restructuring and experienced significant district and school leader turnover.

Yet the union remains steadfast in its commitment to innovation and making progress even in less-than-ideal circumstances. Weingarten said in a 2008 speech at the National Press Club that no issue—with the exception of vouchers—should be off the table when it comes to improving American education. That means bolder thinking will be rewarded in a union that seeks out, rather than shrinks from, change.

"We all know that disadvantaged kids don't get the same things that advantaged kids get," Weingarten said. "The question then becomes: how do you change that? And how do you change that in a mindful, deliberate way?"

The AFT Innovation Fund is a clarion call for creative ideas that unite educators and key stakeholders to help all students not just dream their dreams, but achieve them.



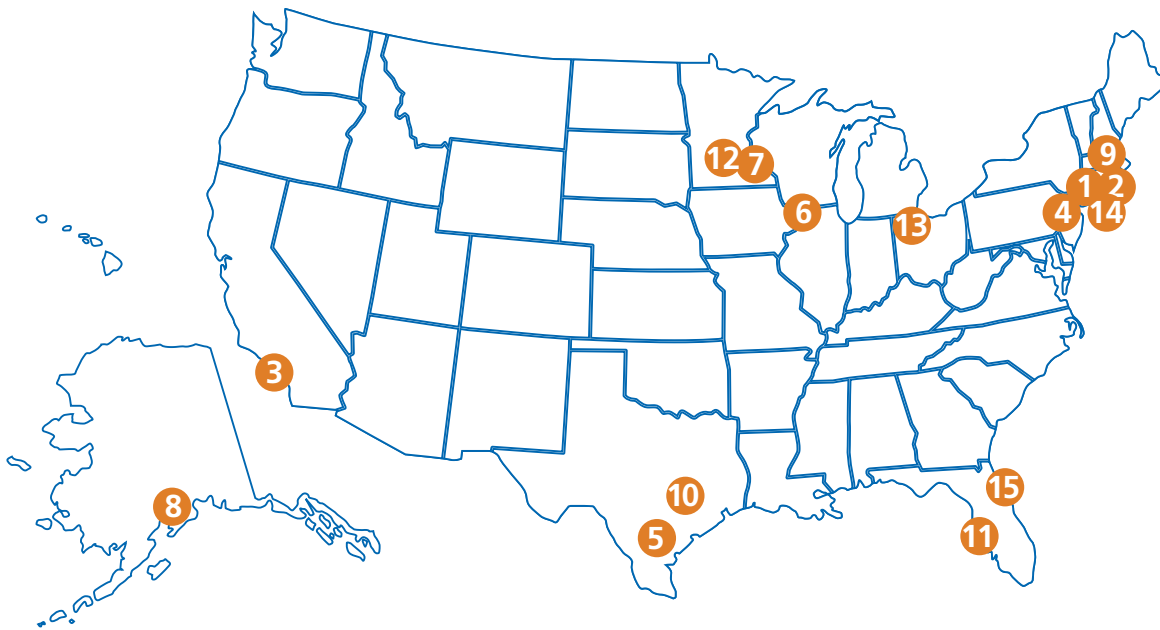
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come an authorizer of high-quality charter schools under Minnesota's stringent new rules for charter authorizers.

In its third year, the Innovation Fund will invest in projects to help roll out the newly adopted Common Core State Standards in creative and effective ways that ensure that teachers have the materials and support necessary to bring the new content to life in the classroom. Just as with teacher evaluation, the implementation of the Common Core is an AFT priority, and the Innovation Fund's investments in the area will be tied in with the union's other work on the new standards.

To give its grantees the best possible chance for success, the Innovation Fund provides support and guidance by matching each project with an expert AFT staffer. The Fund holds monthly "check in" calls, tracks progress with quarterly narrative and financial reports, and visits the sites to offer support and feedback.

Once a year, the Innovation Fund brings all of its grantees together in a national Innovation Exchange to share experiences in the difficult task of making



Making a Difference

The Innovation Fund asked for the first letters of interest in 2009 and ultimately funded seven projects. The next year, the Fund invested in eight more proposals. And in July 2011, another round of grant making is expected to be announced. The first grantees, which are now in their second year, are:

1 2 **New York State United Teachers and Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals**

The unions are developing comprehensive new teacher development and evaluation systems in New York and Rhode Island that include measures of students' learning and provide meaningful feedback so that teachers can improve. The two AFT state affiliates' work has influenced state policy and is the basis for a successful "Investing in Innovation" grant from the U.S. Department of Education, awarded in the summer of 2010.

3 **ABC Federation of Teachers (Los Angeles County)**

The union and school district in this Los Angeles County district are cultivating labor-management partnerships at the school level. Campuses are asked to propose ideas to increase student achievement and parent involvement, which must be collaboratively designed

and carried out. They then receive mini-grants to fund their ideas. The union and district also are developing a national Institute to teach other labor-management teams how to collaborate in order to raise student achievement.

4 **Philadelphia Federation of Teachers**

This initiative involves strengthening a network of community schools in an impoverished West Philadelphia neighborhood. Community schools, which function as neighborhood hubs that offer after school tutoring, in-school health clinics, and music or sports enrichment programs, have a long history in Philadelphia, but few have been planned with teachers' input. To help teachers take ownership of the programs and maximize their effectiveness for students and families, the project is taking inventory of services in schools, helping to align them with the schools' educational plans, and training teachers in making collaborative decisions.

5 **San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel**

The union has embraced the formation of "in-district" charter schools in San Antonio as a way to increase enrollment in the school district and meet families' desire for choices. Three schools supported by the union are to become in-district charters in an effort to keep families engaged and stem students' exodus from San Antonio public schools. The schools will be helped to create solid educational plans and to market them across the city. And the union and the National Council of La Raza, a national advocacy group, have teamed up to offer a parental involvement program in city schools.

6 **Illinois Federation of Teachers**

The AFT Innovation Fund supported the negotiation of a contract for teachers at the Chicago Talent Development High School, a unionized public charter in an underserved Chicago neighborhood. Teachers at the school, which uses the Johns Hopkins Talent Development curriculum, are campus leaders who make key decisions about hiring, budget and the school's schedule and discipline policies. Their contract is a model for other charter school educators.

7 **St. Paul Federation of Teachers**

The union is designing a licensure program to help to fill hard-to-staff special education positions. The union has taken the lead on creating the teaching

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residency program for both teachers changing their licenses, including some who have been laid off, and mid-career professionals new to teaching. The program, designed with the expertise of practicing St. Paul teachers and Hamline University, would be the first of its kind approved in the state.

The Innovation Fund made the following grants in 2010:

8 Anchorage Council of Education

The Anchorage Council of Education has taken the district's "graduation coaches" under its wing. The school support staffers in these roles are being trained in the needs of struggling students and provided with the detailed data they need to fulfill the goal of helping at-risk students earn their diplomas. In further years, the union plans to help the coaches earn a certificate for this new role, and will prepare a manual to help other unions and districts make the most of this vital position.

9 Boston Teachers Union

Educators with the Boston Teachers Union are creating and will distribute world-class lesson plans online, providing an invaluable professional resource for fellow teachers. The lessons incorporate the newly adopted Common Core State Standards. The online templates will function wiki-style, allowing teachers to pool their ideas, and will feature videos of teachers actually delivering the lessons.

10 Education Austin

Education Austin members have joined with the social-justice organization Austin Interfaith in a project to organize community members and educators around a shared educational vision, to be realized in an in-district community charter schools run by parents, teachers, and local leaders. This approach will allow the community to decide fundamental school issues, such as curriculum and the daily schedule, and teachers will be rewarded for improvements in student achievement.

11 Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association (Tampa, Fla.)

The local affiliate is combining technology and teachers' expertise to build an online professional network to connect and empower teachers. A key goal of this online network is to provide information and support to help teachers understand and navigate the changes in evaluation and pay under way in their district as a result of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's "Empowering Effective Teachers" initiative.

12 Minneapolis Federation of Teachers

The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers is seeking to become the first union in the nation to function as an authorizer of charter schools. Through a new nonprofit affiliate, the union applied for authorizer status in the state of Minnesota, with the aim of encouraging and establishing teacher-run "guild schools" that operate outside traditional district constraints and emphasize teachers' professional development.

13 Toledo Federation of Teachers

A new pilot program from the Toledo Federation of Teachers will boost the math skills of 4th through 8th graders in high-needs schools by setting rigorous standards, rewarding collaboration among effective teachers with supplemental pay, and encouraging families to get more involved in their children's education.

14 United Federation of Teachers

The youngest children in New York City are getting a head start on preschool through the United Federation of Teachers' new early learning curriculum. With the help of program coaches, home-based child care providers will teach literacy-boosting lessons adapted from the PBS learn-to-read program "Between the Lions." The goal is to give three- and four-year-olds a solid foundation for preschool and kindergarten.

15 Volusia County

Reflecting a national movement to improve teacher development and evaluation, the Volusia Teachers Organization is working with school district officials to incorporate multiple measures of student growth in teachers' evaluations. A particular focus of inquiry is student work in non-tested subjects and grade levels.



AFT Innovation Fund

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