

Working together for safe and orderly schools

Training in discipline strategies connects the union and school district

The AFT has never been about one-shot professional development or training for training's sake. It is designed to make a difference—across classrooms, schools and districts.

Ask school psychologist Tracey Kuhn, one of 10 Newark, N.J., educators who participated in nine days of intensive AFT Educational Research & Development (ER&D) training in Baltimore, Md., this past summer. “Managing Antisocial Behavior” was the ER&D component she and other Newark school psychologists and behaviorists spent their time learning. They are now back home, working with school-based social workers, resource committees and individual teachers—taking the lead on a new initiative that seeks to make all schools safe, orderly and conducive to learning.

The Newark Teachers Union (NTU) approached the district with the plan for a behavioral initiative more than a year ago, knowing that this was a top priority for teachers and a need that was not being met.

“What we hear from our members is that they graduate from [college], and none of the universities provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to manage challenging behavior,” says NTU research director Mitchel Gerry, who coordinates the initiative for the union. The district was receptive to the plan and has since committed \$1.3 million to the effort.

Thanks to the training, Newark classrooms within a year should see “more structure, concrete rules and regulations—all the things that are statistically supported by ER&D,” Kuhn predicts. The training will introduce techniques that can effectively deal with the emotional and behavioral problems of students who act out—behaviors that not only put their own learning at risk but also jeopardize opportunities for others.

It will take time to train everyone and make the strategies a part of the school culture, says Gary Knight, a resource teacher coordinator who attended the summer training and is now supporting teachers and staff at Central High School. But the trend, he points out, is in the right

direction and there is “absolutely no doubt” that today’s freshmen at Central High will see some big improvements before they graduate. “We have a lot of useful information, and I’m able to apply it within the school setting, working one-on-one” with teachers, librarians and other school staff.

Throughout the system

The district, working with the NTU and using the ER&D model, has increased staff specifically trained and assigned to assist teachers in heading off discipline matters before they become major classroom problems.

Partners hope this will decrease the numbers of students who initially are classified in school referrals as “emotionally disturbed” or “other health impaired.” To ensure that the initiative remains on target, data from each school across the district are being collected and analyzed.

And all staff trained in and spearheading the initiative engage in regular monthly meetings so they can share

Members of the Newark Teachers Union will use their AFT training to foster school environments conducive to learning.

successes, concerns and ideas for moving ahead.

The ER&D connection was important, the educators trained this summer say, because it allows them to engage teachers and point to research showing that the techniques are effective. And, true to ER&D form, the Newark effort keeps the focus on embedded, ongoing follow-up support.

“Follow-up is the big thing,” Kuhn explains. “It’s not just another training

that you go to and put in your filing cabinet after you come back.”

“We’re getting great feedback from staff members in the building,” reports Devvon Crawford, a behaviorist who took part in the training and is now supporting two schools in the system as they implement ER&D techniques. For teachers, says Crawford, Newark’s new behavioral initiative has “meant they can be doing what they should be doing, which is teaching.”

Teachers helping teachers

■ “No college course prepares you for the first day of class—you just get in there and say ‘OK, what do I do now?’” says Leigh Ann Mount, who began teaching in the Jefferson County, Ala., school district this year. She did find the support she needed, however, through the Jefferson County AFT and its new Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program. It translates cutting-edge research into concrete strategies for the classroom and then uses the power of the union network to circulate this information to educators at all stages of their careers. The program also includes individual follow-up, so that teachers and paraprofessionals can really make the strategies they learn stick.

“ER&D comes from real teachers—people who are in the classroom,” stresses Mount, who says it’s helped change the way she views the AFT.

Along with its strong research base, ER&D wins teachers’ confidence because training comes from other classroom teachers, explains Wynell Gilbert, an ER&D trainer in Jefferson. Teachers take notice because “everything that is being said comes from the heart,” she explains.

You can also hear excitement in Patti Senior’s voice. The sixth-grade math teacher at Emerson Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District hasn’t been active in her union that long, but she did participate last summer in national training tied to ER&D’s Journey to Algebra unit. Today, she is eager to share the course’s content with colleagues back home. There are strategies to help students “free up time and attention for higher-order skills.”

Look for more stories like these in the future as ER&D casts a broader net across public schools, says Rob Weil, deputy director of the AFT educational issues department. The AFT’s highly regarded professional development program is changing to meet the needs of AFT locals and members, he says. Working closely with the AFT department of organization and field services, ER&D is tailoring services to find the best fit in each participating local, whether it’s an entire roll-out of ER&D offerings or individual units from the program.

And the union also is making many of these same resources and strategies available to individual educators through the AFT online forum called t-source, www.tsource.org.