



A Union of Professionals

EFFECTIVE LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIPS FOR STRONGER SCHOOLS

When the entire school community works together, students succeed

A high-quality public education for all students is an important right and is vital to maintaining a strong democracy. The effective delivery of this essential public service is undermined if labor (front-line education personnel) and management (those charged with facilitating their work) do not work in common purpose. Too often, when things get difficult, the labor-management relationship becomes adversarial. Instead of working together to solve problems and create solutions, labor and management often try to weaken each other. That must change. Both parties have a mutual responsibility to help students succeed, and they must have a mutual commitment to work in common purpose toward that goal.

Collective bargaining isn't only a vehicle to protect employee rights and ensure workplace fairness—it's a vehicle for both sides to improve teacher quality, ensure school improvement and establish rigorous academic standards.

In city after city, we have seen that better relations among adults lead to better results for students. Important efforts by labor and management, working together, are under way—in various stages—in a number of places, notably in the following districts.

Detroit

In Detroit, a city hit hard by manufacturing job losses and severe budget shortfalls, school district officials and classroom educators overcame a history of adversarial relations. Both sides came together to craft a collective bargaining agreement—notable both for the ambitious reforms it contains and for the increased voice in their profession it gives teachers. The contract includes peer assistance and review, jointly determined professional staff development, best practices at schools identified as most in need of improvement, shared decision making, school-based performance bonuses and a comprehensive teacher evaluation system. Just as important, it establishes a new paradigm in which infighting, suspicion and finger-pointing are replaced by collaboration, trust and a shared commitment to the city's children. Union and district leaders crafted a covenant detailing the elements of their reform agenda and affirming their commitment to work together to transform Detroit's public schools.

Hillsborough County (Fla.)

Teachers and school district officials have forged a collaborative relationship that has allowed them to implement innovations to ensure every student has access to effective teachers. With a shared focus on the principle that education policies should reflect what is good for students and fair to teachers, the district has developed nontraditional approaches to teacher evaluation and pay. In particular, Hillsborough places a special emphasis on high-need schools, providing bonuses for teachers, staffing flexibility for principals and extra supports for staff. And they are developing a career ladder with an alternate compensation schedule to be implemented in the next several years.

New Haven (Conn.)

Last fall, school district officials and teachers in New Haven negotiated a new collective bargaining agreement that goes beyond wages and benefits to lay the groundwork for a breakout model of urban school reform—one that keeps teachers' voices in all key decisions. The agreement was hailed in the local media as “a first-in-the-nation agreement between a city and a teachers union to work together to change the way public schools work.” It sets out a new teacher evaluation system that includes student test results and other measures of

student progress to be determined by a labor-management committee. It also establishes a peer assistance and review program staffed by full-time educators, reaffirms tenure and the principle of fair dismissal for educators, and provides flexibility to support innovation, such as extended school hours, with staff input. It also authorizes conversion of up to three underperforming schools into union-represented charter schools. Since the union and the school district share the goal of retaining good teachers, the agreement also provides average salary increases amounting to 12 percent over four years.

Pittsburgh

In Pittsburgh, school district officials and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers have worked together to design a more demanding curriculum, improve the staffing process at new schools, and elevate the quality of teaching by overhauling teacher evaluations to make them fairer and more rigorous. Pittsburgh has a labor-management relationship based on trust and respect, and a laserlike focus on student achievement. This collaborative approach is further enhanced by renewed public support for Pittsburgh's public schools.

St. Paul (Minn.)

In St. Paul, the school district and its teachers agreed to strengthen the standards for achieving tenure, with more frequent observations and greater support for new teachers. In addition, a new peer assistance and review program will offer assistance to teachers identified as struggling and to other teachers who ask for it. Recognizing the need to attract and retain good teachers, the district raised the starting salary for beginning teachers in 2010. Finally, the district's new collective bargaining agreement addresses school-level improvements by fostering the creation of innovative school environments better customized for specific school populations, and by bringing research-backed measures for schools in need of restructuring.

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The AFT is working to expand and nurture such cooperative labor-management relationships. The AFT has offered to convene a meeting to begin the important conversation about how labor and management can better partner together to improve public education for all children. Invited participants include leaders of the National Governors Association, the United States Conference of Mayors, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the Council of the Great City Schools.