

# What Matters Most

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## A New Path Forward

I recently gave a speech in which I laid out a serious and comprehensive reform plan to improve public education by focusing on how to develop and sustain great teachers and great teaching for all of America's students. This is something teachers want—the issue is simply how to do it.

The proposals in my speech address ongoing teacher development and evaluation; fresh approaches to due process, particularly for teachers accused of misconduct; the conditions teachers need for success; and the key to making any of this work: cooperative labor-management relationships.

We have received support both from allies and from adversaries. We've had pledges of cooperation from officials and administrators whose support will be crucial to making these changes take hold. Yet within hours, we also heard a fair amount of "we'll believe it when we see it," mostly from observers who don't know the AFT's proud history (not to mention that they ignore the fact that teachers and their unions can't single-handedly enact these proposals.)

More concerning is the disconnect—in some circles—between what I said and what some heard, or wanted to hear. Take student scores on standardized tests: Our proposals call for student test results to be considered, assuming the tests are valid and reliable, as ONE part of a comprehensive evaluation program that would also include classroom observations, portfolio reviews, appraisal of lesson plans and student work, and other tools used to measure teacher effectiveness and student learning. Yet, some have seized upon the use of test scores and ignored the rest. Such an approach would give only an incomplete snapshot of teacher effectiveness.

Similarly, commentators who simply praised the AFT for raising the issue of so-called "bad teachers" missed the point. Yes, we need to address the issues of both teacher misconduct and teacher ineffectiveness, but the "bad teachers" refrain obscures the fact that ineffective teachers are far outnumbered by their effective peers; its objective is more "gotcha" than growth—and thus does nothing to develop teachers' skills. Simply put, blaming "bad teachers" is far too limited, because it fails to

recognize that we have a systems problem in education.

Most of the press coverage of these proposals did, in fact, get them right, and that gives me great hope. There was widespread understanding of and support for our template for teacher development and evaluation—a comprehensive system that incorporates standards and best practices for the teaching profession as well as student achievement. We also received praise for advancing changes in procedures dealing with teachers accused of misconduct, calling for procedures that maintain fairness while ensuring that due process does not disintegrate into glacial process.

But some commentators blurred these lines, lumping together teachers who need to strengthen their teaching skills with teachers accused of misconduct. Such a response suggests that all we need to do to strengthen public education is to "get tough," when what many

teachers, especially new and struggling teachers, need is the opportunity and support to *get better*.

Finally, we are calling for collaborative labor-management relationships, without which none of this is possible. The just-completed applications for the federal Race to the

Top grants exposed the fault lines in many such relationships. In too many instances, teachers' voices were ignored, resulting in applications marked by top-down approaches and failed strategies for reform.

But hundreds of AFT locals and many state affiliates have forged productive relationships with their management partners and joined forces with them in the application process for Race to the Top funds. This sort of collaboration should be present in every district and every application for Race to the Top funds. We take the U.S. Education Department at its word when it says it will look for meaningful collaboration in its assessment of the applications.

We are heartened by the attention our proposals have received. Teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their students—that is why they teach. Their unions are taking important steps to help them, and to help their students reach new heights. But we cannot achieve these goals alone. We invite you to learn more at [www.futurestogether.org](http://www.futurestogether.org).



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