



A Union of Professionals

AFT's Pathway to Student Success:

What every student needs

Public schools are the cornerstone of a thriving democracy

EVERY GENERATION OF ADULTS views the next generation of children with a mixture of emotions: hope and despair, awe and apprehension, pride and puzzlement. How will they survive and thrive? How can we pass along our values? How can we help them and guide them? These emotions and questions seem especially acute as we look at the students in our schools today. Will our media-saturated society expose them to violence and incivility, leaving them jaded and cynical? With social media and new technologies at their fingertips, will they fritter away their days and nights playing games and texting? Today's students also seem especially vulnerable to economic uncertainty and increased competition from workers in other countries. Yet, there's cause for hope. New technologies can help young people acquire deep knowledge of science, art and other cultures that would have been nearly impossible for previous generations. New forms of communication may open up a new era of collaboration.

We don't know what awaits the next generation, but we have an obligation to do more than just pass the baton. Our students need us to prepare them for life, college and career in a world that is more challenging today than it was even a decade ago. This means we need to structure our schools differently; foster collaboration among school personnel, parents, community members and elected officials; and provide meaningful and valid measures of student success that go beyond pencil-and-paper tests—in short, we need to rethink our schools to make sure that every student, regardless of ZIP code, has the full opportunity to learn.

Working together, we can transform schools into places where teachers have the tools they need to prepare every child to overcome the challenges of today's world, and to thrive. We can ensure that the next generation acquires the skills, passion and knowledge needed to lead our country, raise loving families, build healthy communities, and create the sweeping innovations that will bring breakthroughs and opportunity to our country and the world.

The following lays out the prerequisites for a successful educational experience for all students and reflects the great, shared responsibility we all have for the next generation.

What all students need

All students need well-prepared teachers.

TEACHERS WANT TO PROVIDE students with the best education possible. Teachers need training and support to help them become great. Let's ensure that every student has access to teachers who:

- Have high expectations for their students;
- Know their subject matter;
- Know how to teach their subject matter and engage students;
- Are provided with high-quality, job-embedded professional development aligned with appropriate standards and curriculum;
- Care deeply about their students and form positive relationships with them;
- Have received training in conflict resolution and other techniques to support student and group behaviors;
- Can differentiate instruction to address the needs of their students, and have appropriate class sizes to enable this;
- Understand how to assess their students and use that data to provide appropriate instruction;
- Structure and create positive and challenging learning experiences;
- Are lifelong learners themselves;
- Work closely with colleagues to ensure that all students' needs are met;
- Are supported by high-quality administrators and school systems; and
- Are full participants in development and evaluation plans that inform teaching and learning.

All students need a safe and supportive learning environment in schools.

EVEN THE BEST TEACHERS cannot help their students succeed in a classroom that lacks up-to-date teaching tools, or in a school where students and teachers are distracted by conflict and fear. If we expect them to excel, we must provide teachers and students with orderly, safe and supportive learning environments that enable

them to work together and focus on the important tasks of teaching and learning. Teachers will succeed and children will thrive, learn and grow in the classroom if we ensure that our classrooms and schools:

- Safeguard their well-being each and every day;
- Have consistently applied approaches to schoolwide discipline;
- Provide the wide array of wraparound services needed, particularly in low-income communities, ranging from mental and physical health services to family supports;
- Do not tolerate bullying or harassment of others, and have nurturing adults to assist students in need or those with unique problems;
- Provide a full array of student support services from guidance counselors to psychologists to social workers;
- Focus on building students' social and emotional capacity;
- Provide a classroom environment that is respectful of language and cultural differences;
- Foster a culture and climate of inclusion and individual responsibility;
- Have access to up-to-date technology of all kinds, and learn to use it appropriately;
- Have access to a variety of rich educational resources such as libraries, science labs, musical instruments, art rooms, etc.;
- Recognize some children need more time to learn than others and offer extended learning time for those who need it; and
- Deal with unique issues of diverse students.

All students need a rich, well-rounded curriculum.

STUDENTS CANNOT BECOME the thinkers, inventors and leaders of tomorrow if we only teach them how to fill in bubbles on multiple-choice tests. Our curriculum must match our hopes for the next generation, and should equip all children with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to lead successful, meaningful lives. Imagine schools where students are invigorated by the thirst for

knowledge, are exposed to a wealth of subjects and can explore unique interests, and are excited to come to school each day to learn. Let's ensure that every student has access to a rich curriculum that:

- Is relevant, appropriate and engaging, and is aligned with the common core standards and yet-to-be-developed assessments;
- Includes the arts, physical education, technology and foreign languages;
- Focuses not only on content but also includes higher-order thinking skills and opportunities for problem solving;
- Is interdisciplinary and across subject areas;
- Builds students' knowledge and experiential base for further independent learning;
- Is based on high standards that students understand in all subject areas;
- Includes feedback on where students are doing well and where they need help;
- Is taught in groups and classes that are small enough to accommodate individual learning needs; and
- Includes appropriate materials, supplies, books, technology and enrichment opportunities to help learning come alive.

All students need healthy bodies and healthy minds.

TOO MANY STUDENTS come to school hungry and often leave without the promise of a nutritious meal at home—and thus lack the basic nutrition they need to be alert and productive in and out of school. Others come to school with unaddressed health problems that also get in the way of learning. Teachers understand that proper nutrition and access to healthcare are fundamental building blocks for helping students be productive. We can create schools that meet the basic health and nutrition needs of students so they can reach their potential. Let's set every student up for success by providing:

- Access to regular medical care, including dental services, and vision and hearing screenings;
- Nutritious meals daily, even during the summer;
- Opportunities for physical activity, including structured time to “play”;
- Access to mental health services provided by counselors, social workers and therapists;

- Wraparound support services, e.g., English language classes and health services, within the school for students and families lacking access to them now; and
- Instruction about health education, good hygiene and daily healthcare.

All students need strong partners at home to support their academic and social growth.

CHILDREN DO THEIR BEST when the adults in their lives work as a team to support their academic and personal growth—but it's very difficult for overstretched parents and teachers to connect on a regular basis. Teachers want to help students overcome their personal challenges so they can focus on schoolwork but often don't know enough about what goes on at home. Parents want to help their children succeed in school and life, but sometimes don't understand the purpose of the coursework or the day-to-day challenges their children face in schools. Let's give students the best chance possible by helping parents and teachers work as a team through:

- Regular communication between home and school on students' academic and social development;
- Schools that are accessible and welcoming to parents, families and/or guardians in traditional and nontraditional family structures;
- Multiple opportunities and ways for parents to be regularly and meaningfully involved in their children's education;
- Parents helping to reinforce at home what is learned in school; and
- Clear and accessible information for students and parents on what coursework they need to master to be ready for college and careers.

And of course, all students need curricular, instructional and educational resources tailored to their developmental and educational stages as well as their particular learning needs and strengths.

Preschool children also need

- Programs that implement school-readiness standards and curricula that specifically address early language and literacy, numeracy, scientific explora-

tion, social-emotional competence, motor readiness and physical abilities;

- Structured opportunities to develop phonological awareness, print knowledge and oral language skills;
- Exposure to many and varied books representing a wide array of children’s literature;
- Opportunities to develop critical thinking in many different areas;
- Instruction and practice in recognizing numbers, counting objects, describing and naming shapes, using basic measurement tools, collecting information, etc.;
- Exposure to structured and free play opportunities to develop social-emotional competence;
- Exposure to experiences that develop self-confidence, self-help and self-control;
- Access to indoor and outdoor play areas with safe and age-appropriate equipment;
- Participation in activities that encourage movement with balance and coordination; and
- Small group size and no more than 10 children per adult to interact comfortably with their peers and get more individualized attention from their teachers.

Elementary students also need

- Individualized attention, small group instruction and small class sizes;
- Readiness skills to become active learners;
- A rich array of opportunities in writing, speaking, listening and reading to develop advanced language skills;
- Interdisciplinary learning activities in major subject areas;
- Focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education early on when exposure to these areas makes a difference;
- Opportunities to learn and understand the importance of becoming active participants in a democratic society by attending a democratically run school;
- Integrated learning that includes values, civics, multicultural appreciation, arts and culture;
- State-of-the-art instructional technology so they are prepared early on for today’s rapidly changing world; and
- Regular opportunities for physical activity including recess and physical education.

Middle school students also need

- Programs, curriculum and supports that help them transition from elementary school to middle school and then on to high school;
- Highly motivating classroom instruction that engages and involves them directly;
- Sufficiently small classes and small group instruction to individualize and personalize the school experience, as well as time for advisories;
- Research-based early detection systems in place for monitoring students who may become at risk of dropping out of school;
- Individualized attention and support to assist students who have been identified as being at risk for dropping out of school, such as individualized learning plans that address students’ academic, social and emotional needs;
- Access to adults who support, care for and understand the unique needs of adolescents;
- Continued help in developing literacy skills and competency to make sure they all are ready for high school;
- Promotion policies that support mastery of a rigorous academic curriculum; and
- Continued access to arts, physical education and extracurricular programs such as sports to keep students engaged and excited about school.

High school students also need

- Rigorous, engaging and relevant preparatory curriculum necessary for graduation and linked to common academic content-standards that prepare them for success in college, work and life;
- Multiple high-quality choices in types of schools—from theme-based small schools to large, comprehensive to career and technical education;
- Sufficiently small class sizes so that all students can benefit from individualized attention to their learning needs;
- Multiple pathways to graduation;
- College-level learning opportunities such as dual enrollment, Early College High School, International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses to become aware of what lies ahead after high school;

- To become aware of multiple postsecondary pathways (for example, advisory periods, College Now, GEAR UP, Upward Bound);
- A challenging STEM curriculum and coursework;
- Participation in service-learning programs that provide meaningful community service with instruction and reflection, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities;
- Project-based learning and research activities;
- Time for peer group and mentoring opportunities;
- Individualized attention around college planning, including financial planning;
- State-of-the-art career and technical education programs that are rigorous and connect to the world of work and community service;
- Extra time to graduate if necessary (up to age 21); and
- Credit recovery and dropout recovery programs for students who are overage and undercredited, or for students who already have dropped out.

Our national responsibility is to educate every child to his or her fullest potential. The great legacy and strength of our public schools is to accept, teach and care for every child who enters them. Our student population continues to grow in its diversity and complexity—and so must our public education system. Students with disabilities and English language learners have very specific learning needs that our education system must also address at every stage of their development.

Students with disabilities also need

THERE ARE MORE THAN 6.5 million students with disabilities in our public schools today. Many of these students are being served in general education settings that have limited access to appropriately trained school staff, inaccessible school buildings and inflexible curricula. These students need:

- Consistent access and support from related service providers such as occupational therapists, speech/language therapists, physical therapists and art/music therapists;
- Trained paraprofessionals and related service provider assistants who are able to provide ancillary support;
- An appropriate curriculum based on standards that can be modified to provide multiple means of engagement, expression, and presentation of content and materials;
- Assessments that are designed to measure growth based on individualized education program (IEP) goals;
- Access to multiple modes of communication and technology;
- Designated space that demonstrates and honors the need for privacy and dignity;
- Buildings designed to support inclusive practices;
- Therapeutic equipment that is properly serviced, updated, maintained and stored; and
- Programs specifically designed to ensure that students with disabilities can be productive and contributing citizens.

English language learners (ELLs) also need

ELLs MAKE UP 10 PERCENT of public school enrollment and are one of our lowest-achieving groups of students. As they become an even more significant percentage of the nation's school population, ELLs will need the following to succeed:

- Teachers and staff who are knowledgeable about working with linguistically and culturally diverse students and who honor the native languages and cultures of these students as they learn English;
- Access to structured, research-based second language acquisition programs;
- Instruction based on core content standards that are aligned to English language proficiency standards;
- Instruction across all core content subjects that focuses on encouraging cooperative learning strategies between ELLs and fluent English speakers;
- Frequent opportunities inside the classroom to practice academic English—the type of language that is essential for school success;
- Participation in school assessment systems that assess both language acquisition and content;
- Access to specialized school staff (reading coaches, bilingual education coordinators, ESL specialists, etc.) who can reach out to and provide guidance and assistance to mainstream teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms; and

- Access to newcomer schools/programs, particularly for students who arrive in the middle and high school years.

America is still facing tough economic times. Nevertheless, providing children with the elements of an excellent education is not a priority solely to be supported in prosperous times. Great public schools are central both to helping our children achieve their full potential and to strengthening our country. Moreover, we cannot simply talk about how important individual teachers are; we must make our children's education a shared responsibility. To accomplish this, we must invest in teacher development and evaluation systems that actually inform and improve teaching and learning.

We must invest in curriculum and programs that are aligned with the common core standards and the yet-to-be-developed assessments. We also must provide wraparound services, where needed, to help ensure that all students can perform on a level playing field that allows them to compete with parity and to overcome the negative impact of poverty. We need a system of 360-degree accountability—real demonstrable responsibility, reciprocity and collaboration—for all those with an interest in the enterprise of education. These must provide the cornerstone of how we adults—parents, teachers, unions, school administrators, community members, elected officials—work on behalf of the students we serve.