

What Matters Most

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'Green Shoots' in Our Schools

After spending the last two weeks visiting schools in eight cities around the country on the AFT's "Back to School Tour," I can report firsthand on the inspiring stories I saw out there—great examples of collaboration, innovation and success.

Despite what you may read about the education debate—polarized, as ever—all of the principals, teachers, parents and community, civic and religious leaders I met with have rejected the blame game and have come to the table to work together to make their schools better. And these terrific examples weren't hidden under a bush; the problem is that too often no one looks for what's right in front of them. It is easier to talk about what isn't working than to applaud what is and come together to fix what isn't. Talk is easy—doing the work is what takes effort and commitment—and I saw it at every stop along this trip.

At my first stop—St. Louis—I was joined by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan who recognized the difficulties the city's schools have faced and how much hard work has gone into turning them around. In the last year, with the appointment of a new superintendent who believes in working with teachers and their union, along with a union that has a five-point agenda for change, a renaissance has begun in the St. Louis Public Schools. Together, they have embraced new and innovative approaches to alternative education, put a premium on supporting new teachers with a focused and robust mentoring program, and made a commitment to full-service community schools.

In Houston, I saw a community coming together to take the once great Kashmere High School back to its old self. After a hurricane nearly wiped out the surrounding community, Kashmere went downhill. So one Friday afternoon, I joined local parent leaders, union leaders, the principal and students at Kashmere in signing a pledge that we would work together to bring down the dropout rate. And many programs designed to keep kids at Kashmere are already underway, like a

vibrant music program, a flourishing JROTC unit, career and technical education, as well as childcare for students with babies.

A thriving community in north Portland, Oregon we visited had faltered in recent decades, losing population and experiencing increasing crime and decay. Local leaders applied for HUD funding to remake the community which now boasts 850 units of mixed-income housing. But planners knew the community couldn't be a community without a school. So the local government, community leaders and educators banded together and formed key partnerships with the local Boys & Girls Club of America and a community center looking to rebuild so they could all share space and build a school that was truly the center of community—open early and late—with services for parents and the facilities necessary for sports, arts and childcare. But that's not

all: the Rosa Parks School is a LEED Gold-certified green school and staff there say the cleaner air has kept illness down and attendance up.

And at one of our last stops on the tour, we joined the Boston Teachers Union as it celebrated the

opening of its own school—one of the few schools around the country run by a teachers union and led by teachers—with a non-traditional labor agreement and an innovative leadership structure. It is designed to make the student-teacher relationship the organizing principle of the school. Without a collaborative relationship between the union and the superintendent, this innovative experiment, which is part of the Boston Teachers' collective bargaining agreement, could not have been undertaken.

So despite what you may read in the papers or see on television, teachers and their unions, together with school and community leaders, are ignoring the noise from the talking heads in Washington, rolling up their sleeves and doing what is necessary to get innovative programs off the ground, to help teachers improve and to get our students achieving at a higher level. I can't think of a better way to start the new school year.



Randi Weingarten with a student from Lexington Elementary School, St. Louis.