



Intensive Assistance to High-Poverty Schools

The primary purpose of a good education is to ensure that every child has a chance to be successful in school and in life. Yet, from the start, the odds are stacked against children from high-poverty environments achieving their fullest potential. By age 3, such children have heard 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers. As a result, by the beginning of kindergarten, children from poor neighborhoods are three times more likely than other children to score in the bottom quartile on assessments of reading, math and general knowledge. The gap only widens throughout these students' schooling. For example, fourth-grade students from low-income homes score three years below their more advantaged peers. The trajectory escalates through the middle and high school years, both academically and socially: These students are less likely to avoid at-risk adolescent behavior, go to college or enter a well-paid profession. To close the achievement gap, these children need a high-quality education, at least comparable and preferably stronger than their more affluent peers receive. Children from poverty will need more and better time and the very best teaching methods we have to offer. And because knowledge builds on knowledge, and failure breeds failure, **we need to offer the best as early as possible.**

The AFT has a long-standing commitment to research-backed interventions for improving schools. Here are our recommendations for high-poverty schools:

- Schools in high-poverty neighborhoods should offer **access to early childhood programs, starting at age 3**, that support children's healthy growth and development. These programs should be comprehensive to facilitate the acquisition of their social and emotional skills, provide the health and nutrition services traditionally available through Head Start, and implement a knowledge-rich curriculum especially designed to systematically bolster students' word and world knowledge and other cognitive skills.
- Research indicates that **effective teaching** is the most important school factor in a child's education. But, because high-poverty schools are often challenging places to teach, they suffer disproportionately from small applicant pools and high teacher turnover—and, as a result, their teaching force often includes a disproportionate number of new and less-experienced teachers.

- **The best way to attract and retain a well-qualified teaching staff in high-poverty schools is to establish the conditions for student success** (including a state of the art system for diagnosing reading weaknesses, the expertise and resources to immediately and massively intervene when a child is reading below grade level, high educational expectations by all staff, safe and orderly schools, a knowledge-rich curriculum, excellent professional development, effective principals and decently maintained buildings) supplemented by a hiring policy that gives hard-to-staff schools an early crack at filling their vacancies first, and **offers pay incentives** negotiated between the school district and the teachers union.
- Evidence is mounting that school improvement is aided when the school district can **target the most struggling schools for intensive special assistance and support—and direct reporting to the superintendent**. Where existing school time is already used very well, but more time is needed for tutoring, enrichment, or staff development, it may make sense to negotiate additional educational time including a longer year in these targeted schools. The direct accountability allows the superintendent’s office to ensure that **problems get immediate top-level intervention**, whether the problem is an ineffective principal, loud construction work taking place during the school day, delays in textbook orders, broken computers or the need for speedy return of diagnostic information.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Accelerating the education of children who enter school behind should be on everyone’s agenda, but a local union cannot do it alone. Engage your district superintendent and board members in discussions about successful school improvement strategies. Collaborate with your district to send teams of teachers from low-achieving schools to the Center for School Improvement Leadership Institute to learn the steps of the school improvement process and the skills needed to begin the process. Consider hosting, in partnership with your district, a model programs fair where teachers can visit with representatives of programs that may be helpful in the school improvement process. Learn about professional development opportunities that are available for teachers in low-performing schools. Provide parents and teachers with training in how that can form effective partnerships for the success of children. Seek out community and business partners that will support your school improvement goals, and provide students with the supports they need particularly when they are not in school. Engage in discussion with state legislators about what it will take to improve student achievement in high-poverty, low-achieving schools.

INTENSIVE ASSISTANCE TO HIGH POVERTY SCHOOLS: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Miami-Dade County Zone Schools

In Miami, a School Improvement Zone was established by the superintendent to provide targeted support to low-achieving schools. Among the special supports: The day was lengthened to provide extra time for tutoring and enrichment programs and for excellent professional development; teacher pay at these schools was raised proportionately; and staff resources and expertise were bolstered to support the interventions needed for low-achieving students. A similar program, known as the Chancellor's District, was undertaken in New York City. Test scores among the targeted low-performing schools in both districts increased significantly. In New York City, students in the Chancellor's schools consistently make greater annual gains in math and reading than their counterparts. In Miami-Dade County, the number of schools receiving a D or F under the state accountability system has dropped dramatically, from nearly 90 percent to just 22 percent. By 2006, nearly 60 percent of Zone schools received a C, while just over 20 percent earned an A or B.

New Mexico Kindergarten-Plus

The New Mexico Kindergarten-Plus program began in 2003 as a three-year pilot project administered in four school districts: Albuquerque, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces. Kindergarten-Plus is based on an idea put forth by former AFT president Sandra Feldman to extend the school year by adding instructional days in the summers before and after the regular kindergarten year. New Mexico was the first state to implement the program, which has demonstrated that the extra school time it provides helps children flourish both socially and academically and also increases parental involvement.

Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association (CTA)

To address the educational needs of its lowest-performing students, the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association has partnered with the Palm Beach County School District to implement a pilot program in six of the county's high-needs schools. Recognizing the impact that knowledgeable teachers can make on improving student achievement, beginning in the 2006-07 school year, the CTA—with support from the AFT—provided ER&D professional development courses in Foundations of Effective Instruction and in reading instruction to all 400 teachers at two elementary schools, one alternative and one middle school, and two high schools. CTA will provide additional ER&D training during the 2007-08 school year.

South Bronx

High-poverty schools in the South Bronx, N.Y., had tremendous turnover rates of new teachers. The resulting churn in school staff further eroded the schools' educational quality. Working with parent groups, the local union designed, and then negotiated, with the district a plan to recruit a corps of lead teachers from across the district to serve as mentors in South Bronx schools. The result: The schools now employ a stable veteran corps and provide support to new teachers. Scores are up, and teacher flight is way down.

Toledo Federation of Teachers

Six years ago, the Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers partnered with the school district to create Toledo's Reading Academy, an initiative to improve early literacy. The academy provides professional development for teachers, a summer school for third or fourth-graders who had failed the state reading test and intensive interventions for students at risk for reading failure. More than 70 percent of summer school students pass the state test at the end of the summer, and the Reading Academy's intervention program, ACE (Achieving Content Excellence) is the largest of the 50-plus providers of supplemental educational services in the city.

RESOURCES

AFT's Center for School Improvement Web site, www.aft.org/topics/csi/index.htm.

"The Early Catastrophe, The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3," by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *American Educator*, Spring 2003, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html.

"Get Real: Here's the Boost that Poor Children, Their Teachers, and Their Schools Really Need," by Antonia Cortese, *American Educator*, Spring 2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring07/GetReal.htm.

"In the Zone: How a Virtual District Provides Real Help for Really Struggling Schools," by Jennifer Jacobson, *American Educator*, Spring 2007, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring07/zone.htm.

"Keep the Faucet Flowing: Summer Learning and Home Environment," by Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and Linda Steffel Olson, *American Educator*, Fall 2001, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/fall2001/faucet.html.

"Preschool Pays: High-Quality Early Education Would Save Billions," by Robert G. Lynch, *American Educator*, Winter 2004-05, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/winter04-05/preschoolpays.htm.

"Season of Inequality, Exploring the Summer Activity Gap," by Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips, *American Educator*, Summer 2005, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer2005/chin.htm.

"Using Well-Qualified Teachers Well: The Right Teachers in the Right Places with the Right Support. The Story of the New York City Chancellor's District," by Julia E. Koppich, *American Educator*, Winter 2002, www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/winter2002/UsingTeachers.html.

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