Few skills are as crucial for success in school—and in life—as the ability to read. Unfortunately, too many children living in poverty fall behind their more affluent peers in reading proficiency and test scores. Much needs to be done, but one piece of good news is that a number of new teaching methods now being tried in high-poverty urban school districts have shown real promise for boosting students’ reading ability.

Among these new methods is one developed by reading experts at the American Federation of Teachers and tested for the past several years at nine low-achieving urban schools in three cities. The AFT project has produced impressive gains in reading scores. Funded in part by the US Department of Education and participating school districts, the project is based on years of proven research and combines instruction in the essential components of reading, such as phonics, with positive exposure to high-quality children’s literature. But what distinguishes it most is its strong focus on preparing teachers to make the methodology work.

Kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers received intensive training in teaching strategies and techniques, as well as in course content, and a skilled coach at each participating school regularly worked with the teachers to help them put their training into practice.

Not all the data are in, but independent evaluators from Johns Hopkins University found substantial improvements in the reading levels of the children involved. For instance, at Cleveland’s George Washington Carver Elementary School, located in one of that city’s poorest neighborhoods, 73 percent of the fourth graders passed the state reading test—a big jump from previous years and more than double the school district average.

Because of results like that, prekindergarten through second-grade teachers in all of Cleveland’s public schools have now taken the AFT training.

This is just one example of new approaches to reading instruction that have shown they can make a difference for urban school districts. There are others. The important thing is for school officials to make a firm commitment to one of these proven programs and then invest the time, effort, and dollars needed to ensure that teachers can use it effectively.

Reading is the principal pathway for learning. Let’s make sure we do what works, so every child in America is able to read well.

Sandra Feldman, President, American Federation of Teachers

To learn more about the kinds of education programs and resources that work, please visit our Web site at www.aft.org