

# The ABC's *of* Partnership

Creating a Labor-Management Partnership  
Focused on Student Achievement





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This publication was made possible by a grant from the  
AFT Innovation Fund and was written by Linda Jacobson.

# Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Element 1: Developing an Interest in Partnership	2
Element 2: Getting Together and Establishing Guidelines	4
Element 3: Making Student Achievement a Priority	7
Element 4: Creating an Infrastructure	8
Element 5: Confronting Issues Together	10
Element 6: Building Partnerships at the School Level	13
Element 7: Handling Conflicts and Challenges	16
Element 8: Collecting Data on Your Partnership	17
Element 9: Celebrating Success and Planning for the Future	19
Element 10: Keeping It Going	22
Some Concluding Thoughts	23
Questions to Consider When Establishing a Partnership	24
Appendix	26
Communication Opener	27
Communication Card Game	28
Old Version of Principal Assessment	33
New PAL Survey	35

# Introduction

When cuts to the education budget forced districts across California to plan for widespread layoffs of teachers in 2008, Laura Rico, then president of the ABC Federation of Teachers (ABCFT), began meeting with her executive board and talking with members about what it would take to keep everyone employed.

After much deliberation and consultation with school finance officials, they presented the district with a proposal: If ABC Unified teachers and staff agreed to take furlough days, would the district be able to avoid layoffs?

District officials knew the union was working on some sort of plan—so the offer, presented during negotiations, didn’t come as a complete surprise.

But the pitch likely would never have been made had the union and the district not been involved in a partnership—one that focuses on looking for solutions to problems that not only benefit both the union and the district, but are also in the best interest of students.

This partnership also evolved from a belief that was articulated by recently retired school superintendent Gary Smuts: “... [We] all have a fixed amount of energy. We can use that energy to push together or pull apart.” In the ABC Unified School District (ABCUSD), this energy is used to “push together” for the betterment of students.

“We wanted as much disruption away from the classroom as possible,” Rico says.

Since 1999, ABCUSD and ABCFT have built and sustained a partnership that now serves as a strong example of labor-management collaboration. Their early and ongoing experiences are inspiring other unions and districts—from as far away as South Africa—to create a new way of working together.

“It is clear that they spent a lot of time developing the relationships—not just setting up structures, but having practices that they consistently used,” says Joan Devlin, the recently retired senior associate director of the AFT educational issues department.

## About This Handbook

This handbook is intended to provide a more detailed look at how the district and the union achieved their successful partnership, and to offer suggestions that other school districts and employee unions can follow to reach a similar level of trust and collaboration.

Sections will include specific examples and scenarios that have tested the strength of the partnership and how the collaborative structures put into place were able to produce solutions that were reached in the best interests of everyone involved.

This handbook is organized into 10 elements of a strong district-union partnership.

1. Developing an Interest in Partnership
2. Getting Together and Establishing Guidelines
3. Making Student Achievement a Priority
4. Creating an Infrastructure
5. Confronting Issues Together
6. Building Partnerships at the School Level
7. Handling Conflicts and Challenges
8. Collecting Data on Your Partnership
9. Celebrating Success and Planning for the Future
10. Keeping It Going

These sections, however, should not be viewed as steps to be followed in sequence. Instead, they should be seen as a framework in which you can develop your partnership using existing systems. For example, in your district, collaborative projects focused on student achievement may be taking shape even before regular meetings are being held.

Included are group activities that can drive home the value of working as a team. Additionally, “Element 9” is a section highlighting partnership work in several other districts that has, in part, been inspired and supported by the example set in ABCUSD.

Use this guide as inspiration to create a more team-oriented environment in your district that will, in time, develop your own unique partnership.

# Element 1 Developing an Interest in Partnership

Whether you are a school superintendent, a school board member, a union official or a union member, you probably wouldn't have picked up this handbook unless you were open to the idea of working more collaboratively with the people who usually sit on the other side of the bargaining table.

Or perhaps, someone who is convinced that a partnership is more productive than the past way of operating insisted that you give this a look.

Either way, developing an interest in partnering is the first step toward changing the typical dynamics that have existed between school district leadership and unions for so long.

ABCUSD was actually an unlikely place for such a partnership to develop. In fact, the ABCFT president at the time, Laura Rico, had just emerged from a successful teachers' strike, which derailed the district's plans to cut teachers' pay and benefits and increase class sizes. Soon after, union-backed candidates were elected to the school board.

So why would Rico have been seeking a more cooperative relationship at that point?

"Even though we were successful in changing the school board and changing the atmosphere," Rico says, "there is always a lot of damage" in the wake of a strike. The partnership was a vehicle to repair damage and promote healthy relationships throughout the school system. It gave voice to a greater number of people, resulting in more input and better decisions.

## Out of Crisis

In the case of ABC, interest in forming the partnership grew out of that strike crisis in 1993. Working in collaboration was a way to avoid another strike and to bring some stability to the district.

"These people did not want to go on strike again," Rico says.

The newly hired superintendent, Tom Riley, showed interest in working with the union and began to encourage a more collegial environment. But he died of leukemia after only three years as superintendent.

The beginnings of the partnership that began under his leadership, however, continued when the district hired

Ron Barnes as its new superintendent in 1999.

"I said, 'I'm going to extend my hand and see who grabs it,'" Rico remembers. "Superintendent Ron Barnes grabbed it."

Saul Rubinstein, a Rutgers University researcher who has studied union-management partnerships, finds that a crisis is often what motivates district and union leaders to begin working as partners.

## Common Language Game

This activity is a great conversation starter and can be used at a partnership event.

- Each table, or small group of three to four people, is given a group of photos.
- The facilitators call out a word.
- The participants in each group choose three photos they think best represent the meaning of the word.
- Each table or group shares its answers and compares them with those of the other groups.

### *What happens?*

Remarkably different photos are often chosen, showing that words and phrases can often have multiple meanings, depending on one's perspective and experiences. (See page 28.)



Tetzlaff Middle School principal Crehena Wise, right, playing the Common Language game with alternate site rep Josh McFarland at a PAL Retreat.



TOP: From left, Dawn Heeren, the vice president of special education for the ABCFT; Ray Gaer, the union president; Mary Sieu, the superintendent; and Ruben Mancillas, the union's vice president.

ABOVE: ABCUSD director of schools Cheryl Bodger, left, with special education teacher Margaret Weimer.

Your district may be in a similar situation. And even though it may seem impossible to reach the type of working relationship that now exists in ABCUSD, Rico and Barnes didn't know where their efforts would lead either.

### Speak a Common Language

Even if there is an interest in partnership, this new labor-management relationship won't progress very far if the parties involved don't agree on some terms and language that they will use to describe how they will work together.

For example, Rico and Barnes decided early in their partnership that they would replace the word "problems" with "challenges."

"That was something we could both agree on," Rico says.

### Words Matter

Just as Barnes and Rico had to agree on what terms or phrases they would use or avoid, the language used by principals or teachers also can be misinterpreted.

In ABCUSD, principals and site reps were asked to stop saying "I" when taking credit for something good that happened at their school. And they needed to stop saying "my teachers" because it implied ownership, and teachers found it condescending.

Teachers needed to stop saying, "We are a

family," because it leaves the impression that there is a parent, Rico says.

"Say you are a team," Rico advises. "Only a team is going to move forward."

A term that has not been wholeheartedly accepted by either the ABCUSD administration or the union members is "learning rep," referring to building or "site" representatives. Site reps are elected by the staff at their schools, handle their traditional duties, and defend their contract and their members. They are also trained by ABCFT to consider partnership with their administrators a key aspect of their position.

Newly appointed superintendent Mary Sieu says the district leaders initially liked the term "learning rep" because it communicated that site reps were more than just "traditional complaint officers" and were involved in decision-making at the school. But among the site reps themselves, there remained confusion over what that term meant. So now, there is inconsistent usage of this term. However, regardless of the term site reps use to describe themselves, there is no doubt that the partnership has changed their role.

### Key Points

- Forming a partnership with someone in authority will give the effort more credibility among administrators and union members.
- View a crisis as an opportunity to make a new start and explore working in partnership.
- Make a list of any phrases or buzzwords that can be misinterpreted. Work together to see if a more agreeable term can be found. These terms might include words such as *directive*, *mandate*, *forced* or even *consensus*.



## Element 2 Getting Together and Establishing Guidelines

Acting on your interest in partnership is the next step. Scheduling a meeting with your counterpart in either the school district or the union is visible proof that you want to work with this person to improve outcomes for students in your district.

If you are the superintendent or a school board member, you would meet with your union president. If you are a human resources officer, you might meet with the union's chief negotiator.

"Relationships that have worked and that have survived started at the top," Devlin says. "It's clear that it was a district value."

Don't expect the first meeting to accomplish anything specific other than voicing your willingness to move beyond the mindset that in order to "win," the other party must "lose." As the Red and Green activity shows (see sidebar), it is possible for both parties to win even when resources are scarce—as they usually are.

If hard feelings or distrust existed in the past, spending time getting to know each other will over time lead to genuine respect. District personnel and union members will be able to tell whether the partnership is real or just for show.

"You don't have to marry them," Devlin advises, "but you better at least want to have dinner with them."

### Schedule Regular Meetings

Don't let the initial meeting be the last, and don't enter this partnership with the expectation that you will meet only when there is a problem brewing. Regularly scheduled meetings are necessary to nurture the relationship, to avoid many conflicts that would arise without a high degree of communication and to keep other problems from escalating.

Rico says that at first she and Barnes sometimes wondered whether they would have anything to talk about in their once-a-week meetings, but they always did.

Officials with ABCUSD and ABCFT can also attest that beginning a partnership is not nearly as hard as sustaining it.

### Red and Green (Interdependent Groups) Exercise

ABCFT and ABCUSD approach their partnership with the philosophy that both can "win"—even when times are tough. This idea of "mutual gains" can be illustrated through an exercise known as "Interdependent Groups," used by Rutgers University researcher Saul Rubinstein. It is often conducted at joint gatherings such as the West Coast Labor-Management Institute.

The exercise attempts to model the dynamics in a union-management partnership by illustrating that there are both areas of conflict and areas of mutual interest. Clearly, teaching quality and student achievement are common goals. The key is how to find that common ground, develop a productive way to work together on areas of mutual interest, and sustain that relationship even when conflicts arise. Doing this successfully involves understanding the interests of all parties, and finding a way to effectively work together.

"This decision is not one that is going to affect you alone," Rubinstein says to explain the activity.

He adds that in the real world, not every decision will necessarily result in a joint gain, but the question should still be examined to determine whether it's possible.

Structures must be built and statements must be written that clearly outline how the partnership will function and how those involved will be held accountable.

### Write Mission Statement and Guiding Principles

A mission statement was written for the partnership in ABC, but this piece came after several years of management and labor working together as partners. Saul Rubinstein, the Rutgers University researcher who has studied labor-management partnerships in schools, recommended that the partnership have a mission statement, and led participants in a three-day training in 2009 to develop the message. This training was followed up by a daylong joint meeting of the superintendent's cabinet and ABCFT's executive board to hammer out the details for the mission statement. Many questions were raised about the decisions that would be made in partnership and

## The Partnership's Mission Statement

The ABC Partnership is a collaborative effort to improve student achievement and to enhance the teaching and working environment for faculty, staff, and administration through the institutional partnering of colleagues in the ABC Unified School District and the ABC Federation of Teachers. Faculty and administration should have a voice in those decisions that reflect the collaborative efforts and goals of the partnership emphasizing a common understanding of the issues, joint research, sharing of information, mutual respect, and working together to ensure each other's success.

those that would remain the exclusive domain of the district or union. Some participants wanted all decisions to be made collaboratively; others did not. Some participants wanted more specific language, and some wanted to keep the statement more general. It became evident that everyone at the meeting wanted a strong voice in the direction of the district.

The ABC partnership now has a mission statement, a list of guiding principles, and a list of "behaviors" that communicate how those involved in the partnership will respond to each other and approach various situations.

For Rico and Barnes, the mission statement and guiding principles were a way to communicate how they were interacting with each other.

"We already saw the benefits of talking to each other once a week," Rico says. "We decided we would put down on paper what was important." These documents can serve as examples to other districts and unions. But bear in mind that the statements won't fall into place overnight. In fact, the parties involved in your partnership may need to work through some difficult situations before they decide on principles and behaviors that work for them.

Rico and Barnes wrote their guiding principles together (see sidebar). But then they each brought in a trusted adviser to listen to the statements—and in a sense challenge what they had to say. It was an opportunity for each of them to defend what had been put on paper and to see whether it would stand up against the type of skepticism and eye rolling they were likely to receive from their primary audiences.

The final principle—"We won't let each other fail"—was written much later because it reflected, Rico says, what was already happening.

### Seek Professional Development

Teachers occasionally need guidance to effectively work as a team—so do managers and labor leaders. Seeking opportunities to learn from other districts and unions that are working in partnership can help to put your situation in context, and give you a framework to follow until you develop your own structure for communicating and addressing difficult topics.

## The Partnership's Guiding Principles

- All students can succeed, and we will not accept any excuse that prevents that from happening in ABC. We will work together to promote student success.
- All needed support will be made available to schools to ensure every student succeeds. We will work together to ensure that happens.
- The top 5 percent of teachers in our profession should teach our students. We will work together to hire, train, and retain these professionals.
- All employees contribute to student success.
- All negotiations support conditions that sustain successful teaching and student learning. This is the MAIN THING!
- **We won't let each other fail.**

## The Partnership's Guiding Principles—Behaviors

- We will work hard to understand the core of each other's job.
- We will respect each other.
- We will be honest with each other.
- We will not "sugar coat" difficult issues.
- We will disagree without being disagreeable.
- We will reflect on each other's comments, suggestions, and concerns.
- We will seek clarification until we understand.
- We will maintain confidentiality.
- We will both "own the contract."
- We will solve problems rather than win arguments.
- We will laugh at ourselves and with each other.

For Rico and others in the ABC district, such an opportunity became available at a weeklong Harvard University seminar on labor-management relations in public schools.

The seminar presenters said, “We’re not going to give you a silver bullet, but we’ll give you some tools,” Rico recalls.

Other training opportunities that the ABC union and district took advantage of include:

- **The AFT TEACH Conference** (formerly known as the QuEST Conference). TEACH, which stands for Together Educating America’s Children, is the AFT’s signature professional development conference held every other summer in Washington, D.C.
- **The AFT Professional Development Network** (formerly known as the educational research and dissemination program or ER&D) is designed to help local unions build the capacity to deliver high-quality professional development services, either on their own or in collaboration with their school districts.
- **The AFT Center for School Improvement**, which provides technical assistance, profes-

sional development and information to state, district and local school educators. The center especially concentrates on helping schools “in need of improvement” under NCLB and holds an annual conference with the United Federation of Teachers in New York City.

“Relationships that have worked and that have survived started at the top. It’s clear that it was a district value.”

—JOAN DEVLIN, retired senior associate director, AFT educational issues department

Today, thanks to a grant from the AFT Innovation Fund, ABCUSD and ABCFT are able to give the same support to other unions and districts that are at the beginning stages of a partnership.

Since the grant was awarded in 2009, they have sponsored a West Coast Labor-Management Institute, which draws top administrators and union leaders not only from districts in California, but also from other states, to learn about how partnership can improve outcomes for students.

## Element 3 Making Student Achievement a Priority

Start with what you have in common. Simply bringing management and labor together in a more collegial, less finger-pointing environment might seem like incentive enough to begin a partnership. But ABC Unified and ABCFT—as well as other district administrations and

unions that have been recognized for having successful partnerships—have identified student success as the highest priority they have in common.

Focusing on how decisions can best support student learning can help guide partners when presented with difficult situations, a budget crisis, or turnover in leadership.

“The decision process is more efficient when you collaborate,” says retired ABCUSD superintendent Gary Smuts. “You don’t waste energy bickering. We now spend more time looking for resources.”

### Focusing on Southside Schools

Finding more instructional support to help struggling students in ABC’s Southside schools was the first example of how this new partnership was used to focus on student achievement.

In negotiations, the district and the union crafted solutions to make the district a more

attractive place to work and to end the practice of hiring teachers who were not yet fully certified. These solutions included restructuring the salary schedule to raise the starting pay for a beginning teacher and offering \$5,000 signing bonuses for teachers who took positions in any of the six Southside schools: Aloha, Furgeson, Hawaiian and Melbourne Elementary schools, Fedde Middle School and Artesia High School.

The district and the union formed the Southside Schools Reading Collaborative, in which they jointly sponsored professional development opportunities for teachers to improve reading instruction and gave schools additional funds to choose research-based reading programs. Teachers began meeting in “vertical teams” across grade levels to better connect the reading curriculum from year to year, and the AFT paid for administrators and site representatives to observe research-based reading programs in Houston, Texas.

Between 1999, when the effort began, and 2011, the schools experienced growth in achievement. California’s Academic Performance Index (API) reflects achievement in English/language arts, math, science and history/social studies, with scores ranging from 200 to 1,000. API scores at the four elementary schools rose an average of 283 points. At Fedde, the API increased from 463 to 684, and Artesia High saw a 252-point climb.



Principal Claudia Ross, left, and site rep Dan Robbins from Gonsalves Elementary share their school goals with attendees at a PAL Retreat.

## Element 4 Creating an Infrastructure

It's not enough for union and district leaders to work in collaboration, or for individuals in these roles to hold regularly scheduled meetings. Ongoing contact and communication needs to be established and maintained at all levels throughout the district and the union for the spirit of partnership to truly change the way management and labor interact. In ABC, administrators and union leaders are continually discovering new ways to communicate and strengthen the partnership.

This "infrastructure" should include the individuals in your district and union who are responsible for key decisions about people's jobs, financial issues and implementing instructional changes. Here is how it works in ABC:

- The chief financial officer of the district and the union's chief negotiator meet frequently.
- The assistant superintendent of human resources for the district and the ABCFT president also meet regularly to focus on personnel matters.
- Other executive board members for the union meet with their counterparts in the district's central office.
- Once a year, the superintendent's cabinet and the union's executive board hold a joint retreat.
- ABCFT executive board members now have a network of three or four schools they are responsible for, meaning that they get to know the principal and the staff and serve as another point of contact for questions or concerns. This is the newest layer of communication that has been created.
- At the school level, many principals meet regularly with their site representatives. But Rico notes that leaders forming partnerships at the district level should not require these meetings at the school level. "That would be top-down," she says. "We have said, 'It is your school; you've got to make it work.'"

### The First Partnership Administration and Labor (PAL) Retreat

ABCFT had long held an annual retreat for site representatives. In 2001, Barnes asked Rico if the district's principals could attend the meeting, especially since the district's chief negotiators were going to talk about the budget. They decided it would be good for everyone to hear the same news of possible budget cuts at the same time.

"This was our first attempt to do something together," Rico remembers. "We met resistance on both sides." Many site reps believed it was their meeting and did not want management present.

Mike McCoy was a relatively new elementary principal in ABCUSD when invited to be on the planning committee for the first PAL Retreat. "I guess I was asked to do this because I was on the district bargaining team and had established some minimal relationship with the ABCFT leaders," he recalls, adding that the idea of being on the PAL Retreat committee was received with both excitement and dread.

"This was our first attempt to do something together.  
We met resistance on both sides."

—LAURA RICO, president emerita, ABC Federation of Teachers

"It was exciting to be part of the first PAL Retreat," McCoy says. "However, I worried about the perception of my fellow principals. With the relations between union and management being strained at that time, I felt that the idea of principals spending a full day with their union reps would not be positively received."

The PAL committee approached this first retreat as the start of creating better relationships. The day began with an opening joint presentation by superintendent Ron Barnes and ABCFT president Laura Rico. Just having these two presenting together in front of district and union leaders was a groundbreaking event and set the stage for building the partnership.



Site rep Ken Denman and principal Carol Castro from Fedde Middle School enjoy lunch at a PAL Retreat.

“The rest of that day was kept fairly light, with humorous skits and educational presentations,” McCoy remembers. “We did not come even close to addressing the big issues of labor-management relations.”

Rico recalls that she and Barnes stood before the participants and talked about their partnership. “Everyone just looked at us,” she says.

In retrospect, the leadership has come to understand those “looks.” A few years earlier, in 1998 under the tenure of then-superintendent Tom Riley, principals were asked to attend the site rep meeting and awkwardly stood outside until the union invited them inside. They did not feel

comfortable entering the meeting, which had already started and had a set agenda of which they were only a part. Many busy principals were bothered by this situation, which reinforced the “us-them” mentality. Still, the first PAL Retreat set a precedent for how the union and district leaders would share information and responsibility for decisions that are made and communicated collaboratively.

The district and the union split the cost of the event—another action that communicated their partnership and a practice that continues to illustrate how they approach challenges together. Now a district director, McCoy is proud that he was on that first PAL committee, along with subsequent retreats, and has experienced the many benefits of the partnership both at the bargaining table and as a district administrator.



## Element 5 Confronting Issues Together

This element really goes hand in hand with the previous one. Regular meetings might feel awkward at first if the participants don't have specific tasks to accomplish and business to discuss. Because the primary purpose of this partnership should be to support student achievement and learning, the meetings should include that topic.

### Collaborate on the School Calendar

A challenge involving student attendance provides one example of how the district and the union worked together to come up with a solution that suited students and teachers alike.

In California, districts lose funding when students are absent from school—a result that districts work hard to avoid in such tight economic times. Hedy Chang, an author and an expert on absenteeism in the early grades, was invited to speak at a joint PAL Retreat on how to address this key issue.

In keeping with the spirit of bringing information to management and labor at the same time—and finding solutions that benefit all parties—Chang helped the participants “focus on what kind of data we needed to analyze and how we should be analyzing the data,” says ABCFT president Ray Gaer.

With that knowledge, the union and the district concentrated on the more specific challenge of attendance during the week of Thanksgiving. Under the district calendar at the time, school was in session for the first three days of the week, but many students would miss one or more of those days because of child care or travel issues. This would negatively impact learning and district funding.

With greater awareness of the issue, the situation was taken to the collective bargaining table, where a solution was crafted to take the entire Thanksgiving week as a holiday and make up the days elsewhere in the calendar.

“I do not believe that both parties would have agreed to the importance of having the entire week of vacation without having Hedy's help in discussing the importance of attendance,” Gaer says.

### Share Costs

A lot of people can talk about partnership, but then might take a step back when it comes to following up that talk with money. One of the most tangible ways to demonstrate a commitment to working together is to share expenses for programs or services that meet the needs of both the district and the union members.

“When we get together, we leave the titles at the door, roll up our sleeves, and honestly tackle the issues together. We speak to the ‘elephants’ but avoid blame.”

—DAWN HEEREN, vice president for special education, ABC Federation of Teachers

As mentioned in the previous section, the ABC district and ABCFT shared the cost of the first joint PAL Retreat. In addition to continuing to split the cost of the events, the district and the union have found other ways to combine their funds for the benefit of everyone. Here are a few examples:

- Special education teachers in the district needed a certain number of hours to be trained in teaching children with autism. The district and the union shared the cost of the classes.
- When a teacher needed training or guidance in a certain area and a conference was available, the district paid the registration fee and the union covered the cost of the substitute teacher.
- The district and union split the cost for teams from most schools in the district to attend the Center for School Improvement, sponsored by the AFT and the United Federation of Teachers in New York City. In addition to learning best practices, these workshops were critical for team building and moving the partnership forward.
- Peer Assistance Support System (see Element 7).

## Transparency Over Funding

As described in the introduction, the union and the administration in the ABC district do not keep secrets from one another regarding state funding for education. They have adopted the view that when they come together, they are more likely to find the best solution possible, especially when the financial picture is gloomy.



ABCUSD superintendent Mary Sieu, left and teacher Dana Lindsay.

Even now, when state officials are issuing warnings of cuts to the education budget, district and union leaders review the fiscal outlook together. Mary Sieu, the former deputy and now superintendent of the district, says there is almost a sense of relief in gathering to review budget projections. “If we didn’t have this relationship that we’ve built over time, I wouldn’t be able to meet and work with all the labor groups,” she said shortly after California Gov. Jerry

Brown released his 2012 proposal for possible cuts to the education budget.

This transparency and honesty has helped to build support for the partnership among employees, Devlin says. “It would have been more difficult if they were just viewed as leaders in a side room making deals.”

In 2011, Fedde Middle School was the lowest-performing school in the district and was eligible for a School Improvement Grant (SIG) from the U.S. Department of Education. The three-year \$1.5 million grant, however, requires that student assessment be used as part of the evaluation process and that the evaluation method be negotiated between the labor groups and the administration.

The staff and the district leaders agreed upon a definition of student growth that used a combination of assessments. Teachers had to set a goal for student improvement, but what made the method acceptable to them, Sieu says, was that no one was penalized if their students didn’t reach the goal. “We didn’t take them out of the classroom. Having the goal, participating in classroom walk-throughs and examining assessment data were sufficient improvement,” Sieu adds. The school has become a model for the SIG Network of California.

The example shows that whatever the issue or challenge, solutions are more likely to be reached if more viewpoints are considered. In fact, a phrase that is commonly repeated in the ABC district is, “The answers are in the room.” It is a mantra that originated with Howard Schwartz, who conducted professional development sessions for the UFT Teacher Center in New York City. It is one that has resonated with the partners in ABC.

## Improving Special Education

In addition to the overall partnership that has grown in the ABC district, a more specific collaboration has developed between administrators and teachers of special education.

Proactive Problem Solvers—known as PROPS—is a consortium of special education team members, including reps from the union’s special education advisory committee and the district administration. The consortium works together to address schools’ special education issues before they escalate into larger problems.

Superintendent Sieu describes PROPS as “... a forum for issues to be aired out as opposed to moving directly to grievance or negotiations.”

“There is no more us or them. There is just we.  
It is just how we do business now.”

—PINKY UPPAL, special education teacher, co-chair, Proactive Problem Solvers

## Confronting Accountability Issues Together

Sieu provides another example of how the partnership has allowed teachers and administrators to tackle a topic that might otherwise have managers and labor taking opposite sides: using student growth measures as part of teacher evaluations.



The PROPS committee, which formed in 2008, meets once a month, and focuses on solutions to staffing problems, professional development and other ways to support special education teachers.

The committee looks to solve problems and think up “out of the box” ideas that shape the department’s future. PROPS plans for possible challenges and meets them “head first” before they become serious problems. The uniqueness of the committee lies in the fact that the teachers in the special education department now have an equal voice along with their administrators as they work together to solve problems that the department faces.

“When we get together, we leave the titles at the door, roll up our sleeves, and honestly tackle the issues together. We speak to the ‘elephants’ but avoid blame,” says Dawn Heeren, ABCFT’s vice president for special education.

The first areas the new committee tackled were special education caseloads and class size, which were the issues at the crux of the grievance that led to the committee’s formation. This was a difficult challenge that involved looking at the causes of the problem and not just at past practices. Both sides agreed to set aside the

“blame game” and look at how to “just fix it.” The result of this newly developed collaboration was evident when the very next school year started much more smoothly than in years past. In light of such a successful start, the PROPS committee decided to take on the challenge of student achievement.

To help facilitate this, the committee decided to participate in ABC’s innovation project (see Element 6). By focusing on student behavior, the team felt that there would be an improvement in students’ academic performance as well.

This collaborative team continues to tackle communication issues, morale, assignments, space for unit members to work, curriculum, intervention, procedural issues, and even budget challenges. Now, the district looks to PROPS to work out issues and make them a “win-win.”

“There is no more us or them. There is just we,” says Pinky Uppal, who co-chairs the committee. “It is just how we do business now.”



ABCUSD special education director Patsy Jaimes presents the PROPS model with teachers Dawn Heeren, Ken Denman and Pinky Uppal.

## Element 6 Building Partnerships at the School Level

District and union leaders in ABC say the most difficult partnerships to build and maintain are those between principals and site representatives at the school level. As Rico said, collaboration can't be forced from the top down to the schools. But union and district leaders can model partnership and encourage management and labor at schools to work more cooperatively. Devlin adds that successful partnerships at the school level appear very similar to strong district-level partnerships—the parties communicate regularly and have adopted similar beliefs and behaviors.

### The AFT Innovation Fund

By the 2009-10 school year, ABCUSD and ABCFT were primed to expand partnership further at the site level. A grant from the AFT Innovation Fund was the vehicle that allowed the expansion to occur. The Innovation Fund supports creative ideas to improve student learning and the teaching environment through collaboration between administration and unions. Affiliates of the AFT are eligible to apply, and the process for receiving a grant is competitive.

The union created a similar competitive-grant process for schools in ABCUSD. A joint district-union Innovation Fund council was formed, and then created the parameters for the school-level grants. The council's role was to review all grant applications and monitor implementation. Projects needed to focus on improving student performance, but equally important was to get the teachers and school administrators to work as a team. Each team was charged with creating a sustainable and culture-changing project that addressed the specific needs of the school.

Some applicants even submitted minutes of staff meetings to prove that the project grew out of a partnership. Here are some examples of the projects that were funded.

- **Carmenita Middle School's GEAR initiative**, which stands for Get Everybody Academically Ready, focuses on giving students who are performing below grade level extra support and preparation before the school year begins. Strategies included three days of summer school at the end of August; field trips to local colleges, universities and trade schools; parent seminars

on goal-setting; analyzing student data and using technology; and professional development for teachers on working with a diverse student population.

- **Leal Elementary School's Art of Stagecraft program** is an extension of the school's visual and performing arts curriculum and is geared toward students who are struggling academically and not comfortable with performing in front of their peers or adults. Learning behind-the-scenes skills are now seen as important as the singing and dancing taking place on stage.
- **Juarez Elementary School's Connect program**, is designed to increase parent participation and strengthen relationships between parents and teachers. Strategies include opportunities for staff collaboration, a newsletter, parent trainings and even joint staff-parent outings.

The Innovation funds were successful at fostering collaboration and opening new lines of communication in the schools. But just as district and union leaders must nurture their partnership through consistent communication and an open exchange of information, school leaders and site representatives also must develop a structure of meeting and interacting that works for them.

This new relationship takes the role of the principal and the site rep to a level beyond just the discussion of contract issues.

### The Changing Roles of the Site Representative and Administrator

Site reps are elected by the staff at their schools, handle their traditional duties, and defend their contract and their members. But once in place, they are also trained by ABCFT to consider partnership with their administrators a key aspect of their position.

In fact, in its recently revised training program held at the start of each year, ABCFT makes it clear that site reps are expected to meet regularly with their principals and engage in "fierce conversations" in an effort to improve learning at the schools.

New principals are introduced to the collaborative labor-management partnership as part of their

two-year leadership training. Their program is called COMPASS, which stands for Coaching Our Management in Peer Administrative Support System.

“Sharing leadership is not easy for many principals,” admits Crechena Wise, principal at Tetzlaff Accelerated Learning Academy. “It’s so much easier to just do it yourself,” she says. “But it’s when we share the job that we are all held accountable.”

An important point to consider: Conflicts can arise when a site rep—a teacher—is expected to work as a partner with the principal who conducts his or her evaluation. When working as partners to resolve issues or develop school improvement strategies, consider yourself equals. Outside of the partnership, the manager-subordinate relationship stands.

The following examples show partnerships at the school level. The principals and site reps at these three schools have been able to build trust, maintain a relationship that contributes to a sense of teamwork throughout the school and improve learning environments for students.

### Artesia High School

Artesia High School principal Sergio Garcia came from a school where he had a more traditional relationship with union reps. He described it as, “You beat me up and I’ll beat you up, and we’ll see who wins each of the battles.” But becoming the principal at Artesia High, he says, “was the first time in my history as an administrator that a union seriously cared about student achievement. That was common ground.” So now, he talks with his three site reps “formally once a month and informally, at least once a day.”

He also brings department chairs and site reps together for an annual retreat—sort of their own version of a PAL Retreat—where they create the master schedule and talk about ideas for the coming year. One strategy that grew out of that retreat was having more interactive classrooms in which all students are having “frequent contact with complex knowledge” and answering a higher-order question every 15 minutes.

Site rep William Napier, who is also chairman of the special education department at the school, says Garcia shares his ideas, but “if we say we don’t want to do that, he doesn’t push it through.” Napier adds that “Garcia leaves most decisions to a team of teachers.”

“We’re there every step of the way,” he says. In fact, Napier was drawn to the position of site rep because of the partnership Garcia had created with the union.

Just as district and union leaders share budget information from the state, Garcia also brings his site reps and department chairs together when changes are occurring.

“If he gets information from the district, the first thing he does is call his leadership in and say, ‘This is what is happening and here is how it affects you,’” Napier says. He adds that Garcia doesn’t allow misunderstandings or complaints to become “larger issues.”

Rico notes that a similar dynamic exists at most schools in the district now. If a conflict involving a teacher arises, it is more likely that it will be “settled informally with the rep going in to talk with the principal and the teacher.”

### Tetzlaff Accelerated Learning Academy

Principal Crechena Wise meets monthly with site rep Mark Reagan and alternate Josh McFarland, saying that it’s useful to her to have both of their perspectives. “Before we run something out that is new to the staff, they are the first people to hear it,” she says. “They say, ‘This is how we have to sell it.’ We’ve solved some major problems in those meetings.” The three have a practice of examining the pros and cons regarding possible changes at the school, and “then we sleep on it,” Wise says.

Because Wise and Reagan approach challenges together, issues that Wise says she once would have expected to be “deal breakers”—such as creating a new calendar and bell schedule—have instead been solved through an open, inclusive process.



Hawaiian Elementary principal Laurie Cordova, left, and site rep Jackie Donar discuss plans with tablemates.

Another example is classroom walk-throughs, in which teachers participate in focused classroom observations to collect data. Teachers at Tetzlaff did not want to be asked to evaluate their peers, Wise says. So the district's document was changed to something more acceptable to teachers and the process was renamed "learning walks" and explained as a chance to learn good instruction strategies from colleagues.

The staff also collaborated to apply for a federal magnet school grant and decided the mission of the school: pre-Advanced Placement.

Partnership between the administration and the union has spread to the parent organization, Wise explains—a result of being named one of the Innovation grant winners. The school chose fitness—specifically cardiovascular health and upper body strength—as its focus area for the grant. After-school programs featuring yoga and cross-country running were added, and teachers began competing against students in hockey and other sports during lunch.

The school PTA showed support by donating \$15,000, which is being used to create a new "fitness lab" with free weights, Bosu balance balls, rowing machines and a rubberized floor equal to that of any high-end gym. Teachers are running their own "Biggest Loser" competition to improve their health and to set an example for students.

Wise expects the activities to continue when the grant ends because of the enthusiasm of the parents, staff and students.

### **Hawaiian Elementary**

When Laurie Cordova became principal of Hawaiian Elementary School, she knew she was stepping into a "rough situation." She didn't know any of the teachers, and most of them had filed for transfers to avoid working for the previous principal.

But Cordova and the site reps worked to build a partnership from the beginning.

"I knew that they needed to trust me. The best way to do that was to trust them," Cordova says. "Luckily, both my union reps reached out to me right away."

Because a labor-management partnership was already developing at the district level, Cordova and site rep Jackie Donar had a model they could follow in setting up their own guidelines and procedures.

Now Cordova relies on Donar to provide "moral support" and regular feedback from the staff—whether it's about how to spend the school budget, staffing plans or personality conflicts.

"We talk almost every day. If I hear a rumbling of something, I will run it by her," Cordova says. "We both have that same goal—we want the kids at this school to do well."

The two have developed a regular schedule that keeps communication open:

- At monthly staff meetings, Donar is a "standing item" on the agenda to share any news or information regarding the union.
- A union meeting is then held.
- Cordova and Donar then have their regular monthly meeting to address any concerns or questions that arise among union members.

Donar, who teaches third grade, notes that even if she doesn't agree with a complaint or an opinion among the union members, she encourages them to put their concerns in writing or in an e-mail so she can share it with Cordova.

These practices were especially useful when complaints were growing from teachers about jokes and comments being made by a member of the school's staff. Allowing the teachers to have their say made them feel as if their opinions really mattered, Donar says.

Echoing the advice of others—and following the example set at the district level—these partners say that it is important to make regular principal-site rep meetings a habit.

"Once you get into the habit, it takes away the anxiety when you do have issues," Cordova says, adding that it's important to come together "... in good times and bad."

## Element 7 Handling Conflicts and Challenges

Partnership is obviously much easier when districts have a budget surplus and test scores are on the rise. But like all relationships, those between labor and management will be tested, repeatedly. ABCFT president Ray Gaer says that when such challenges arise, it is time to think about not falling back on conventional responses. He describes it as a “conscious effort to not be traditional.”

### The Story of PASS

When a teacher or other school employee is struggling on the job, unions and district officials often find themselves in opposite corners. But in ABCUSD, supporting new teachers and assisting experienced teachers who have gotten sidetracked is one of the strongest examples of labor-management collaboration.

The effort dates back to 2000, when the state of California handed out funds to local districts to implement Peer Assistance and Review (PAR), a program designed for teachers who need help in their subject matter or teaching skills. PAR, however, had a negative connotation among some teachers in California, so ABC district and union leaders decided to call their version the Peer Assistance and Support System (PASS).

Under PASS, every new teacher in the district was assigned a peer coach—an expert teacher—and given a year of support. “This created a more positive impression of the program among the staff,” says Rich Saldana, a teacher at Artesia High School and the coordinator of PASS. Peer coaches would conduct seven to 10 formal evaluations over the course of a teacher’s first year in the classroom. PASS coaches also are assigned to teachers in need of help. And efforts are made to

“We talk almost every day. If I hear a rumbling of something, I will run it by the site rep. We both have that same goal—we want the kids at this school to do well.”

—LAURIE CORDOVA, principal, Hawaiian Elementary School

match the teachers with coaches who are experts in the same content area.

“The best help available is from their peers,” says Susan Hixson, a former principal who now serves as the district’s director of human resources. “We have seen some amazing transformations.”

A labor-management council made up of three teachers and two administrators leads PASS. Even with that ratio, however, decisions about whether a teacher has made sufficient improvement have always been unanimous. PASS continued to support all new teachers as long as funding was available. By 2008-09, peer coaches were taking on greater caseloads of new teachers.

“We kept it as long as we could,” Saldana says. The program still exists but is reserved for teachers in need of help, which might include some training, teaching materials, or classroom equipment. “If Rich says, ‘We need something,’” Hixson says, “then we say OK.”

PASS remains a critical resource in the partnership because disagreements about teacher effectiveness inevitably arise, and it is a vital vehicle for labor and management to come together at these challenging times.



## Element 8 Collecting Data on Your Partnership

Collecting, analyzing and using data is now an expectation of working in the education field—from monitoring student achievement to serving school lunches. A labor-management partnership should be no exception.

In addition to standards-based tests, data collection on a partnership could include attendance counts at joint district-union events or professional development opportunities, feedback forms from participants after joint training sessions, outcomes of school projects, or even the frequency of communication between labor and management staff.

Teachers and nonteaching personnel are often asked to respond to surveys about working conditions or school climate. Relationships between management and the union should be considered part of that inquiry.

Assessing progress is essential to improving labor-management collaboration.

For years, the ABCFT conducted a “principal evaluation” to give members a chance to express their opinions about their administrators. But Gaer describes it more like a “bloodbath,” in which teachers vented any and all frustrations and criticism of their principals.

So the district leaders asked the union if something more productive could be created. There was pressure from membership to leave the survey alone. Many members wanted assurance that the questions they were able to respond to on the “old” instrument were intact and that the local would not lose its control over these data.

With this input in mind, the survey was redesigned in 2009 into a “PAL survey,” referring to the Partnership between Administration and Labor. Three members of ABCFT and three administrators used the existing principal evaluation (the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders [CPSEL] document) as well as questions generated by similar “climate” surveys to develop a new PAL Survey to assess the

partnership. Although labor and management members all had a common interest in changing the existing evaluation, this survey took several long, sometimes tense, meetings to develop.

PAL committee member Saldana recalls one meeting when he and the other two teacher members walked out to “allow calmer heads to prevail” before returning to the table. Similarly, there was administrative discomfort with the move toward a PAL Survey. Based on their prior experience, the principals on the committee undoubtedly had strong negative feelings toward any survey. This ultimately led to several months of inactivity with the PAL Survey as well as changes on the committee, with administrative members, who were uncomfortable leading their peers down the path of partnership, deciding to resign or retire.

What eventually emerged were survey questions focused on six specific areas: schoolwide culture, professional development, resources, communication, data and partnership (see Appendix, page 35).

### A Research Opportunity

The PAL Survey has also given ABCFT and ABCUSD an opportunity to partner with researchers at Rutgers University to examine labor-management collaboration in education.

To better understand how effective the ABC Innovation grants have been at improving relationships between teachers and principals in the district, John McCarthy, a graduate student at Rutgers, surveyed schools. He analyzed the results of the surveys to compare differences between schools that received a grant and those that did not. As part of the study, different versions of the surveys were given to teachers and principals, depending on whether their school had received a grant.

The research showed that levels of labor-management partnership in the Innovation Fund schools were already higher than in schools that did not participate in the initiative. There was some evidence that collaboration improved in the Innovation Fund-supported schools over the life of the grant, but it also went up in nonparticipating schools.

McCarthy says the PAL Survey is a good starting point for schools or districts that are interested in learning “the extent to which teachers feel joint decision-making is a part of their school.”

The PAL Survey is made up of a series of statements organized into six categories. The respondents answer the questions using a four-point scale where a 1 indicates disagreement and 4 indicates agreement. See pages 35-36 of the appendix for the list of statements in the PAL Survey as well as three open-ended questions that were part of the survey. Respondents could say “no comment” if they didn’t have an answer for those questions. Also included in the appendix is the original Principal survey (see page 33-34) so you can get an idea of how the two questionnaires compare.

The data from these surveys have been a valuable tool in guiding the ABCUSD and ABCFT down the partnership path. The surveys reveal site-specific feedback that indicates whether teachers and administrators are maximizing their efforts toward student achievement. As you can read in the appendix, the surveys provide both a qualitative and quantitative measurement for partnership and the degree to which it is associated with student achievement.

Still, the partners continue to meet to explore ways they can improve their work together and

assess their progress. They have expressed a desire to their Rutgers University partners to expand data collection on the partnership to include comparisons among schools using the following data:

- Attendance counts at joint district-union events or professional development opportunities;
- Feedback forms from participants after joint training sessions;
- Outcomes of school projects;
- (California) Academic Performance Index (like-schools index);
- Student and teacher attendance rates;
- Teacher retention rates;
- Magnet grant (school) recipients vs. non-magnet schools;
- Grievances; and
- Attorney fees.

Multiple measures are always preferable and more reliable. What is most important, however, is that some metric is used to assess the labor-management partnership.

## Element 9 Celebrating Success and Planning for the Future

The PAL Retreat in the ABCUSD is not just an opportunity for district personnel and union leaders to confront serious issues such as the state education budget or new teacher evaluation rules. It's also a time to recognize the hard work that educators do in their schools every day, to provide inspiration, and to give school and union leaders a chance to cooperate on a new project to improve learning at their schools.

Organizing an event like the PAL Retreat is an important piece of a partnership. Everyone needs a chance to step away from his or her daily routine, enjoy a meal and conversation with colleagues, and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Whether the event is held in a hotel banquet room, a school gymnasium or some other location, here are a few essential components that should be included:

- **Joint representation:** Even if principals and site reps are not yet working together in partnership, it's still important that both attend the retreat. It's not enough for just one or the other to attend. It's even better if teams from schools, including administrators and teachers, attend so more people can take what they learn back to their schools.

If visitors from other districts are attending your event, it's also recommended that a representative from both the district and the union come together.

- **An opening activity:** This can be a type of team-building exercise or a conversation starter to allow participants to get to know each other, especially if they are sitting at tables with people they don't know.

For example, at the 2011 West Coast Labor-Management Institute—held the day before the PAL Retreat—the organizers put up signs around the room displaying specific years. The participants then stood shoulder to shoulder around the perimeter of the room, finding their place in this human “time-line” based on the year they entered the education field. The participants then paired off with someone else in the line, typically someone from another generation, and shared what was happening in education (the big issues, major reforms, catch phrases of the day) during the years they began their teaching careers.

The activity helps attendees put their own experiences in a greater context, and communicates the message that change is constant in education.

“We wanted to illustrate that inevitably there is always going to be more reform,” says Rich Saldana, the ABCFT member who led the activity along with Carol Hansen, the assistant superintendent for human resources in ABCUSD. “What can last through everything is partnership.”

If your event runs more than two days, have more than one activity planned. The Red and Green exercise highlighted on page 4 is one option. See the Common Language Game sidebar on page 2 for another activity.

- **Joint leadership:** As with the “timeline” activity above, it's important that district-union collaboration is carried through to your partnership event. A district or school administrator and a union representative should lead every major session. This reinforces the idea that partnership is valued and gives the two activity leaders another reason to get together and plan for their session.

It's also important that sessions at the event are led not just by superintendents and union presidents, but also by principals and site reps. These school-level partnerships can be the toughest to develop, so giving these leaders an opportunity to plan and conduct a session can serve either as a recognition of those who are working well together or as an incentive for those who need a little push.

- **Time to share:** Celebrate the work in schools that has been accomplished through labor-management partnership. Allow principals and site reps to showcase the projects they have been working on. This creates accountability for those at the school level.
- **Keynote speaker:** A speaker chosen for the event should be someone who can inspire participants to examine what they are doing in their schools and classrooms, and explore whether there is something they can do differently to improve experiences for students and families at their schools.

Speakers at ABC gatherings have included Saul Rubinstein from Rutgers University, who conducts



research on labor-management partnerships, and Carol Chaney, a school and community relations specialist for the Schools First Federal Credit Union.

- **Time to work:** Participants from individual schools should have a chance to work together on a collaborative project for the school. Initially, school administrators and union members may need some guidance on how to choose or organize a project. But over time, they should be able to identify a need at their school and collaborate on their own to address that need. According to Dawn Hereen, special education vice president for ABCFT, the expectation that participants will have time to work on a project makes the gathering not just an event, but the “start of a conversation.”

### **Fostering New Partnerships**

The work in the ABC district has served as an example to other union affiliates and district leaders that partnerships between management and labor can be successful. Here are some other sites that have learned from ABC’s experiences.

#### **Culver City (Calif.) Unified School District and Culver City Federation of Teachers**

Before becoming superintendent of the El Rancho Unified School District, Myrna Rivera Coté was superintendent of the Culver City Unified School District and had attended one of the West Coast Labor-Management Institutes organized by ABCFT and ABCUSD.

“Productive meetings” involving current superintendent Patricia Jaffe, Culver City Federation of Teachers president David Mielke, the California Federation of Teachers field representative, and AFT’s Joan Devlin were held, according to Mielke. With Jaffe retiring, the search is under way for a new superintendent, but Mielke notes that the union has stressed to the school board that it would like to see a successor who is open to working in partnership.

“ABCFT has been helpful, first as an inspiration and second with some nuts-and-bolts ideas as to how to go about creating such a partnership,” Mielke says. “I believe the future of unionism—

especially for school employees—lies in this direction.”

#### **El Rancho Unified School District and El Rancho Federation of Teachers (Pico Rivera, Calif.)**

As the new president of the El Rancho Federation of Teachers, Rico Tamayo looked to ABCFT for mentorship at a time when furloughs were beginning in his district and “the level of stress was extremely high.” Meanwhile, the district’s new superintendent, Myrna Rivera Coté, had attended a West Coast Labor-Management Institute. Together, they attended an AFT gathering on collaboration in Washington, D.C., which Tamayo says “cemented trust and communication between the superintendent and me.”

In all, they have attended three ABC events. Tamayo and Coté meet once a week, and Tamayo says he feels comfortable picking up the phone and talking to any cabinet-level official or school board member.

The partnership is growing. A special education advisory council has been created—El Rancho’s own version of ABC’s PROPS committee. The council is expected to be helpful in a new pilot endeavor in which special education and regular education teachers will co-teach a combined classroom.

#### **Fullerton (Calif.) School District and Fullerton Elementary Teachers Association**

Former superintendent Mitch Hovey and Fullerton Elementary Teachers Association president Karla Turner, along with the cabinet members for the district, have attended two partnership events in the ABC district.

Union and district leaders have made a commitment to improve communication, trust and honesty, and so far the growing partnership has had an impact on contract negotiations, Turner says. District officials will call the union to give a “heads up” on current issues. “That’s something that’s been different than in years past,” she says. “We used to be blindsided.”

Turner, the superintendent and the cabinet members meet once a month, and the district recently conducted a survey of teachers regarding professional development opportunities. “They actually listened,” Turner says, adding that as a result of the survey, a labor-management committee focused on professional development is being formed. In addition, a joint committee on special education, similar to ABC’s PROPS committee, is being written into the contract—also a major breakthrough, Turner says. “Previous contracts didn’t even have the words ‘special education.’ ”

“We wanted to illustrate that inevitably there is always going to be more reform. What can last through everything is partnership.”

—RICH SALDANA, social studies teacher, Artesia High School

#### **Newport-Mesa Unified School District and Newport-Mesa Federation of Teachers (Costa Mesa, Calif.)**

Kimberly Claytor, president of the Newport-Mesa Federation of Teachers, has attended three labor-management partnership events along with district officials—the West Coast Labor-Management Institute, an AFT event in Washington, D.C., and a United Federation of Teachers conference in New York.

Although the district has experienced “turmoil” in recent years and has a “long way to go,” Claytor says steps have been taken in the direction of

greater cooperation. Claytor and district executive director of human resources John Caldecott, worked together to create and distribute a survey of staff, asking about the level of trust, partnership and respect in their schools. While more analysis of the results is needed, Claytor says it will provide baseline information.

Openness to partnership with the union is also being stressed as part of the search for a new district superintendent, Claytor says, adding that the ABCFT-ABCUSD partnership has been a successful model to look at. “They have a clear direction about where they are going and what it means, what works for them and what doesn’t,” she says. “There’s lots of enthusiasm, and it’s genuine.”

#### **Oxnard (Calif.) Union High School District and Oxnard Federation of Teachers and School Employees**

Wes Davis, president of the Oxnard Federation of Teachers and School Employees, has attended the West Coast Labor-Management Institute once and is interested in working in partnership with school district officials. The union and the district have a history of good labor-management relations, but at this point, the partnership is strongest between Davis and the district’s human resources department. “We pick up the phone and call each other and get stuff fixed,” Davis says, adding that the seed of a stronger partnership has been planted.

He adds that ABCFT and ABCUSD have served as a model that shows partnership is possible and that it can lead to significant improvements in student achievement. “I saw people who genuinely respected each other,” he says.

## Element 10 Keeping It Going

Those in education know that a change in leadership can dissolve even the most successful programs. The same is true with a labor-management partnership. A school board election, a union election, or a new superintendent with different views can change overnight what has been built up over several years.

That's why together, ABCUSD and ABCFT wanted to have something in writing that would help preserve the relationships they had built as well as communicate to future district and union leaders that partnership is key to the successful operation of the district and growth in student achievement.

The "charter statement" is a document that simply restates the partnership's mission statement, principles and guiding behaviors. The superintendent, members of the school board, the union president, and members of the union's executive board signed the document.

Putting the partnership in writing, whether in a statement or contract language, sends a message about sustainability.

The statement, however, is not part of the negotiated contract—something superintendent Sieu says was intentional because there was a feeling among the leaders that partnership is not something to be "bargained at the table."

A charter statement or agreement is one option available to district and union officials. But drafting contract language that describes the partnership and includes those principles is also an option. This might send an even stronger message to successors that they should protect the partnership and follow the principles.



Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, with members of the ABCUSD cabinet.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

Even in a partnership as strong as the one that exists in the ABC district, there are individuals who still raise questions about whether the cooperation is truly genuine and whether the climate that has been created is truly better than a traditional labor-management relationship.

The work of building and nurturing the partnership never ends. It must always be cultivated as one would cultivate a garden or a relationship. Ongoing communication with all constituents is necessary. Respect for varying opinions is as important as sticking to the principles and behaviors. “Always pay attention to those who grumble or doubt,” former AFT staff member Devlin advises. “Communication is key. [ABCFT] never stopped talking about the partnership with their members. If someone was complaining, they answered with information and knowledge and not just snide remarks.” It’s also important, Devlin says, to “circle back” around to topics and themes that partners may not have been prepared to absorb the first time around.

“Partnering makes it easier for the board to lead because the employee groups we work with meet together and come up with like-minded solutions.”

—CELIA SPITZER, vice president, ABCUSD Board of Education

A constant example of this “circling back” is salary and benefit comparisons with like districts in response to anyone who questions the value of a partnership. Almost monthly, the membership is provided with a budget update that shows the district is maximizing resources and respecting the work of ABCFT members with competitive salaries and benefits.

Another example is the book *Fierce Conversations*, by Susan Scott, which was featured at a PAL Retreat. The book is about having honest conversations with others, even when there are serious disagreements.

“Nobody was ready for that,” remembers Devlin. “If you’re a site rep, you don’t have a fierce conversation with the person doing your evaluation.”

Now, years later, however, most ABC principals and union reps have learned when they are working as partners and when their relationship is one of boss and employee. Together they own the contract and distinguish contract from noncontract issues.

“It is often the non-contract issues that are most challenging to resolve and require the fiercest conversations,” states ABCFT executive board member Rich Saldana. “We continually urge our site reps to have those sometimes difficult conversations knowing that better decisions are more likely to result.”

Of course, these conversations are more likely to occur at the school site when those at the highest levels are supportive and modeling the partnership. ABCUSD Board of Education vice president Celia Spitzer says, “Partnering makes it easier for the board to lead because the employee groups we work with meet together and come up with like-minded solutions.” Thus, the school board encourages, supports and expects collaboration, which gets modeled throughout the organization. The board understands that although it is not always the easiest and fastest path, partnership is always the right path when long-lasting and sustainable improvement is the goal.

Finally, remember that someone is always new to the partnership environment you are trying to create, and everyone’s perspective may be a bit different. Professional development and opportunities to grow are necessary, along with patience and perseverance. American industrialist Henry Ford, who knew a bit about labor-management relations, had this to say: “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” ABCFT president Ray Gaer likes to acknowledge that there are different “operating systems” from which labor-management can work. Like Henry Ford, however, both the ABCUSD and ABCFT acknowledge and affirm that working together in partnership leads to the highest degree of success for students and staff.

# Questions to Consider When Establishing a Partnership

Establishing a labor-management partnership usually involves the development of a formal agreement, which creates a partnership council or steering committee and an action plan at the district level that is usually paralleled at the school level.

Fundamental questions must be answered by the partnership agreement, including:

## Membership and structure

- Who is on the council and how are these individuals selected?
- Are there any subgroups or work groups?

## Basic Goals and Objectives

- What will the council work on?
- Do both sides recognize common interests as well as separate and distinct interests of management and the union?

## Procedures

- How often will the council meet?
- How will decisions be made?
- Are meetings during the work day or after school?

## Communication

- How will the council members share information among themselves and with the workforce?
- How will existing access to programs and work-site information be altered to ensure common knowledge for decision-making?

## Disputes

- How will disputes that inevitably arise be resolved among the partners, including participation or lack of the same at the middle level, whether by union or management?

## Relationship to Collective Bargaining

- What can and cannot be discussed in the council and especially at the schools?
- Can site-specific contracts be created?
- Is it possible to file grievances if decisions made at individual work sites are violated?
- Can site-specific decisions be made binding on other sites?

## Training

- How much training will be available to support the central committee and any work-site committees?
- How will training needs be assessed?
- How will training be delivered?
- Will training be available individually, by committee, separately and/or together?
- Will training time be compensated?



## **Appendix**

This section includes the principal surveys and supplemental materials related to the activities mentioned in the handbook.



# Communication Opener—Ripping Paper

Here is an idea for an opener on communication and how easy it is for a message to be heard differently by various stakeholders. This activity is powerful for illustrating how important it is to have clear communication and how we can take care to guide others so that they do not fail.

It is important that you are curt and make sure people feel somewhat helpless, because it's their job to create something that has to be just how you want it.

Directions for the activity:

1. Tell the participants that they are *not allowed to ask any questions* during this activity. (This activity requires that they show trust in the process.)
2. Give each participant a sheet of paper.
3. Tell participants to *close their eyes* while they do this activity and that they will be asked to open them only when they have their final product. (Take note of those who don't close their eyes, because you can bring up the point of comfort later.)
4. Tell participants they will now perform a series of folding and ripping exercises with the paper.
  - a. Have them fold the paper in half. (Hands will go up to ask if it is "hamburger" or "hot dog" style, but remind them that they *cannot ask questions*.)

- b. Have everyone rip a piece of paper out of the top right corner. (They will want to ask more questions. Remind them they can't.)
- c. Have them fold the paper in half again.
- d. Have them rip the bottom left corner.
- e. Fold again.
- f. Rip the top right and the bottom left.

5. Remind them to keep their eyes closed and unfold the paper and hold it above their heads.
6. Ask everyone to open their eyes and look at the paper. (There will be different variations!)
7. To start the discussion, ask "Are they the same?"
8. Then ask "Why?" to engage participants in the discussion.

You can spin this activity any way you want to give it meaning. For example, you can say that everyone interprets directions differently, which can cause chaos in a system and create products that are not uniform (like different schools).

You can ask participants what would have made the system more productive. Stress that in any relationship, you are more productive and create a better product when you make sure that other stakeholders in the project don't fail.



# Communication Card Game

**Goal:** The goal of this game is to see how differently people interpret the meanings of different concepts.

**Materials:** Print out the sheets of cards (see pages 29-32 or create your own pictures and identical sets of cards for each group participating in this exercise).

Make a list of words for the game. We have included a list of words we have found informative and entertaining. This game is about laughing at ourselves and understanding how others think differently about big and small ideas.

## **Process:**

1. Break participants into groups and give each group a set of cards.
2. Pull a random word from a grab bag and read it to the participants.
3. Each group is to work together and use the picture cards they received to come up with three cards that represent their interpretation of the word. They are also to rank from left to right the strongest to weakest cards of

the three they have chosen to represent the concept.

4. Each group or a few groups can share each word by reporting out to all of the groups their three card choices. There are many laughs to be had here, and the class clowns will keep your game fresh and moving forward.
5. Do a wrap-up when you think you've done enough concept words. Ask participants what they learned from this activity.

Here is a list of words that we have found to be informative and funny to work with as you play this opening game:

Celebrate, Learning, Education, Collaboration, Life, Knowledge, Daring, Job, Technology, Choice, Budget, Summer, Stability, Communicate, Relationship, Security, Leadership, Achievement, Challenge, Goal, Partnership, Karma, Decision, Children, Trends, Happy, Important, Unity, Relaxation, Create, Philosophy, Essential, Team, Cooperate, Promise, Play, Future, Beauty, School, Constructive, Cooperate, Journey, Difficult, Your State, etc.



**income**



**happy**



**help**

**?**



**option**



**best**



**courage**





**stress**

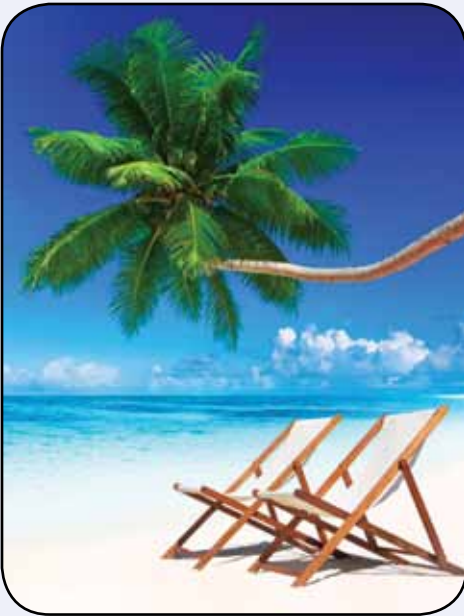


**fantasy**



**trust**





**relief**



# Old Version of Principal Assessment



## CONFIDENTIAL ASSESSMENT OF PRINCIPAL/SUPERVISOR

### Instructions:

1. After completing your confidential assessment, please seal the forms (scantron & comment sheet) and return them to your ABCFT Site Rep by **June 16, 2006**. You may also send your assessment to the Union Office through District mail.
2. We welcome and encourage any comments you wish to include. Please write them on a separate sheet and include it in your envelope (**don't forget to write your administrator's name and site on your comment sheet**). ABCFT will collate assessments and comments.

Each site administrator will receive an ABCFT prepared summary of results and comments after the close of the school year.

### I. School Management:

*How a school is managed on a daily basis is a vital part of an effective learning environment. Teachers rely on principals/supervisors to manage the day-to-day operations of the schools/work sites. The nuts and bolts of running a school include but are not limited to: working with parents, food services, transportation, school cleanliness, discipline, decision making, scheduling, school facilities, budgets, staff meetings based upon shared agenda building, and/or classroom coverage.*

The following questions address how well your school is managed.

#### The assessment scale is:

A-Consistently B-Inconsistently

#### *Your Principal/Supervisor:*

1. Equitably distributes all financial resources: materials, equipment, conferences, aides, extra pay assignments, etc.
2. Shares decision making for budget and other site decisions that affect teachers and their classrooms.
3. Follows through on assignments, projects, and decisions.
4. Supports staff in student discipline cases in a timely and consistent manner.
5. Maintains & practices standards that are consistent, fair, and equitable for all students.
6. Is available for staff at your school site before, during and after school, and during breaks.

*(continued on the other side)*



7. Keeps classroom interruptions to a minimum.
8. Staff meetings are well organized and limited to essential items, based upon agendas developed with staff input. Agendas, materials and locations are available in a timely manner.
9. Overall, your principal/supervisor is effectively managing your site based upon the criteria listed in 1-8 above.

## **II. Workplace Environment:**

*You should be valued at your workplace, so that discussion and dialogue are welcomed, risk-taking is encouraged, people interact professionally, and achievement is celebrated. It's the place where you want to go everyday. The following questions address how you feel about your workplace.*

**The assessment scale is:**

**A-Consistently    B-Inconsistently**

***Your Principal/Supervisor:***

10. Supports and maintains a positive work environment.
11. Creates an environment where you can question and/or challenge decisions or policies without fear of mistreatment and/or repercussions.
12. Clearly communicates important information to staff in a timely manner.
13. Maintains a safe and orderly school/work environment.
14. Overall, works as an equal team member with the staff on decisions that affect classrooms and instruction, rather than "top-down" decision-making.

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**III. Overall Assessment:** Choose **a, b,** or **c** to indicate an overall assessment of your principal's/supervisor's performance. (***CHOOSE ONLY ONE ANSWER.***)

- a) I consider this principal/supervisor a vital member of the school/work team.
- b) This principal/supervisor needs to make changes in the areas to which this assessment speaks in order to be a vital member of the school/work team.
- c) I do not consider this principal/supervisor to be a vital part of the school/work team.

**Reminder: Place any comments on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to include your site and administrator's name. Put the comment sheet and scantron in your envelope. Return to your Union Rep. or send to ABCFT via district mail. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.**

# New PAL Survey

**Respondents are asked to agree or disagree on a four-point scale, where a 1 indicates disagreement and a 4 indicates agreement.**

## Schoolwide Culture

1. There is a clear sense of direction at my school or within my district department.
2. The development of the school plan/district department plan is meaningful and collaborative.
3. There is ongoing support and review of the school plan/district department plan.
4. Our school/district department initiatives (i.e., academics, magnet school programs, intervention programs) are meaningful and developed collaboratively.
5. Our staff/site team meetings are well organized and developed with staff input.
6. Teaching and room assignments are established in a fair and equitable manner.
7. There is recognition for a “job well done” at my school/district department.
8. Our principal/administrator/supervisor promotes a positive, safe and effective learning environment.
9. Our principal/administrator/supervisor supports staff in discipline cases in a timely and consistent manner.
10. Our principal/administrator/supervisor maintains ethical standards of professionalism.
11. Our principal/administrator/supervisor is accessible and visible to staff, parents and students.
12. My principal/administrator/supervisor understands my students.

## Professional Development/ Professional Practices

1. Professional development opportunities support our school/district department goals.
2. The professional development that I am offered at my school/in my department has positively impacted the work in my classroom.
3. The instructional feedback that is provided to me by my principal/administrator/supervisor helps me to be a better teacher.
4. Classroom visits by the principal/administrator/supervisor support my teaching/program.
5. There is effective collaboration at my school site/in my district department that supports my teaching/program.
6. I have autonomy to make decisions about my instructional delivery.

## Resources

1. I have the materials and equipment that I need to do my job.
2. My principal/administrator/supervisor is a resource for me.
3. My AFT rep(s) is/are a resource for me.
4. Interruptions of class time are kept to a minimum.

## Communication

1. I am informed about changes that are happening at my school/within my department.
2. I have frequent and open communication with my principal/administrator/supervisor.
3. I am part of the decisions made at my school/site/program.



4. My principal/administrator/supervisor follows through with commitments.
5. I know with whom to talk at my school or within my department when I need assistance with a problem.

### Use of Data

1. The data that I can obtain from Data Director is helpful in my instructional planning.
2. I have other data resources to help me plan my instruction (i.e., Aeries, AR, STAR, Edline and SRI).

### Partnership

1. There are open lines of communication and collaboration between the principal/administrator/supervisor and the AFT rep(s).
2. Our staff is working collaboratively to promote and ensure the success of all members of the partnership.
3. Our partnership creates an environment where one can question and/or challenge decisions or policies without reprisal.

### Open-Ended Questions

1. When I think of the work we will be doing next year to increase student achievement, it would be most helpful to have the following kinds of professional development in order to enhance my teaching:

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2. The most important kinds of communication that I receive from my principal/administrator/supervisor are:

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3. The best thing I like about the partnership is:

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